

Applied Theatre Research
Volume 1 Number 1

© 2013 Intellect Ltd Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/atr.1.1.43_1

SALLY MACKEY

Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London,
United Kingdom

SARAH COLE

University of the Arts, London, United Kingdom

Cuckoos in the Nest: Performing place, artists and excess

ABSTRACT

1. *Lead artist Sarah Cole invited Sally Mackey to research Nest (part of an arts residency in Basildon, United Kingdom, in 2007–08) as part of Mackey's longer-term inquiry into how we 'perform' place. Could Nest practices provoke new insights into the role performance has in articulating or shifting our relationship with place?*
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
5. *After explaining the context of the Nest project and articulating what might be meant by 'a performance of place', the article deconstructs two themes that emerged during Nest, which are offered as potentially important for future work of this kind.*
- 6.
- 7.
8. *First, evidence suggests a significant response to place from even the most temporary of denizens, the visiting or 'cuckoo' artists, implying that even when performing there briefly, strong relationships with a place can develop. Second, an argument is made for 'excess' contributing to performing place – for example, arising from transgression, the non-quotidian and boundlessness – that can enhance participants' affective response to, and memories of, place.*
- 9.
- 10.
- 11.
- 12.
- 13.
- 14.
- 15.
- 16.

KEYWORDS

place
performance
community
artists
excess

1. See also <http://www.nest-life.com>. All photographs are reproduced from that website with Cole's permission. Photographers: Sarah Cole, Kevin Dutton and Andrew Whittuck.

NEST¹ (BY SARAH COLE)

Nest (2007–08) was the last stage in a three-year arts residency taking place in Briscoe Primary and Nursery School (Briscoe), a school for around two hundred 3–11-year-olds on the outskirts of Basildon, near London, United Kingdom. *Nest* evolved from a broader initial inquiry entitled *Lie of the Land* (2005–07). All were funded by the UK Creative Partnerships (Thames Gateway) scheme. The main premise of this project was to examine the ambivalent relationships Briscoe Primary School community had with its sense of place. Using strategies from archaeology, pedagogy and performance, artists were commissioned to engage with different sectors of the school: the school council, the learning support staff, the parents' group, the teachers, the mid-day playground staff, those pupils labelled 'gifted and talented', and those with identified educational needs or who were simply found roaming around outside of class. The whole school was involved, with over 120 people more directly so.

A starting point in the three-year project with Briscoe had been the uncertain general knowledge that the school had been built on the site of a former farm, and I became interested in the possibility of what could be learnt from 'overlying' a farming landscape on to that of a school. A key approach was to persistently negotiate spaces that fell outside of conventional learning zones, to up-end how certain spaces were used and transgress expectations. For example, I commissioned Mark Storor to set up as artist-in-residence to operate in the (glass-sided) school hall over a period of a week, attracting people in to the space with an invitation of spectacle and complicity. Reflecting on what we had learnt about the school (in terms of care, damage and conflicts of interest), we decided that he should build a giant nest, using hay from a local farm and with the help of various school inhabitants, throughout the five days. The nest played host to the weekly staff meeting, a parents' workshop and a nursery picnic, and became a place to hide or hang out for those children who struggled to stay in class. Notably, when Mark dismantled and removed the nest, many people expressed a genuine sense of loss and confusion that this

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.
9.
10.
11.
12.
13.
14.
15.
16.
17.
18.
19.
20.
21.
22.
23.
24.
25.
26.
27.
28.
29.
30.
31.
32.
33.
34.
35.
36.
37.
38.
39.
40.
41.
42.
43.
44.
45.
46.
47.
48.
49.
50.
51.
52.



Figure 1: An advertising flyer for Nest.



22. *Figure 2: Nest building in the school hall.*

23.
24. place, formerly and once again the hall, was no longer a place of absurdity
25. and sanctuary; it no longer smelled or 'felt right' anymore.

26. Later that spring, the pupils – for the first time – began to make nests in
27. the school field using the freshly cut grass, and the idea of nest (as a perform-
28. ance event, statement, metaphoric enquiry and celebration) began to evolve
29. properly.

30. In place concurrently with interventions of this kind was a pedagogic
31. agenda to critique creativity, bringing the approaches of artists and educators
32. into close and sometimes uncomfortable proximity. Mirroring the model of
33. artistic inquiry in the school, staff were encouraged to develop ideas without
34. a planned outcome; to focus on inquiry rather than solution and to accom-
35. modate chaos; to allow for their work to be manhandled, destroyed or altered;
36. and to see this as part of a creative process rather than a moment for despair.
37. It was after this that they began nest building. And taking them apart. And
38. building them again.

39. *Nest* became a promenade performance on Sunday, 24 February 2008,
40. in which the audience entered the school in Year 6 spaces (10/11-year-olds)
41. and travelled back to infancy via fourteen installations. The school was trans-
42. formed. Parents wrote words in soil across the floor of the hall, the head
43. teacher became Bo Peep with two sheep in her office, 500 bread rats were
44. baked to the sound of UB40's 'Rats in the Kitchen' and a fight broke out in
45. the cupboard for Taking Stock. Each nest had been devised with, for or by the
46. inhabitants of the school, supported by seven artists with a varying degree
47. of engagement. The guide for each promenade was a child 'twitcher' (a bird
48. watcher). The audience's journey began by being crammed into an air-raid
49. shelter and listening to the voices of 10-year-old children describing the
50. moment when a bombshell hit them. The death of a mother, the suicide of
51. an aunt, the loss of a budgie, the murder of a dog, the departure of a dad. The
52. final nest, devised with composer Jules Maxwell, was one of silence.



