ACTION OF STREET

ACTION OF ROOM

A Directory of Public Actions
A collaboration between Febrik and students from Westminster Academy
For the young people – eight students aged 14 and 15 years-old from Westminster Academy – the project provided a space to think about their future beyond school and to critically consider their roles and responsibilities in relationship to their community and the wider world.

The group used physical interventions and film as tools to research, test and record their experiences. They revealed the lack of public space by occupying and activating pockets of left-over areas; the places that exist between the public and private, the back and the front, from the stairwells of libraries to the backs of market stalls.

Through the project, the young people also proposed a series of speculative changes by imagining alternative futures for Church Street. They suggested that the market should be pedestrianised in order to protect spaces for strolling and conversing; proposed a yearly food fight to bring the buyers and sellers of the market together and a dance off to address the divisions between the two markets at each end of Church Street. These propositions existed only in the speculative realm and served as triggers for conversations as to why such interventions are not possible in public space.

This project is part of the Serpentine Galleries Youth Forum; a work-experience programme where young people work with artists and curators to identify and discuss issues in the social realm and create platforms for change. The programme adopts a critical pedagogy approach in order to reveal and address power structures and to disrupt hierarchies between adults and young people, teachers and students.

Unlike Jodorowsky’s Dune, which never materialised, this publication maps a dynamic process as it unfolds through explorative public actions in the street and reflective exchanges in the studio. Each chapter moves between the street and the studio, mirroring the non-linear path the project took, while the text is drawn from conversations between the young people, Febrik and the Serpentine Galleries Education Team. What follows is the record of an experimental collaboration and unfinished film.

During the 1970s, film director Alejandro Jodorowsky assembled a team of people to help him realise his vision to translate the cult science-fiction novel Dune into a feature film. The project was eventually pulled by the producers and was famously left incomplete. What remains are the sketches, screenplay, notes and ideas the director collected together in a book he calls his production ‘bible’.

Although markedly smaller in ambition and scale to the great filmmaker’s project, this directory has echoes of Jodorowsky’s draft; it can be read as a collection of sketches from the cutting-room floor, as a working document and a tribute to the collaborative creative process.

Throughout the winter of 2015, young people from Westminster Academy, artist collective Febrik and the Serpentine Galleries Education Team worked together to investigate the use and regulation of public space on and around Church Street, North London. The directory charts the project – from filming experimental actions in the street, to reflections on their meaning in the studio and the ultimately unsuccessful attempts to bring the footage together into a final film.

Since 2002, the Serpentine Galleries have developed projects with artists in collaboration with organisations and people living and working in the neighbourhood that explore the impact and responses to political and cultural issues within the local area. Church Street is undergoing extreme change, with three major regeneration projects in the area. This creates both an atmosphere of uncertainty and anxiety, as well as an opportunity for young people to be involved in responding to and shaping provisions for others in the area.

Working together as Febrik, artists Reem Charif and Mohamad Hafeda are interested in the practices of public spaces in relation to social and urban change. Their research has taken place through a series of projects primarily in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan and more recently in Sceaux Gardens estate in South London. For Febrik, this commission presented an opportunity to extend their practice of using actions and propositional thinking to support people to negotiate their right to spaces.
The camera pans from the ground to the sky revealing the horizon in the middle of the market street as Siana walks the line.

What places on the site inspire you to re-think how to use public space?

Sianaspace

Spending some time in a place you like or you are curious about.
The camera follows our bodies as they mark the boundaries of spaces. Our gestures respond to the nature of each space – Siana touches the books quietly, while Aaron taps the rails noisily.

The films show how places can be used in different ways – Hanaa

What places are accessible to us?
We identified a poverty of public spaces available on the street. Within the public spaces that were open to us, such as the library and the park, there was much more scope for creative actions.

Where can you freely walk in the middle of the street? Can a space for walking support social interaction?

The middle space is where conversations happen, where produce is stacked, where traders take a break and make a mess.

I think in-between the market stalls, it's a bit free. There's a bit of freedom, because everyone can talk to each other — Aaron

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What is 'public space'? Where does it start and who is it for?

Here the site operates as a playground. Public areas became spaces for exploration and investigation, places to play with different actions and their meanings.

I like the part when I'm doing a first person shot when I'm climbing up the roof. That was one of my favourite bits for the film — Jaber

This shows that we control the area — Aaron

Critical Action

In the studio the group reflected on the types of public spaces accessible to them and the types of social and spatial limits that govern these spaces. They observed that:

- Certain limits influence the nature of the public actions they feel comfortable in performing.
- The limits they encountered were affected by social and legal expectations on how to use and behave in these spaces.
- The limits relate to physical accessibility, degrees of visibility and individual's confidence in using these spaces.
What public spaces are available to us and how can we use them?

Identified public spaces:
- Park and park-railings
- Library
- Pavement
- Middle of market street
- Back of market stall
- Edge of private and public property
- Back of housing estate
- Top of bin storage area
- Pedestrian passages
- Leftover spaces between buildings

Critical Action

It feels like you’re free to do what you want. You get motivated inside through it — Aaron
Use your body in a new way in a public space.

Can we physically test what is possible in public spaces?

Walking along the wall of a terraced housing block

The camera moves along the wall, following Jaber’s footsteps as he negotiates the boundary between public and private.

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PUSHING THE LIMIT
Through this project, in various ways, we have tried to challenge not only our imagination but also the monotonous stereotypes about young people that are rather common nowadays. As shown in both the library and outside on the street, we have attempted to rearrange the chairs in numerous ways to suggest our creativity — Siana

How can we occupy the boundary between public and private? Do physical edges such as the wall demarcate areas that are off-limits or are they in-between spaces to occupy?

