Jordan McKenzie

Three Works:

Spent (2008 - Ongoing)

Mottled green, inky splotches splashed across yellow paper. Dotted with cell-like blobs, the shapes are otherworldly: mysterious and alien. They are dark and precise around the edges but faded and chaotic inside, bleeding into the background. The images might be a study of some exotic virus taken from a petri dish, enlarged for a gallery audience. The colours are cartoonish and vivid, as if they have been digitally enhanced for effect — yet there is something solemn and elegant about them, almost melancholy.

Each image is slightly different, some larger or more faded than others, although uniform in their yellow-background-green-splotch form, and in size.

*Image 1: *Spent 2** Credit Jordan McKenzie

Spent is two series of images featuring the artist's semen covered with graphite powder (*Spent 1*) and on universal litmus paper (*Spent 2*, described above). Referencing the tradition of bodily fluids used in high-profile performance and Live Art works[i] these 'drawings' extend the work Jordan McKenzie began in the 1990s, which explored the limits of queer art and bodily practices. By using the explicit body to produce art objects he blurs the boundaries between visual art

and performance.

Border Patrol (2014-2015)

A small, rock-like lump of roughly hewn cement; a tiny, polished silver canister; a blue pen, melted out of shape (it's small, of the type they supply for free at the counter in high-street banks, or at the catalogue store Argos); a rubber bird, cartoon style: its huge blue eyes framed with lush, thick painted lashes; cigarette butts; a Kinder-egg capsule; a round green plastic thing smeared with dirt; folded lengths of cardboard, newspaper, pages torn from magazines; a used plasterboard plug; a child's toy; a plastic carrier bag; assorted sticks; a flat, folded metal component that might be from a hinge; a candy-striped length of fabric.

Image 2: Border Patrol credit Jordan McKenzie

Photographs of the objects detailed above are displayed in life-size on a white background. They are items used as 'door stoppers' to the communal door of the tower block where McKenzie lives. Over a two-year period, he collected these objects, used by gangs, individuals and drug users to gain access to the communal corridors and stairwells of his block. The objects document his role as 'guardian of the border' (McKenzie 2016), policing the barrier between inside and outside.

In the cavernous ballroom of the London Irish Centre the London Gay Men's Chorus have finished a recital of new songs and spoken word, exploring stories of shame within the gay community. McKenzie sits on stage with members of the Chorus, journalist Matthew Todd, and some of the composers, answering questions from the floor about the work that has just been performed and its difficult themes. From the audience, a man stands and begins to narrate his involvement with the project: he stares around the room intensely; standing in the centre of the floor he takes the microphone from the usher's hand. He explains what being involved in this show has meant to him. He begins a heartfelt confessional: he tells us how he was rejected by his parents because of his sexuality, and was subsequently forced into homelessness. He tells us that he has recently begun recovering from a drug addiction; he is on medication for HIV; he lost a partner to 'AIDS' (his term) last year. Finally, he says, this project has allowed him to speak about shame and the terrible veil it has pulled over his life. His voice breaks with emotion. When he finishes speaking there is loud applause.

*Image 3: *Shame Chorus** Credit Mike Kear

This was the question and answer section of the 2016 London iteration of *Shame Chorus*, a spoken word and music event conceived and organised by McKenzie —

partly funded by an online crowdfunding campaign with website Indiegogo.com

— in which members of the London Gay Men's chorus were interviewed about

their experiences of shame by psychoanalyst Susie Orbach. The interviews were

anonymised and given to composers, who adapted the material into original

songs and choral works sung by the Chorus in a series of live performances.

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The three works I describe above offer a montage of Jordan McKenzie's practice

throughout the past decade. I have begun with these works because, placed side-by-

side, they offer an insight into the range and scope of his output — which in form and

dissemination often appears incoherent, almost schizophrenically so, with performance,

drawing, photography and music spanning gallery, theatre and festival spaces, the

street, the internet and McKenzie's home.

McKenzie's work is characterised by ostensibly simple practices that give way to

complex social and political critiques. He often uses humor to enter into dialogue with

theoretical ideas, and appeals to the 'common' (Butt 2012) by engaging with spaces and

objects from so-called 'low culture' in order to attract audiences beyond the culturally

elite art world. Working with the spaces, places, objects and materials that surround

him, McKenzie creates visual and performance artworks that provoke a fractured

interaction with the live, attempt to unite disparate communities, and are site-focused

— drawing attention to the sites from which they are performed or produced in order to

articulate a politics of space. In this chapter, after offering an overview of his work to date, I return to the three works above in more detail, giving a close reading of each in order to demonstrate how McKenzie's recent practices have worked with liveness and through site, engaging audiences in a politics that questions the status quo in one way or another.