Figure 3: A child 'twitcher' starts the promenade for an audience.

PLACE, PERFORMANCE – AND NEST (BY SALLY MACKEY)

I was invited by Sarah Cole to observe and research *Nest* as potentially contributing to my long-term research inquiry into the performance of place. The project offered a range of opportunities for research inquiry. I was interested in one particular aspect of the project, however: what it might add to understanding particular practices of performing place. Recurring questions have included: How might 'performing' place be made manifest as both framed rehearsed performance and as 'everyday' performance? How might a performance of place be specifically contrived through performance-related practices? And what effect might such performance work have on participant inhabitants (see Mackey 2007b)?

I interpret 'place' as having more import than material 'site' for inhabitants. Place becomes 'a perceived environment or geographical area with which individuals (or groups) believe they have a personal relationship; there is a psychological interaction between person and location' (Mackey 2007a: 181). A performance of place, then, might demonstrate, inflect, respond to, interrogate or challenge the material and psychological construction of a particular locus, and can be interpreted as a series of performative operations as well as constructed performances. In using the term 'performative', I refer to the post-Butler interpretation of the term as 'conventional cultural behavior' (Taylor 2003: 6), suggesting that place can be created through the repetition of normative behaviours – in addition to a constructed, framed, developed 'performance' that might be created in and of that location. Whilst site-based performance may well be performed by 'visitors' (e.g. professional practitioners, students), I argue that a performance of place is enacted by inhabitants. It is more likely to comprise the reframing of a moment in an inhabitant's everyday than, for example, a devised performance in response to a site's mytho-geography.

The interpretation of performing place suggests a practice situated within the concepts, discourses and practices of applied and social theatre, with its

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.
9.
10.
11.
12.
13.
14.
15.
16.
17.
18.
19.
20.
21.
22.
23.
24.
25.
26.
27.
28.
29.
30.
31.
32.
33.
34.
35.
36.
37.
38.
39.
40.
41.
42.
43.
44.
45.
46.
47.
48.
49.
50.
51.
52.

1. emphasis on community, citizenship and locations (Nicholson 2005), where
 2. matters of place might be of particular import to a group of people. Historical
 3. legacies of power and ownership, contemporary deterritorialization and migra-
 4. tions, disillusionment or disengagement with locus, or even simply the need
 5. to 'create place' in the absence of long-term attachments, might all give cause
 6. for applied performances of place. This is the range of practice I have sought
 7. to identify, construct and evolve.

8. I entered *Nest* not knowing what might be discovered. Cole had outlined
 9. the emphasis on a fractured and disillusioned response to Briscoe by its
 10. inhabitants, the children and staff in particular. Increasingly interested in
 11. how performance-related activities can impact upon, relate to and even
 12. ease people's relationship with places that they do not necessarily inhabit
 13. permanently (staff and pupils move on), I found in *Nest* an opportunity for
 14. further research. A focus upon 'performance' in provisionally inhabited places
 15. responds to a growing emphasis on temporary place as iconic of our times.
 16. Place might be considered, now, as a meaningful way-station, as pause, or as
 17. momentary location. This 'place' might be described as part of travelling up,
 18. across and along (Ingold 2006, 2011), as a 'meeting' place (Massey 1997) or as
 19. a site containing a gathering of stories-so-far (Massey 2005). Some commen-
 20. tators suggest that humanity is immanently without longevity of place and
 21. deterritorialized, no longer tied to particular locations or communities (e.g.
 22. see Deleuze 1993; Bauman 2007). I am interested in how, and to what extent,
 23. community-based performance practices can reconcile a form of transience
 24. with an affective response to place. Even if accepting place as most usually
 25. nomadic (and some would argue against this), we need not assume place as
 26. a waiting room for transient bystanders. Place might still be usefully affective
 27. in retaining, for example, characteristics of belonging, familiarity and even



28.
29.
30.
31.
32.
33.
34.
35.
36.
37.
38.
39.
40.
41.
42.
43.
44.
45.
46.
47.
48.
49.
50.
51.
52. *Figure 4: The Airing Cupboard (a mother performs nurturing gymnastics).*



Figure 5: Walking on eggshells.

to some extent security – even if it is inhabited non-permanently. With this interpretation, temporary place becomes more interspersed periods of affective dwelling. Of particular interest to me is the potential role of performance practices in bringing about a changed perception of such places when they are sites of dis-ease.

Cole's creative project, *Nest*, offered an example of practice that might contribute to such accruing theories of performing place. The project was intended to help reconnect a community with its sense of place that fitted well with my inquiry. In addition, this 'place' might be described as temporary, with pupils, parents and even staff as temporary inhabitants. In fact, the visiting artists were the most temporary, and proved to be interesting respondents to the ambiguities of inhabiting place briefly. *Nest* was a rich research study furthering inquiry into the performing of place, particularly with respect to disenfranchised, unfixed or – as with the Briscoe community – disinterested people re-engaging with place through performance. Cole provided a range of material about the background to *Nest*, and I observed the process on several occasions, undertook interviews with staff and artists, had access to evaluation material in the form of participant comments and read government inspection reports about Briscoe. In reflecting upon the work, two particular *leitmotifs* emerged as particularly interesting and worth analysing: 'excess' and 'the artist as cuckoo'. It is within these two conceptual frames that *Nest* offers something to debates around performing place.