Stepping on the boundary wall of a terraced house expanded the discussion of what constitutes public space. The action politicised the discussion by physically exposing the fine line separating public from private, and by asking whether we are inside or outside someone's property — or simply on the edge.

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Are there public spaces dedicated to us? What would make a good place for us to hang out?

Speculating on the limits of public space and its relation to age. Identifying what is allowed or expected from different age groups, especially through the transition to adulthood.

Sitting down on a chair on a quiet road to give an effect of peace — Hanaa
The fixed camera records Aaron, Abdi, Bruno, Kevin and Jaber physically crossing the boundary between the library courtyard and housing estate. A close up shot shows Nahid drawing a line to mark this ephemeral crossing.

The small areas that people don’t use much, we can use it, bring more activities. Creating, experimenting with areas full of people — Kevin

We made two types of footage — one is disruptive and the other is peaceful — Aaron

Critical Action

Staging and rehearsing alternative uses for the library courtyard

Through the action of selecting and arranging words to name the film, discussions about the wider context of the project began to emerge:

— How important is public perception when making a public action and a public film?
— What is the role of a title in communicating the aims of the film?
— What are our rights in public spaces and what are our responsibilities towards others using the same space?
— What are the ways we can make our film public?

Moved from inside the library to the courtyard outside, the interior of the library works as a backstage for a theatrical use of the courtyard. The fixed camera records Aaron, Abdi, Bruno, Kevin and Jaber physically crossing the boundary between the library courtyard and housing estate. A close up shot shows Nahid drawing a line to mark this ephemeral crossing.

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Can we change spatial and social hierarchies and arrangements?

Who are the public? What message do we want to communicate to them?

- Titles set expectations and convey the essence of the public event (film). Our title aims to:
  - Challenge stereotypes about young people by proving their independence with positive and creative actions.
  - Push public limits in different ways from gentle to assertive.
  - Encourage more freedom in the rules of street behaviour.
  - Make people think differently about public space and encourage young people to use public space in unexpected ways.
  - Show that young people can be free, fun and energetic without causing harm.

Critical Action

And then sometimes people might come through and then we have to stop the video, let them come and then wait for it. And then start again. I think that’s what happens when you’re doing something in public and outside, you just respect other people — Bruno
I learned that there's two types of teenagers — well, there's probably more but in the video we've only shown two—one of more movement and one of less movement. And it just shows how we used public spaces to our own advantage — Hanaa

How powerful is gentle resistance of a public limit?

There are many ways to ask questions through public action: by gently being present, by boldly and actively occupying spaces or through initiating conversations with residents.

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I think the film’s about young people trying not to break the limits by doing something bad but break the limits by doing something positive. So they don’t want to feel like they can’t do stuff, because of the law or something like that. It’s in the title, Urban Takeover — Jaber

Can we break the limit by doing something positive?

When young people cross limits in public, their actions can be interpreted by adults as transgressive. These readings expose an underlying distrust of young people and their intentions. Through the project we collectively sought to challenge these prejudices and reveal the creative capabilities of the group.

In Church Street, there are people with different cultures and just young people, old people. There’s a poor side and a more posh side — Abdi

What and who are at each side?

What do both sides have in common?

The division between Church Street market at one end and the antique market at the other is clearly marked by the clients, the cars, the facades of the buildings and the exclusivity of access to some of the shops.
Can film be used as a research tool?

— How does this experimental footage fall into a narrative with a clear line of thought and meaning?
— What is the nature of the narrative produced?
— Is it linear, fragmented or suggestive?
— Does it need to be conclusive?

The process of turning footage of public actions into a collective film also generates speculations about each young persons ownership of the film's narrative. In the end, three films were produced.
Does a film need to have a coherent narrative if the process of making it was not linear?

Filming as research
Filming as reflecting
Filming as crossing
Filming as pushing
Filming as speculating
Filming as proposing
Filming as playing

Editing as objecting
Editing as agreeing
Editing as debating
Editing as narrative

I would create a story, like a film with an introduction, beginning, middle and end — Kevin

Experimenting with ideas and brainstorming — Hanaa
The camera gives Jaber confidence in pursuing his interviews. The questions are suggestive and provoke strong responses from the interviewees about the future of their local area.

What do you think if the market had a food fight once a year?

Well I’ll go with Jaber’s idea for a food fight — Nahid

What would you like to change on Church Street?

Suggest a fictional or imagined scenario to change the site.
Many people have contributed to our common footage. Not only the editors, the people who support us, but also the ones who work in the street, in Church Street. Once one of the people allowed us to take their trolley in order to fulfil our project. He trusted us and that helped a lot and made our work easier — Siana
Do differences of opinion amongst a group create a rich dialogue and a better understanding of a topic?

— Sometimes we cannot reach a shared outcome or a singular decision.
— Disagreeing is important for the development of discussions and for the emergence of new ideas and understandings.
— Needing to agree may force groups or individuals into making decisions that do not represent them.
— Differing opinions and the opportunity to raise them are necessary for a fairer democratic representation.

Critical Action

I think we can do the same movie, but two different scenes maybe, because this shows the freedom and this shows... what they did — Aaron

I can’t say that I don’t like any. I like everything of that film because it represents us in many different ways — Siana
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Education Team

With thanks to Aaron, Abdi, Alex, Amal, Ben, Bruno, Hanaa, Jaber, Kevin, Nahid, Marwan, Mohamad, Nekane, Reem and Siana

Design by Marwan Kaabour

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