From the Street to the Body and Back Again: Sites of Practice

Like Live Art as an overarching category, McKenzie's body of work resists clear definition. While Live Art embraces disciplinary infidelity, it is a slippery and contested term, perhaps uneasily applied to an *oeuvre* that includes a large collection of material art 'objects' that articulate a clear link with fine art —particularly drawing. Indeed, during an interview I carried out with him in preparation for this chapter, McKenzie told me he was uncomfortable with using Live Art as a descriptive category for his practice, partly because of its roots in theatre scholarship (Johnson 2012a: 12), which imply a lineage he does not identify with. Nonetheless, McKenzie's work has certainly been conceived and produced within the established field of Live Art — having received significant support from the Live Art Development Agency (LADA), including the publication of a survey of his work, *Jordan McKenzie Occupations: 1996-2013,* on DVD under its Unbound label. So too, much of his practice — as I will later discuss —invokes liveness, even where it might be more readily understood as 'visual art', and he has, as we shall see, drawn on the Live Art sector to generate an audience for works performed and exhibited in unusual spaces.

I first became aware of McKenzie's practice in the spring of 2013, when I applied to attend a LADA-funded Do it Yourself (DiY) Professional Development opportunity that he was running from his home. 'Look at the E(s)tate We're In'[ii] was conceived as part of an initiative in which artists run training events for other artists. The event came to my attention when a colleague sent me a link to the LADA DiY page over the social networking website Facebook. Held in a two-bedroom flat located in a tower block on a social housing estate in Bethnal Green, East London, the event interrogated issues of place, localism and social engagement. Over the course of three days, participants (who were mostly artists interested in socially engaged practices) shared details of their work, toured the estate, took craft workshops in local community venues, heard papers from academics and established artists, spent an afternoon joining McKenzie's neighbours as they went about their daily lives, and shared lunch and evening meals together. Although not an artwork as such, 'Look at the E(s)tate We're In' revealed some of the hallmarks of McKenzie's current work: his practice, though often simple and lighthearted on the surface, offers nuanced social commentary and draws attention to the political potential of the mundane. It is community-focused and informally shared in social spaces, including online.

Surveying the terrain of McKenzie's work from the 1990s until now, the turn towards social engagement marks something of a departure — or perhaps a return. He began his career as a student, performing on the streets of Nottingham, an experience he argues

influenced his approach to artmaking by giving him access to 'non-art aware audiences' and 'working in a different context from an art institution' (Lane 2010). These early experiments were shaped by his encounters with literary theory at the University of Nottingham, where he studied for a degree in literature. By the late 1990s, McKenzie had become especially fascinated by queer theory — during this period, he produced a series of performance works that foregrounded homosexuality and parodied the sometimes blurred lines between art and pornography. These works were often concerned with interrogating form and deconstructing established and emergent 'live' trends: 'queering' the Live Art sector in which his practices often took place by gently satirizing tropes of body-based contemporary artworks.

McKenzie's refusal to take avant-garde body-based practices seriously is obvious in the archival footage of his performance works from this period, which caricature the pornographic body and satirically draw attention to the ways that body-based practices can easily slip into a register that might be read as 'silly'. For example, *Fountain* (1998) sees McKenzie dressed in a wig of baby-bottle teats, fellating a man who is visible only from the waist down while a milky-white liquid showers on McKenzie from above, looking, at moments, as though it is leaking from the teats. Meanwhile, in *Suckle* (1998) McKenzie sits on the knee of an elderly gentleman, on an armchair by an open fireplace, undoes his own shirt, and cradles the older gentleman who suckles at McKenzie's nipples for the duration of the work. McKenzie argues that the (queer) theoretical ideas that underpin this body of work allowed him to 'satirise, disrupt, play and effect' the 'art

world' (Lane 2010). By 'queering' avant-garde practices, drawing attention to their inherent absurdity, he inserts himself into popular, ongoing debates about what constitutes 'legitimate art'. If, as Wigeman and Wilson argue, 'a critique of normativity marks the spot where *queer* and *theory* meet' (2015: 1, original emphasis), McKenzie's work during this period might be understood as a queering of the bodily practices that had become ubiquitous, if not normative, within the Live Art world by the 1990s.

Between the late 1990s and early 2000s McKenzie increasingly became interested in the relationship between drawing and the body: creating art 'objects' (including photographs and drawings) alongside his performance-based work. Despite the playful nature of his early practice, McKenzie has argued that his output eventually became theoretically burdened (Lane 2010). 'My early art was theoretical, and fun' he told blogger Amica Lane in an online interview in 2010. 'Somewhere along the way I got lost in it's [sic] austerity and being theoretically rigorous that I forgot it was also supposed to be fun. It should also be fun; otherwise it becomes this masochistic odd endeavor' (Lane 2010).