EXCESS

I use 'excess' to refer to a pervasive sense of heightened effervescence evoked by unusual or non-quotidian activities. I suggest that such excess was a strong characteristic of *Nest*. The maverick, the unusual, the 'code-breaking' and 'high' creative practice that were all transforming Briscoe and its residents became increasingly notable over the year's research; 'excess' expresses much about such a range of practice.

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.
9.
10.
11.
12.
13.
14.
15.
16.
17.
18.
19.
20.
21.
22.
23.
24.
25.
26.
27.
28.
29.
30.
31.
32.
33.
34.
35.
36.
37.
38.
39.
40.
41.
42.
43.
44.
45.
46.
47.
48.
49.
50.
51.
52.

1. Georges Bataille and Richard Dyer contribute to this interpretation. For
 2. Bataille (1985), boundlessness and transgression are characteristics of excess,
 3. whether talking of sacrifice or objects of repulsion. Even without the asso-
 4. ciations of eroticism, there is something in Bataille's irregular breaking with
 5. systems and classifications that is central to the excess displayed in *Nest*.
 6. Schools are structured around tight temporal rulings and spatial regularities.
 7. As explained below, moments of particular meaning – or heightened
 8. effervescence – in the *Nest* project seemed to occur *because* embedded struc-
 9. tures were transgressed.

10. Richard Dyer's 'utopian sensibility' (1993: 279) responds to 'real needs
 11. *created by society*' (278, emphasis in original). Such utopian sensibility is faci-
 12. litated through the glamour and spectacle of musical films in Dyer's analysis.
 13. (I am usurping his thinking for matters of performance in community contexts.)
 14. He categorizes it as abundance replacing scarcity; energy ('work and play
 15. synonymously') instead of exhaustion; intensity ('excitement, drama, affectivity
 16. of living') replacing dreariness; transparency instead of manipulation; commu-
 17. nity ('all together in one place, communal interests, collective activity') in place
 18. of fragmentation (1993: 277–78). It is these qualities of a utopian sensibility as
 19. 'temporary answers to the inadequacies of the society which is being escaped
 20. from' (1993: 277) that have something to offer my use of 'excess'. The pro-
 21. cesses and outcomes of *Nest* encouraged an escape from the quotidian.

22. With reference to Bataille and Dyer, excess as heightened effervescence
 23. can be identified more specifically as transgression, boundlessness, abun-
 24. dance, energy and intensity, where systems and classifications (and perhaps
 25. the inadequacies of society) are challenged. Such 'excess' was manifest in
 26. *Nest*. The following paragraphs offer examples of what I interpret as forms of
 27. excess that I observed, or that were described by adult participants.

28. Intense pleasure in the project arose from the impact of transgressive inter-
 29. ventions and the challenging of known systems and classifications. The artists
 30. facilitated an alternative viewing and experience of a familiar and perhaps
 31. disregarded place for the 'residents' of Briscoe through such transgressions.
 32. There were several examples. Artist Helen Rowe talked of the highly unusual
 33. absorption of a special educational needs class in turning a routine, open area
 34. of the school – a mobile space of transversing – into an indoor aviary. Rachel
 35. Anderson 'politicized' the young pupil representatives of the school council,
 36. provoking them to see themselves as rich voices for others rather than the
 37. staff being seen as the voices of power. In the final performance-event, pupils
 38. 'staffed' the vastly transformed school; they were responsible for displaying
 39. it to parents, teachers and friends. Sarah talked of the enjoyment in making
 40. the space visible in different ways – a rabbit nest/enclosure transformed a
 41. misused outdoor area, for example. Families and staff (the majority of the
 42. invited audience) found old space converted into new: a small, disused chang-
 43. ing room was used for Rachel's School Council nest. On seeing this, one staff
 44. member exclaimed: 'Where did that come from?' She hadn't remembered the
 45. cupboard's existence. To the delight of many, the most overt transgression
 46. was the head teacher, Diane Pilgrim – now Little Bo Peep with live sheep in
 47. her office. One adult whispered, 'How brave!' as we left that nest.

48. As Dyer suggests, such transgressions were cognate with 'boundlessness',
 49. leading to a sense of anarchic risk and freedom. Pilgrim writes of:

50.
 51. building an enormous nest in our New Hall; exploring emotional 'bomb-
 52. shells' with Year 6; writing on the corridor and classroom walls in a staff

2. This makes reference to Bakhtin's (1965) argument for the liberating effect of the carnivalesque, itself rooted in the medieval Feast of Fools, where normal social structures were inverted for the day.

meeting; Jules [Maxwell] wheeling the piano out into the playground at lunchtime and playing for the children.
 (<http://www.nest-life.com/DianePilgrim.html>, accessed 3 August 2011)

In one of the workshops, the parents' group wrote on and 'wore' furniture as a comment on how they were perceived by their families – just being part of the furniture. The artists spoke of freedom and the lack of boundaries within the project. Jules commented on being straitjacketed in the past; he said it was very rare to be given such freedom as an artist in a community – to be given vision without having to fill in evaluation forms. Siobhan O'Neill spoke of the freedom to interpolate the personal into the project. (Her nest was a nest for welcoming a baby – she was pregnant.)

