

## **Housing, Performance and Activism: Thinking with performance in times of crisis**

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## **Housing, Performance and Activism: Thinking with performance in times of crisis**

This special issue explores the relationships between performance and activism in conditions of housing crisis, asking ‘what can performance do for housing activism’?

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The right to adequate shelter and housing is, globally, under threat. As population growth and the emptying of rural communities leads to congested megacities, housing conditions become increasingly disorganised, unsanitary, and shambolic (Patel and Burke 2009). According to the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, by 2012 there were over one billion people living in slums and informal settlements, and over 100 million ‘homeless’ people worldwide (2012, 1). The collapse of the sub-prime mortgage market (as aspirational homeowners defaulted on unaffordable loans) triggered the 2007/8 financial collapse and subsequent global recession — illustrating how failures in the provision of housing are linked to failures of the prevailing economic ideology, and pointing to tectonic cracks in the neoliberal model. Across the world, those unable to keep up with mortgage payments found themselves under threat of eviction or repossession. These conditions have deepened local and global inequality in past decade, paradoxically heralding a boom in speculative development as the market floods in ineffectually to shore up the breaking system, intensifying the displacement and disenfranchisement of those unable to find and sustain secure housing.

Under these conditions, the term ‘housing crisis’ is now ubiquitous — surely familiar to most English speaking people with even a passing interest in politics. A recent google search I conducted raised over 483 million results for the phrase; these

results suggest not only its ubiquity but also the fluidity with which the term ‘crisis’ is applied to disparate conditions of housing precarity, uncertainty and emergency in the neoliberal moment. In the UK, the term ‘housing crisis’ is usually centred on discussions of rapidly rising house prices, particularly in London and the South East, and the concurrent decline in provision for social housing and its quality. The charity Shelter point to four factors that constitute the UK’s housing crisis: ‘home ownership slipping out of reach’ due to rising house prices; the high costs of housing for those who borrowed mortgages that cost more than they could afford, leading to an increase in repossession; increase in private rental; and rising homelessness caused by the factors above (Shelter 2019).

The UK context reflects a wider global trend in which there has been a shift in how we think about homes, houses and the right to shelter over the past three decades, as the global neoliberal project has expanded, bringing with it a reduction in social and affordable rented housing, and expanded demand for ownership and, latterly, private rental. This shift is characterised by ‘hyper-commodification’ (Madden and Marcuse 2016, 56), wherein housing’s function as living space becomes subsumed by its function as a financial product, and increasing deregulation and overreliance on the supposed efficiency of the market contribute to speculation, inflated prices, and ever more precarity, especially for the least well off. This hyper-commodified environment, Madden and Marcuse explain, is characterised by ‘fear, stress, anxiety and disempowerment’ (56) for citizens struggling to survive in hostile market-driven conditions. As David Harvey (2008) points out, the neoliberal trend towards owner occupation, which reached its peak during the first decade of the twenty-first century, exacerbated existing local housing crises and resulted in a global crisis of affordable housing. This is regardless of the fact that the right to safe, decent housing is commonly

understood as a fundamental human right; enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Understanding local articulations of the global housing crisis I map above was the starting point for this special issue, which responds not only to the growing public awareness around issues of housing precarity, but also to the ways that artists and activists have responded to conditions of housing crisis in different contexts and in myriad ways since the expansion of neoliberal ideology in the 1980s. In Detroit, USA, for example, the Heidelberg project, launched in 1986, drew attention to the neglect of the city's suburban houses, and facilitated ongoing protests against the City of Detroit's plans for urban development. In 2011, in cities across the world — including Amsterdam, Hong Kong, London and New York — people disenchanted by capitalism chose to respond to the state of the financial system with 'Occupy' protests. Protesters took over public (and public/private) spaces using makeshift tented dwellings — symbolically referencing the fact that the recession had threatened the individual right to basic shelter. In 2016 Camden People's theatre hosted a festival, 'Whose London is it Anyway?', which explored the ways in which unaffordable private housing and the decimation of existing social housing provision is leading to a so-called 'social cleansing' in London, where the city becomes unaffordable to all but the richest residents. These examples point to the way, as Patrick Duggan and Lisa Peschel note, drawing on Franz Fanon's work, crisis often prompts:

a sudden and urgent desire, even a fundamental need, to speak creatively to, from or about the socio-political context of the 'exceptional circumstances' being acted upon the body (individual or collective) of those affected. (Duggan and Peschel 2016, 4).