McKenzie has pinpointed 2008, the year his studio was destroyed by an arson attack, as a significant turning point in his career, a moment when he actively returned to play as an aesthetic strategy. Expanding on his decision to move towards 'play' in an email exchange with me McKenzie said:

> I was finding that the work was fitting too easily into a theoretical landscape

(minimalism, queer, phenomenology) and that the practice, though 'watertight' both artistically, theoretically and conceptually had ceased to stimulate my interest. I think that the foundation of the work was so firm that all I could do was to make multiple versions of it with small changes [...].

This is a problem I feel with applying practice to academia, I could have kept on looking at these issues […] but to be honest I felt that I have artistically pretty much exhausted them and the fire gave me the permission to stop. I guess it is difficult to stop of your own volition when the work is getting academically and artistically celebrated for its 'thoroughness'.

(email exchange 2017)

The destruction of many of his art objects, coupled with a year-long residency at Studio 1:1, in London's Shoreditch, led McKenzie to reconsider his approach to making and actively search for 'fun', which included collaborations with other artists. In one work shown at Studio 1:1 McKenzie, Aaron Williamson and Edwina Ashton dressed as termites and systematically destroyed the gallery over a four-hour period (Lane 2010); a mischievous, satirical intervention that signaled a return to play.

It was during this resurgence of the playful in his body of work in the seminal year of 2008 that McKenzie began his *Minimal Interventions* series — an ongoing set of works that involve him physically engaging with iconic minimalist artworks from the 1960s and 1970s. As he explains: 'For a short period of time I co-author the works, inhabiting the historical canon and subverting it for my own uses. These works question ideas surrounding originality, authorship and ownership' (McKenzie 2016). For example, in

Serra Frottage (2010) McKenzie attempts to 'queer the cannon', rubbing his body up and down against artist Richard Serra's *Fulcrum*, a 55-foot steel structure located at Broadgate East, by London Liverpool street station. As Klara Kemp-Welch has noted, in *Serra Frottage* McKenzie 'dramatises [the] contradictory drives' of Serra's work by 'inserting himself into the gaps of the older artist's ambivalent intentions.' (2014). *Serra Frottage* is also indicative of McKenzie's attempts to challenge the conventional uses of public space by disobeying the laws of acceptable behaviour and 'disrespecting' the established and often conservative expectations of the art world.

Transgressing the acceptable boundaries of public space has become a trope of McKenzie's post-2008 work, which often explores cultural identity, particularly in relation to ideas of the local as they intersect with class and notions of 'Britishness.' Adopting a series of alter-egos, he uses satire in order to actively critique the use of public spaces. For example, In *Monsieur Poo Pourri Points at Things* (2010) McKenzie, dressed as an archetypal aristocrat, walks along his local high street pointing at objects, people and landmarks with his cane. The Poo Pourri character riffs on the concept of the *flâneur* who strolls idly in the public domain, objectively appraising his surroundings. As McKenzie explains in an interview with Marquard Smith:

> I'm kind of quite interested in seeing how […] the street has one kind of narrative, especially those sorts of streets which are now full of […] pound shops. They're quite bleak but in another way what happens if you can reimagine — how politically could that work if people had the ability to reimagine other

spaces, reimagine other ways of behaving? You don't just have to follow the discourse which is given to you by the powers that be. You can actually, to a certain level, reinvent that. Kind of finding more cultural space instead of the economic imperative which you're sort of forced into performing, or being, as a member of the street.

(transcribed and edited for clarity by me from interview in *Jordan McKenzie Occupations 1996-2013* 2014)

This imperative to challenge the powers that be, and to encourage engagement from a wider public, is especially visible in McKenzie's post-2010 projects. In *Look at the (E)state We're In* (2015)[iii]*,* a conference and arts festival he ran in Peckham, South London, in partnership with Patti Ellis and students from Camberwell College of Art, artists, activists, academics, journalists and members of the public were invited to participate in a series of events — including exhibitions, talks, workshops and panel discussions — that interrogated the role of art in relation to social housing. This event drew attention to how artists have used social housing estates (or 'council estates') in artworks, and asked how such work might usefully address the crisis of affordable housing in the capital. So too, his socially engaged work often utilises playful strategies that draw attention to and attempt to overcome the sometimes exclusive and excluding elements of contemporary art. In this way his later work might be understood as operating within what Gavin Butt identifies as a turn towards the 'common' in Live Art practices.