Perhaps this pleasure in anarchic play and freedom was facilitated partly by a temporary inhabitation. Edward Casey suggests that such responses are encouraged by temporary or transient locations: '[A] truly transitional space is often a place for creative action, providing enough protection to encourage experimentation (if not outright exploration) without being overly confining.' (1993: 122) There seemed to be a Bakhtinian licence for ludus and boundlessness in the artistic work at Briscoe, led by the artists – perhaps because of not being tightly and formally part of that place.² Such boundlessness appeared to be enhanced by the disrupted temporalities that were thematic of this project: artists entered the project for different lengths of time; people went to school on a Sunday (to see *Nest*); much of the work took place outside the usual times of learning (in breaks, at lunchtime, after school); pupils sent out of class were immediately incorporated into activities (such as building the nest in the school hall). A luxurious, abundant sense of flexibility and freedom became part of the project's 'excess' – encouraged, perhaps, by temporality: of presence and non-normative time-patterns.



Figure 6: *The Airing Cupboard* (a mother's words written in soil).

1. Memories of excess have lingered and had an impact. In comment-
 2. ing retrospectively on the *Nest* project (interview 20 September 2011), head
 3. teacher Diane Pilgrim spoke with enthusiasm about one example of this. She
 4. was 'blown away' by the upturned, scattered desks, part of a 'bombshell nest';
 5. it was a defining moment for her. Apologizing for the seeming simplicity of
 6. her statement, she said, 'I'd never seen desks look so great ... something
 7. that's usually so normal and mundane and school-like.' (see [http://www.
 8. nest-life.com/slideshows/bombshell/bombshell-700x494.html](http://www.nest-life.com/slideshows/bombshell/bombshell-700x494.html), accessed 20
 9. September 2011) This iconic example of transgression, abundance and energy
 10. suggests Dyer's 'utopian sensibility', where the inadequacies of the everyday
 11. were supplanted by more exciting alternatives offered by the performance
 12. practices.

13. *Nest* was a success. Three years on, a clear re-engagement with the 'place'
 14. of Briscoe is evident by those who inhabit it, and even by those not actu-
 15. ally present during *Nest*, as identified more fully in the concluding section.
 16. Its 'excess' – such as the upturned desks – is retained as somehow iconic of
 17. the project. It may be that, when working with disengaged communities on
 18. performing place projects, 'excess' is something to be aimed for. An assump-
 19. tion might be made that engaging with place would be to live and operate
 20. more firmly and confidently within a place's everyday, to 'accept' its oper-
 21. ational norms and acclimatize to these fully. In fact, intensely experiencing
 22. places by *transgressing* their norms through performance-related activities
 23. might more constructively facilitate emplacement. While experiencing place
 24. cannot be continuously excessive – this would negate 'excess' as a concept,
 25. as there would be no 'normative' from which 'excess' departs – moments or
 26. periods of heightened effervescence invoked by performance-related activi-
 27. ties may well effect a greater engagement with place, as they did in the *Nest*
 28. project.



29.
30.
31.
32.
33.
34.
35.
36.
37.
38.
39.
40.
41.
42.
43.
44.
45.
46.
47.
48.
49.
50.
51.
52. *Figure 7: The Fold (a head teacher tends to her sheep).*

THE ARTIST AS CUCKOO

The *Nest* artists were addressing the ambivalent relationships the school community had with its sense of place. They were primarily facilitators of re-viewing this place, undertaking a range of practices for pupils, staff and parents. I became particularly interested in their position as temporary, but comparatively long-term, regular 'visitors' to Briscoe. To be partially present for this length of time was unusual; the complex and ambivalent role they held as place-makers was heightened by that longevity. Such artists might be perceived as nomadic performers of place themselves, while simultaneously facilitating local inhabitants' re-viewing of place.

Using the metaphor of the artists as 'cuckoos' in the Briscoe 'nest' that 'belonged' to pupils and school adults (that is, adults connected with the school such as teaching and support staff and parents) implies a negative presence. The artists did not quite 'fit'; they were outsiders, the dis-indigenous, what Marc Augé terms 'allochthones' (1995: 47). Briscoe was the domain of the staff and, in passing through the system, the pupils and their parents. The artists lodged in that site, but outside of that system. They took root temporarily, found a place to nest, sought to ruffle some feathers. A difference was hoped for because of their presence – whether a change in atmosphere or the re-enfranchisement of learning. The cuckoo artists were expected to 'lay' ideas, moods, artefacts – which were to be nurtured by other, more permanent members of Briscoe. On hearing an early version of this article, David Harradine – a notable artist/scholar in the United Kingdom and artistic director of the company *Fevered Sleep* – suggested that the metaphor of a cuckoo provoked negative connotations of artists working with communities:

The adoptive parent of course adopts the cuckoo chick because it is deceived, and as a failure of recognition. The cuckoo chick: a trickster, an imposter, a murderer, killing off its nestlings, a drain on resources, a food-vacuum (so much bigger than the birds that feed it). The cuckoo egg-layer: a cheat, a trickster, a thief (stealing the space of another). (e-mail, August 2009)

In response to Harradine's thoughts, Cole suggested the cuckoo as

a migratory bird – one that flies in and out of a place, that makes an intervention in that place, causes friction and, after having made a change (and changed its song pattern), leaves again ... [T]here is necessarily friction between the artist and the place and the cuckoo metaphor allow[s] us to inspect this.