The articles in this issue show us what it means to be in and to speak creatively from conditions of housing crisis — although the way in which the term 'crisis' is conceived

differs in each article. Lynne McCarthy, for example, focuses on the London articulation of the global crisis —exploring how the housing shortage affects working-class single mothers in Newham, while Cecilia Vergnano explores the perpetual crises of housing faced by so-called Roma communities in Turin, Italy — revealing how racism towards Roma people manifests in housing precarity, exacerbated by the conditions of neoliberalism. In this way, although the global ‘housing crisis’ serves as an organising idea underpinning each article in the issue, the articles also speak beyond strict understandings of ‘housing crisis’ (commonly understood as referring a shortage of housing and a decline in quality under neoliberalism) that I map above. Indeed, the issue as a whole draws attention to the way that crises of housing intersect with crises of race, class and gender, creating precarious, abject and often dehumanising conditions for those already marginalised within the neoliberal order (cf Tyler 2013, 156). It draws attention to the way individuals and groups work to struggle against and survive neoliberal conditions. The issue, then, uses performance practice and theory to think about the state of housing in specific places and historical moments; the crises produced by precarious housing conditions in England and elsewhere; and the ways people resist and respond to crises of neoliberalism that manifest through housing using performative means.

In positioning performance as its primary focus, this issue draws on Donna Haraway’s assertion that, especially in times of enduring trouble across ecological, economic and social spheres, ‘[i]t matters what thoughts think thoughts. [...] It matters what worlds world worlds’ (2016, 34). The articles in this collection think with performance to ask ‘what can art do for housing activism?’, positioning the role of activism and resistance as essential to overcoming the crises caused by neoliberalism. This question emerges from a long-table event I held, using the format developed by

performance-artist and academic Lois Weaver, as part of the Resist festival at the London School of Economics in 2016. The event brought together UK artists, housing activists, residents from a range of precarious housing tenures and academics, using a theatrical method of public engagement (see Split Britches ND) to explore the ways that art might function within fraught housing contexts and alongside activism. The debates that emerged as part of that event reflected the debates that have permeated scholarship and online discussion surrounding art, performance and housing activism in the UK. Although it was clear that the work of artists emerging from conditions of housing crisis was both a means of expression and enjoyment for participants living in crisis and a way to amplify the voices of residents engaged in housing struggles, there was also a deep suspicion of the motivation of artists and academics working in areas undergoing urban development. This suspicion is most clearly epitomised by the ‘artwashing’ critiques (see Pritchard 2017; Harling 2017; Duman et al. 2018), which have demonstrated how artists profit from the housing crises caused by neoliberalism. The term ‘artwashing’ describes how artists can provide a gloss for the violent displacement of communities during urban redevelopment where artworks are often created, commissioned, co-opted or otherwise sanctioned by developers who profit from the cultural capital that artworks afford up-and-coming neighbourhoods.

These criticisms of arts practice, while often justified, make it difficult to conceive of ways that art might operate beyond the serving of a neoliberal agenda: impossible to imagine how artists might act autonomously for resistance and progressive change in the face of oppression. Scholars and artists have resisted totalising accusations of artwashing, and drawn attention to the ways that arts practices taking place in fraught housing contexts negotiate the complexities of the neoliberal terrain (see e.g. Berry-Slater and Iles 2011; Harvie 2011; Sachs-Olsen 2017). These

arguments often emphasise the ambivalence of works in contexts of crisis, and indeed, as I have argued elsewhere (see Beswick 2019, 150), critical ambivalence is a useful tool for understanding how the intersections of sensual practice and structural inequalities work to produce spatial injustice. In this special issue however, what begins to emerge is not an irreconcilable ambivalence between systems of injustice, the work of activists and the practice of artists, but the sense that performance, as a way of thinking as well as a practice, might still yet sometimes be just out of reach of the forces of capital that orchestrate our worlds. The articles illustrate how coming to know through our bodies and our relationships with others are important means of moving through, understanding and resisting the trouble of our times, and how framing activism *as* performance can better equip us with a language to conceive the ways in which activism can engage and mobilise resistance.

The issue begins with Bill McDonnell's recollections of his experiences working with Sheffield's tenants theatres in the 1980s, community-building with performance to oppose the ideology of Thatcherism at its inception and expose the harms of creeping neoliberalism along with residents of inner city social housing estates in Sheffield, England. This article offers a historical 'way in' to the contemporary UK housing crisis, and introduces performance as powerful means of collective action that might provide a strategy for resistance to the ongoing effects of neoliberalism. McCarthy's article, which follows, visits related contemporary performance activism, offering a reading of the Focus E15 mothers' occupation of empty social housing in Newham, London in October 2014, and the subsequent verbatim theatrical staging of the campaign, *The Land of the Three Towers* (2014). McCarthy uses performance analysis to demonstrate how the Focus E15 campaign, which protested the social cleansing of young mothers from the borough of Newham as part of its redevelopment, and the subsequent

performance, reveal the significance of the feminist voice as a strategy for making claims to property in times of housing crisis.