Butt argues that in the meshing of 'high' and 'low' culture Live Artists are able to critique discourses that place Live Art in a 'distinguished' field that is notably separate from the 'common' (Butt 2012: 49-53). Increasingly, McKenzie's work has become concerned with interrogating and ridiculing forms of class distinction that permeate 'high art' culture, and investigating the instrumental possibilities for arts practices to speak to so-called non-traditional audiences. One example of this turn towards the 'common' is in McKenzie's use of the lock up garage in the car park of his estate in Bethnal Green, a working-class district of East London, as the site for the 2011-2013 project LUPA (Lock Up Performance Art). This endeavour (realised in collaboration with Aaron Williamson and Kate Mahony) saw a range of contemporary performances, from artists such as Daniel Oliver, the Parlour Collective, Richard Wilson and McKenzie himself, take place on and around the estate, drawing audiences of up to 200 people. LUPA brought Live Art audiences to his estate, and, as McKenzie explains, integrated groups who might not usually enjoy the same kind of cultural events:

> There's audiences, art audiences which come onto a council estate, which they probably don't often do. My fellow residents who see performance art which they probably don't often do. There's the consequence of me setting up and making work where I live — but it's not about bringing art to the people. So, I include them, and to a certain extent ask permission, in a way, from them. And have to put up with the consequences. But it's not about 'come and look at art because it will be good for you.' There's a level of co-existence which is like: 'yeah, we quite like what you do. It's all right. We don't very often come and see

it. Maybe we do, maybe we won't.' Because I'm there for a long time, because I

live there, it kind of co-exists in the community, rather than being central to it.

(transcribed and edited for clarity by me from interview in *Jordan McKenzie Occupations 1996-2013* 2014)

As Butt argues, tactics that appeal to the 'common' mark '[….] an aspiration to forge a

common language in contemporary performance, one worthy of the name by din of

being shared by all rather than exclusive property of any particular social class or

cultural group.' (Butt 2012: 55). As we will see, McKenzie's practice increasingly

exemplifies this turn towards the common, moving Live Art into an actively socially

engaged arena, often bleeding into territory that might be described as 'applied'. In

other words, McKenzie uses strategies of community-building, engagement with those

who might be considered 'other' (due to class or sexuality), and the adoption of non-

traditional spaces that have characterized applied and socially engaged arts practices

(see e.g. Prentki and Preston 2009), in order to appeal to audiences who might not

usually choose to attend Live Art events.

While he may not see himself as a Live Artist, then, McKenzie's work certainly embraces

the 'itinerant boundary cross[ings]' (Johnson 2012a: 7) that Dominic Johnson argues are

a principle feature of Live Artists' work. Most importantly in terms of his inclusion in this

collection, Live Art as a conceptual frame offers a useful method through which to

consider the connecting points of McKenzie's disparate career. In the remainder of this

chapter, the 'live' therefore operates as a method through which to tease out

identifying themes, concerns and politics that position McKenzie as a significant figure in

the overlooked cannon of contemporary Live Art practice.

Politics of Site

In what follows, I give close readings of the three works I described at the start of this

chapter. Building on the narrative of McKenzie's practice I offer above, the key terms I

have chosen to use in the analysis of these works are 'site' (of the body, the home and

the 'mainstream'), 'liveness' and the 'common'. Although I don't apply them in a

systematic manner, these words circulate in my analysis, enabling me to think through

the political potency of each artwork. My choice to include two art 'objects', created for

display online and in gallery spaces, may at first seem incongruous with Live Art's

association with action, with immersive, evental and experiential practices. Indeed,

writing in the catalogue of personal histories, published to celebrate the 30th

anniversary of the National Review of Live Art (NRLA), Richard Ayres notes that when

the term Live Art was first mooted as suggestion for the title of a book he was editing,

Richard Layzell, a contributor to the collection, jokingly asked whether the adoption of

the term meant that 'we regarded painters, sculptors and all the rest of them as dead'

(2010: 15). What I want to illustrate here is how liveness permeates through McKenzie's

significant 'dead' arts practices, referring back to his performance works and articulating

a Live Art methodology, which destabilizes artificial boundaries between live and visual

practices. My close readings reveal how in both live and non-live practice McKenzie

takes 'conceptual risks', working to 'create a context to look at different mediums of expression, explore ideas of process, presence and endurance, and investigate relationships with an audience' (LADA ND).

My argument, then, is firstly that McKenzie's body of work might be considered site-focused, in that it is always in active conversation with the sites from which it is produced or performed, and secondly that his use of site operates politically through liveness by appealing to the common in a variety of ways. By juxtaposing three works, we can understand something significant about the nuanced politics of McKenzie's practice, and extrapolate this in order to understand how his work fits within the wider context of the Live Art sector.