(e-mail, August 2009)

Interrogating the *Nest* artists as non-engaged inhabitants with few bonds to that place and its community contributes to developing theories of performing place. Bauman's (2001) observation on 'carnival' communities has some bearing on the cuckoo-artist metaphor. In his strong criticism of how we aspire to the ideals of 'community' and yet have little possibility of realizing them, Bauman critiques what he calls 'carnival' or 'aesthetic' communities, whose common feature:

is the superficial and perfunctory, as well as transient, nature of the bonds emerging between their participants. The bonds are friable and short-lived. Since it is understood and has been agreed beforehand that they can be shaken off on demand, such bonds also cause little inconvenience and arouse little or no fear.

(2001: 71)



Figure 8: *The Aviary* (a 'twitcher' takes the audience through a hole into a nest of paper ladders, carrots and words).

Bauman calls these carnival bonds 'bonds without consequences' (2001: 71). The implication is therefore that a carnival community is one that might be experienced lightly, as a carnival would be, rather than a community that is longstanding, fraternal and sharing. The bonds within such a community, Bauman suggests, would be perfunctory. An artist might well be perceived as one who develops only carnival bonds with their participant community because of the brief and fragmentary contact. The 'artist as cuckoo' metaphor implies such transient brevity.

There are two points here, however. First, short-lived bonds may not necessarily be perfunctory; and second, such bonds may not preclude a performance of place that offers a significant experience.

PERFUNCTORY BONDS?

Interrogating the artists' experience of *Nest* quickly suggested a depth of engagement with the project. While their bonds were necessarily temporary and relatively short-lived, they were not hasty or superficial. A manifestation of this was the sense of responsibility they demonstrated in their role at Briscoe. Jules spoke of being given such an opportunity to work without having to compromise 'education and creative partnership', where 'one is about keeping rules and one is about breaking them; one is about getting the right answers and one is about exploring the wrong answers'. As a result of this, he developed a strong sense of responsibility for the work and kept asking himself 'Could I do more?' Rachel was concerned about some of the pupil-recorded playground statements to be used as pupils' voices in the School Council 'nest of words', thinking they might cause offence to staff and parents. Ethically bound to use these words, she sought artistic solutions, mixing and slowing recordings such that words were barely distinguishable and avoiding causing offence to other inhabitants of that place; she cared that they would have been upset.

A further manifestation of the artists' engagement and responsibility was evidenced in a sense of guilt that scored some of the interviews. On introducing eight budgerigars into the environment, Helen was surprised by the dissent that greeted her: they might die; they were somehow inappropriate for primary schools. Intended for her space-turned-aviary nest, she was informed that they would fly to the skylight and damage themselves trying to escape; this left Helen 'feeling horrific' about the potential consequences of her good intentions for Briscoe. Similarly well intentioned, Julian Walker felt guilt for not knowing appropriate behaviours – a child crossing the field had wanted to hold his hand. He talked also about 'pitching in and out' of the project, and how difficult he found this – particularly with some of the problems the pupils were facing. Knowing that you had to 'walk away' added to a sense of guilt. The artists were offered counselling by Creative Partnership; an outpouring of grief and frustration from staff and pupils could sometimes be overwhelming. Julian insisted that you have to care – 'that's 90 per cent of your justification for doing it' – yet, along with some of the other artists, he was in despair, at times at feeling unable to help individual pupils with longer term problems.

The artists were clearly not able to throw off the ethical responsibilities of being part of the community, as Bauman suggests happens with 'carnival bonds'. They gained considerable pleasure from the more 'permanent' residents' achievements and re-engagement with Briscoe; they found the freedom invoked by artistically experimenting with performance in that temporary place deeply rewarding; they were unable to assuage guilt at 'walking away' at the end of the day. These were not the friable bonds that match with an image of the cuckoo as a hardened, careless trickster or simply the provocative migrant; they were not what Bauman might term 'carnival' bonds. These bonds were perhaps short-lived temporally but they were not perfunctory.



Figure 9: *The Mothership (a room of waiting and advice).*

1. PERFORMERS OF PLACE

2. Such artists as those involved with *Nest* – and surely those in similar projects –
 3. are temporary inhabitants of places charged with facilitating community
 4. responses. Their role is a highly complex one, and is difficult to label specifically.
 5. Although subject to different inflections globally, ‘community artists’ imply
 6. artists who predominantly facilitate the work of others. All the *Nest* artists
 7. make their own work, and would not necessarily perceive themselves as
 8. community or ‘teaching’ artists. ‘Public artists’ might be described as those
 9. who make permanent or semi-permanent art outside conventional galleries
 10. and who are funded ‘publicly’. Such work is likely to be inspired by the site, to
 11. reflect a historical significance of a location, to respond to a community’s call
 12. for an aesthetic integration or intervention (cf. Kwon 2002: 56) or simply be
 13. an unrelated piece of art placed in a public area. Work might directly impact
 14. upon such issues as ‘the diversity of urban publics and cultures, the func-
 15. tions and gendering of public space, the operations of power’ (Miles 1997: 1).
 16. There is an emphasis on the product of the artwork and how that artwork is
 17. ‘place making’ (Warwick 2006; Fleming 2007; Krause Knight 2008) without
 18. including visiting artists as immanently of that place. A shift for such public
 19. art to suggest socially engaged processes has emerged recently, where artists
 20. work closely with community participants (Cartiere 2008: 7–17), although
 21. some suggest that ‘socially engaged arts practice ... was a field still in forma-
 22. tion’ (UCLAN 2011). Shannon Jackson (2011) advances thinking, interrogat-
 23. ing social art as socially engaged practice, interdependent and collaborative,
 24. and exploring art’s relationship with social institutions, politics and even art-
 25. and-children. She comments that ‘there is a particular kind of incredulity that
 26. comes when a child hits her [aesthetic] mark’ (2011: 241), which has a reso-
 27. nance; in *Nest*, the quality of artwork produced by artists with school adults
 28. and children was exceptional.