The following three articles, ‘*The Ground of the Cities* – Performance as Catalysis’ by Andrea Maciel, ‘Performing millennial housing precarity: How (not) to live together’ by Chris Green and Katheryn Owens, and Alex Halligey’s “‘Home is Home’: Journeying and Living from Ethiopia to Johannesburg’, examine the micro-daily ways in which individuals deal with conditions of crisis in very different contexts, and expose the wider political significance of this micro-daily work. Maciel narrates her performance experiments with *The Ground of the Cities* project, in which she fell to the ground in a number of cities across the world in order to expose the plight of the homeless population, and explore the verticality of the urban order. Her work acts as a catalysis to open up discussions of the crises of neoliberalism. It reveals the ways that homeless people cope with injustices of the urban order, emerging as ‘heroes of a daily resistance’. Green and Owens, who work as an enduring collaborative team, present performance-writing that narrates their experience of living in shared housing in the UK. They reveal how conditions of housing crisis structure the experience of the millennial generation, and use anecdote and experimental performance scripts to uncover the ways in which precarity emerging from structural inequality and injustice might nonetheless afford possibilities for exploration, freedom and play. Halligey’s hybrid essay-interview, meanwhile, emerges from the performance-workshops she runs with refugees in the Johannesburg suburb of Bertrams, South Africa. The interview offers the housing biography of Mewish, an Ethiopian refugee living in Johannesburg, and demonstrates how individual actions might be understood as performance activisms that resist housing crises. Halligey articulates how micro-acts of resistance make up what Ingold (2013) calls a ‘meshwork’ of actions, through which people in conditions

of crisis make changes to improve their daily lives. Like McCarthy (and, to an extent McDonnell), Halligey considers the question of housing crisis from a feminist perspective, mapping how crises of home, property and housing are overwhelmingly born by women who often experience housing as a 'site of unpaid reproductive labour' (Fakier and Cock 2009, 354). Maciel, Green and Owens and Halligey's articles take seriously the role of individual anecdote and testimony in understanding the housing crisis, and reveal how performance can offer strategies for navigating the myriad crises of neoliberalism.

Developing an understanding of the crises of housing conditions for those living in precarious circumstances in South Africa (and returning to themes of sanitation that Mewish raises in her interview with Halligey), Veronica Baxter and Mbogeni Mtshali use performance theory to think about the 'poo protests' in Cape Town, South Africa where residents used shit to protest sanitation conditions in a series of protests between 2011 and 2017. They argue that this slow activism provides generative and productive models of performative resistance, which effectively disrupt the neoliberal order. Meanwhile, Cecilia Vergnano uses performance as a mode of understanding the strands of activism that operate at the via Germagnano Roma camp in Turin, Italy, where residents are in a perpetual state of housing crisis, not directly as a result of the 'global housing crisis', but rather as a result of their marginalisation within the neoliberal system, where people labelled as Roma are utterly dehumanised. Recognising the intrinsic 'infrapolitical' activism evident in acts of violence and vandalism by the Roma in the camp, Vergnano also thinks about the possibilities and limits of the 'legitimate' performance activism of the Clown Army, who join forces with the camp's residents in defiance of the abject conditions to which Roma groups are subjected.

In the final article of the issue, we return to the UK; Rebecca Hillman's 'Home is where the heart is: building, belonging and emotional engagement in anti-austerity performance', develops McDonnell's discussion of the potential of agitprop performance articulated in the opening essay of the special issue. Based around her work as part of the performance collective In Good Company in Reading, Hillman explores the 2011 performance *The Pact*, in which issues of housing and home circulated. She proposes that the conditions of rehearsal offer a productive home for political organising, and explores the emotional registers of home, thinking with performance to suggest that audiences' emotional responses to the scenes in the pact were 'integral' to their 'awareness of themselves in society'. Her work reveals the importance of emotion, connection and engagement in activist performance.

As I outline above, I conceived this special issue as a method for understanding the ways that conditions emerging from the neoliberal housing crisis manifest in local contexts, the possibilities arts methods and performance theory offer for activism, and the challenges the neoliberal housing context poses in different geographical regions. Nonetheless, perhaps because this is an English journal, published in the UK and written in English, it emphasises the English context — with contributions from scholars in Brazil, Italy and South Africa providing points from which we might expand our understanding of the crisis in different global contexts. The issue takes seriously the role of performance as an academic discipline that offers new insights into our contemporary problems, and as a practice with the potential to intervene in and move towards change in times of crisis.

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