29. What *Nest* illuminated beyond a social engagement was the fragile and
 30. intricate role of the artists, suggesting *themselves* – their presence, their
 31. emotional investment, their creative energies – as place-makers as well as the
 32. artwork as place-making. The artist-facilitators appeared to have an integral,
 33. sometimes pivotal and ‘rightful’ position alongside the more usual inhabitants
 34. of that place. They too performed place, but as the more temporary inhabit-
 35. ants. This was not, as has been discussed, always a positive or resolved experi-
 36. ence. In interviews some months after the end of the project, it was clear that
 37. the artists still found their relationship with that place and its people puzzling.
 38. Guilt remained. Notwithstanding, they were committed, responsive and active
 39. performers of that place, however temporarily.

41. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: MULTIPLE PLACES AND 42. SITUATIONS OF EXCESS

43. Researching *Nest*, I looked for ‘findings’ that would increase my understand-
 44. ing and theorization of performing place. Two organizational structures of
 45. platial³ performance practice have emerged, both of them potentially useful
 46. for further work in this field: ‘the artist as cuckoo’, and how that leads to
 47. considering places of intermittent and brief inhabitation as still meaningful –
 48. even if just one of multiple places; and ‘excess’ as invoking affect.

49. First, interrogating the artist’s position within *Nest* confirms that perform-
 50. ing place – as framed, planned, devised, artistic sharings or as the enhanced
 51. repetitious behaviours of the everyday – can effect a sense of belonging to,
 52.

3. ‘Platial’ is taken from Una Chaudhuri’s neologism, ‘platiality’, which she interprets as ‘a recognition of the signifying power and political potential of specific places’ (1995: 5).

or sharing responsibility for, place *even when only present temporarily*. Such a response may not always be long term, but is nonetheless important and 'felt', countering the superficial transience characteristic of Bauman's (2007) carnival communities. We inhabit multiple places. The *Nest* artists indicate that inhabitation need not be any less meaningful if it is temporary. While there will be benefit and long-term change – a 'tap root' experience – for some, such as the pupils and school adults at Briscoe, others still gain a memorable sense of place from a rhizomatic engagement with one of multiple places.

The impact upon the cuckoo-artists as highly temporary residents is particularly useful here for wider practices of performing place. In negotiating the fluidity of place and how we might dwell 'easily' – rather than uneasily – such a residence offers evidence of an important and felt way-station in the process of travelling up, across and along through multiple places. The nest and cuckoo-artist metaphors offer a useful theoretical mapping for current and future practical research into the performance of place with community groups, some of which will be or have been temporary residents. As part of a three-year UK Arts and Humanities Research Council award, for example, I am currently working with Oldham Theatre Workshop (near Manchester) and migrant, refugee and asylum-seeker families using performance as a means of ameliorating potential feelings of atopia (see <http://www.challengingplace.org>). Research from the *Nest* inquiry suggests that performance might well help ease a relationship with a 'new' place, however temporary the dwelling.

Second, a performance of place in community contexts can create a shifted, positive perception of that place, resulting from an affective response to situations of 'excess'. I allude to a long history of thought on 'affect', of course – a history that this article can only briefly reference. Nigel Thrift (2008)



Figure 10: A cot of tears en route to the Nest of Silence.

1. summarizes, succinctly, four different accounts of affect, eschewing affect
 2. as individual emotions in favour of 'broad tendencies and lines of force'
 3. (2008: 175):

4.
 5. Each of [four nuances of affect] depends on a sense of push in the world
 6. but the sense of push is subtly different in each case. In the case of
 7. embodied knowledge, that push is provided by the expressive armoury
 8. of the human body. In the case of affect theory it is provided by biologi-
 9. cally differentiated positive and negative affects rather than the drives
 10. of Freudian theory. In the world of Spinoza and Deleuze, affect is the
 11. capacity of interaction that is akin to a natural force of emergence.
 12. In the neo-Darwinian universe, affect is a deep-seated physiological
 13. change involuntarily written on the face.

(2008: 182)

16. Thrift captures in the first 'broad tendency' here something of the inten-
 17. sity of affect that I am implying results from excess – or pervasive moments of
 18. heightened effervescence. Lyotard's 'libidinal affects' (alluding to Freud) and
 19. Bataille's 'communicative cognition',⁴ for example, both suggest an 'uncon-
 20. scious' or 'primary' access to knowledge that transcends objective reason and
 21. rational thought. Such knowledge and understanding result from an intensity
 22. of embodied emotion rather than a cognitive intellectual process. I have argued
 23. (Mackey 1993) that affect arises from phenomenological experience *and* ontolog-
 24. ical consciousness when experiencing the arts. Winston (2009) and Thompson
 25. (2009) also capture complex debates on affect, beauty and emotion in applied
 26. and educational performance contexts. Whether through unconscious sublime,
 27. embodied emotional experience or this in conjunction with cognitive, conscious,
 28. rational thinking, I am interested here in iterating a theory for an affective
 29. response to situations of excess as an important part of performing place.

30. I have suggested that excess cannot permanently be part of a performing
 31. place process. Instead, excess denotes shorter or longer periods of intensity,
 32. transgression, abundance and so on. This renders place more affective because
 33. such periods of excess in the performance practice process are non-quotid-
 34. ian and beyond the norm. An intense, affective perception and response is a
 35. perception and a response to a situation of excess. This aligns with the first
 36. of Thrift's four accounts, 'chiefly from the phenomenological tradition' where
 37. 'perception of a situation and response are intertwined' (2008: 175, 176). The
 38. response was intertwined with the perception of the 'situation'. In the *Nest*
 39. project, the 'situation' might be described as certain ongoing performance prac-
 40. tices from the straw-nest building in the school hall through all the processes
 41. to the final promenade performance of the nests. Where those 'situations' were
 42. iterations of moments of excess (transgressive behaviours, boundlessness and
 43. Dyer's interpretation of a utopian sensibility incorporating abundance, energy
 44. and intensity), the participants were most notably affected. They perceived and
 45. responded with emotion to situations arising from moments of excess.

46. In using performance practices to express and ease relationships with places,
 47. it remains to ask whether moments of excess might therefore be contrived. If
 48. temporary or longer-term denizens may benefit from 'excessive' performance
 49. practice, can this become a specific aim of such work, to maximize the effect of
 50. such practice? As outlined above, the *Nest* research indicates that performing
 51. place practice impacts upon those who inhabit places even briefly. It also suggests
 52. that such practice accrues an affective response, most notably through moments

4. 'Lyotard uses the terms "libidinal intensities," and "affects" to refer to events. These intensities and affects are, in more common terminology, feelings and desires. In the terms of Freudian psychoanalysis, they are the "primary processes" of the libido, the forces that exist in the body on a more basic level than the "secondary processes" of the conscious mind.' See <http://www.iep.utm.edu/lyotard>. Accessed 10 January 2012. The sublimation of rational thought during transgressive moments is repeatedly in Bataille's (1985) writing. This particular phrase is coined in an essay by Nami Ohi, http://www.digitalnarcis.org/ohi/Cognition_as_Communication.pdf. Accessed 10 January 2012, where she refers to Bataille's articulation of different forms of communication used in his 'The Limit of the Useful' (fragments), part of Volume 7 of his *Complete Works*.

of excess. Rather than noting these retrospectively, contriving such moments of excess in future applied theatre contexts (such as in Oldham, mentioned above) is a potentially fruitful way forward in project work of this nature.

CODA

To support these last 'findings' and to end this article, I return to *Nest* – and its legacies. Such affect is remembered three years later by the longer-term residents of the *Nest* project. One of the parents (now a teaching assistant) wrote of the experience with raw poignancy, reflecting the pleasure of the *Nest* experience as well as mourning its ending: '[E]ach parent took their tools away with them and have continued to build on the things they found out about themselves. Why would anybody want that to end?' (fax, 3 October 2011) She was one of the parents performing in the gym, hanging upside down as an expression of the gymnastics her life entailed. The impact of the project on her had been profound; she gave several examples where she had felt more confident in approaching new activities, including performance and role-play, as well as the lasting effects on the school through the narratives of the project that were passed on to the many new staff. 'You can't say *Nest* without smiling.' (interview, 28 September 2011) She believed the event had become an affective cultural moment in the school's history that genuinely changed the atmosphere of the institution.

Head teacher Diane Pilgrim summarized by saying the school was simply a different place: 'You don't walk on eggshells any more.' (interview 29 September 2011) She had been strongly affected by the work, and found the artists' vision (particularly Sarah's) to be boundless and innovative. 'Sometimes you work in such tight boundaries in school and it was such a privilege to work beyond that – to work with such creative people.' She spoke, too, of lasting tangible impact. First, 'Welly Wednesday' is an activity inspired



Figure 11: Part of the furniture.

1. by the unusual approach of the whole project, where every other Wednesday
 2. morning throughout the year, the nursery and reception pupils (aged 3–5)
 3. work outside, eschewing the formal classroom. Second, the original nest
 4. that Mark Storer built in the school hall had attracted pupils, staff and many
 5. other activities. Pilgrim recognized the powerful ‘nurturing’ role the nest
 6. had fulfilled during its week’s installation, where pupils had shared unspo-
 7. ken thoughts with Sarah and Mark: this had been pivotal in inspiring *Nest*.
 8. As a result, together with a learning support tutor, Pilgrim has since created
 9. ‘The Nurture Club’. Pupils ‘who you walk on eggshells with’ are identified,
 10. and after the first half term of the academic year, they spend every afternoon
 11. in the ‘booster’ room, the setting for the Nurture Club, with a specialized
 12. support worker. This lasts for half a term, starting and finishing with a self-
 13. esteem profile. Despite a 2011 poor inspection report (such reports are now
 14. statistically benchmarked and reductive in the United Kingdom), Pilgrim is
 15. convincing in her belief that caring for the whole child and ‘getting that right’
 16. is critical as a foundation for furthering more formal aspects of education. The
 17. school’s most recent follow-up monitoring report of April 2012 validates this
 18. with its clear recognition of improvement in the ‘formal’ education at Briscoe.
 19. The Nurture Club alone is a testament to the *Nest* project and it’s re-engaging
 20. with the place of Briscoe through the practices of performance. Both the
 21. teaching assistant and the head teacher were insistent on the dramatic shift in
 22. Briscoe as a result of *Nest*. Eggshells are no longer trodden upon; dis-ease has
 23. been replaced by an ease of place.

REFERENCES

27. Augé, M. (1995), *Non-Places: An Introduction to an Anthropology of*
 28. *Supermodernity*, trans. J. Howe, London: Verso.
29. Bakhtin, M. (1993 [1965]), *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky,
 30. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
31. Bataille, G. and Stoekle, A. (1985 [1933]), *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings,*
 32. *1927–39*, trans. A. Stoekle, C.R. Lovett and D.M. Leslie, Minneapolis, MN:
 33. University of Minnesota Press.
34. Bauman, Z. (2001), *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*, Cambridge:
 35. Polity Press.
36. — (2007), *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*, Cambridge: Polity
 37. Press.
38. Cartiere, C. (2008), ‘Coming in from the Cold: A Public Art History’, in
 39. C. Cartiere and S. Willis (eds), *The Practice of Public Art*, London: Routledge,
 40. pp. 7–17.
41. Casey, E. (1993), *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the*
 42. *Place-World*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
43. Chaudhuri, U. (1995), *Staging Place*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan
 44. Press.
45. Deleuze, G. (1993 [1988]), *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. T. Conley,
 46. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
47. Dyer, R. (1993), ‘Entertainment and Utopia’, in Simon During (ed.), *The*
 48. *Cultural Studies Reader*, London: Routledge, pp. 271–83.
49. Fleming, R.L. (2007), *The Art of Placemaking: Interpreting Community Through*
 50. *Public Art and Urban Design*, London: Merrell.
51. Ingold, T. (2006), ‘Up, Across and Along’, *Place and Location: Studies in*
 52. *Environmental Aesthetics and Semiotics*, 5, pp. 21–36.

- (2011), *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, London: Routledge. 1.
- Jackson, S. (2011), *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*, London: Routledge. 2.
- Krause Knight, C. (2008), *Public Art: Theory, Practice and Populism*, Oxford: Blackwell. 3.
- Kwon, M. (2002), *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 4.
- Mackey, S. (1993), 'Emotion and Cognition in Arts Education', *Curriculum Review*, 1: 1, pp. 245–46. 5.
- (2007a), 'Performance, Place and Allotments: Feast or Famine?' *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 17: 2, pp. 181–91. 6.
- (2007b), 'Transient Roots: Performance, Place and Exterritorialities', *Performance Research: On the Road*, 12: 2, pp. 75–78. 7.
- Massey, D. (1997), 'A Global Sense of Place', in T. Barnes and D. Gregory (eds), *Reading Human Geography*, London: Arnold, pp. 315–23. 8.
- (2005), *For Space*, London: Sage. 9.
- Miles, M. (1997), *Art, Space and the City*, London: Routledge. 10.
- Nicholson, H. (2005), *Applied Drama: The Gift of Theatre*, London: Palgrave. 11.
- Taylor, D. (2003), *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 12.
- Thrift, N. (2008), *Non-Representational Theory: Space/politics/affect*, London: Routledge. 13.
- Thompson, J. (2009), *Performance Affects: Applied Theatre and the End of Effect*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 14.
- UCLAN (2011), 'New Model Arts Institutions and Public Engagement, Research Study', <http://culturalpractice.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/new-model-arts-organisations-and-public-engagement-emergent-findings.pdf>. Accessed 5 December 2011. 15.
- Warwick, R. (ed.), (2006), *Arcade: Artists and Place-Making*, London: Black Dog Publishing. 16.
- Winston, J. (2009), *Beauty and Education*, London, Routledge. 17.

SUGGESTED CITATION

- Mackey, S. and Cole, S. (2013), 'Cuckoos in the Nest: Performing place, artists and excess', *Applied Theatre Research* 1: 1, pp. 43–61, doi: 10.1386/atr.1.1.43_1

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Sally Mackey is Reader in Applied Theatre and Deputy Dean of Studies at the Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London. Initially publishing on post-16 drama education, more recently Sally's publications have been about place and performance as part of an applied theatre field. She is on the editorial board of *RiDE: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, and was on the commissioning panel for the United Kingdom's Arts and Humanities Research Council's 'Landscape and Environment' theme, contributing to several of the projects within that theme and most recently, with Dee Heddon, contributing to and editing a themed edition of *RiDE* on 'Environmentalism'.

Contact: Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London, Eton Avenue, Swiss Cottage, London, NW3 3HY, United Kingdom.
E-mail: sally.mackey@cssd.ac.uk

1. Sarah Cole is a visual artist whose practice involves the orchestration of collaborative encounters with people as a form of live research into lived experience.
2.
3. Since *Nest*, she has worked with Artangel to develop *Smother*, working with
4. very young parents and their children. *Smother* was housed in a five-storey,
5. three-sided building in London's Kings Cross, where three performers could
6. be found climbing the walls, spinning china teacups and skating, quite literally,
7. on thin ice. Sarah is a Senior Lecturer at Central Saint Martins College of
8. Art and Design, where her teaching practice explores ideas of play, pedagogy,
9. community and performance.

10. Contact: Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, University of the
11. Arts, Granary Building, 1 Granary Square, King's Cross, London, N1C 4AA,
12. United Kingdom.
13. E-mail: sarah@sarah-cole.co.uk

have

14.
15. Sally Mackey and Sarah Cole **has** asserted their right under the Copyright,
16. Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in
17. the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.
18.
19.

Intellect 2012
Not for distribution