As Stephen Hodge and Cathy Turner point out, Live Arts practices concerned with site often involve an interrogation of the relationship between a performance and its geography, and involve 'some degree of phenomenological engagement with site.' (Hodge and Turner 2012: 93). So too, Hodge and Turner suggest that site-based practices are inherently concerned with turning away from conventional modes of viewing and receiving artworks. They argue that the relationship between site and Live Art can be understood through two tendencies often found in site-focused practices:

> The first removes or destabilises the 'grounding' of the arts practice, through a rejection of the materialism of the art object and the conventions of viewing proposed by the gallery or theatre space. This tendency broadens out into a

more general disruption of our perceptions of all socio-cultural spaces. The other

tendency grounds the work in activism and socially engaged events — partially

achieved, no doubt, through a destabilization of our assumptions and

categorizations of cultural spaces — but partly concerned with performing

alternatives (even if transient or multiple ones). Thus 'site', or 'place', is both

questioned and, potentially, transformed.

(Hodge and Turner 2012: 93)

These tendencies towards destabilising materialism and social activism are central to

McKenzie's practice, which frequently articulates a relationship between performance

and geography — even in cases where the work is not necessarily 'site-based' in terms

of its final manifestation — in order to challenge accepted ways of being in the world.

This is not to suggest that McKenzie's practice (nor, indeed, Live Art as a genre), is

uncritically 'political' in the sense that it gives rise to any tangible change or

transformation of the status quo. As Deidre Heddon reminds us, 'the political does not

reside *within* the art, but rather takes place within a matrix of diverse cultural and

historical relations, relations that include the spectator' (Heddon 2012: 176, original

emphasis). Instead I contend that McKenzie's practice demonstrates a political intention

— it is a politics of potential, seeking to disrupt established hierarchies, meeting Collini's

definition of politics as 'the important, inescapable, and difficult attempt to determine

relations of power in a given space' (Collini in Kelleher 2009: 3).

Drawing with The Body (*Spent*)

Spent is a collection of two series of drawings created by McKenzie with his masturbatory ejaculate. In the first series, he dusts his semen with graphite powder – a method that references the early twentieth century carbon dust technique used in medical drawings, rendering flat images with a realistic, tissue-like quality — while, in the second series he 'draws' the semen onto universal litmus paper at the moment of ejaculation. In *Spent 1* the carbon dust settles to create solid, inky, dark images; while in *Spent 2* a sci-fi aesthetic is created as the semen dries and turns shades of green against the yellow/orange background of the litmus paper. Indeed, *Spent*, like many of McKenzie's works, is highly referential: pointing to the use of masturbation and bodily fluids in contemporary and historical fine and Live Art practices (see endnote i). In this way *Spent* continues the satirical interrogation of form that characterised his queer performance work in the 1990s.

At the level of site, *Spent* is initially confusing. Divorced from a conceptual framework, the artworks, as viewed in the gallery, online, or, as I first encountered them, on the living room walls of McKenzie's flat, are abstract in the extreme: incomprehensible. Yet even in their abstraction they suggest a relationship to a world beyond the image: an unearthly geography —in *Spent 2* the thick, dark borders mark a boundary that the inside, bleeding towards the edges, seems intent to break free from.

The knowledge that these works are made from the artist's masturbatory ejaculate shapes our phenomenological engagement with the images in a way that undermines

their material significance. The works become secondary to the performative acts that created them — viscerally invoking the bodily site of their creation and, in doing so, the live moment of their production. In *Spent* the act of masturbation is the live event that exists just out of our perceptual frame, and which, though not quite visible, is an intrinsic element of the artwork.

Although McKenzie has insisted that he won't masturbate for an audience — 'we only need to look at the drawings to relate them to a physical act' (Viceland 2008) — in his writing about the images, he graphically recounts the act of their making, the viewing of pornography, the repetitious stroking of his own skin:

> Propped up awkwardly on a cushion leaning on my left arm, remote control in hand. The litmus paper in front of my cock angled slightly up to the left so that the 'composition' can be framed on the paper. My eyes shift from screen, to remote, to paper…back to screen. The rhythm of intercourse on the screen falls into the rhythm of my hand and then my hand falls behind, the endless edited thrusting explored from every angle, known visually from all sides. The ache in my left arm reminds me that it needs to move; I angle my body closer to the paper.
>
> (McKenzie 2012: 6-7)

If all drawing has a relationship to the physical body, here we are directly confronted with that simple fact: we cannot escape the reality of the artists' body, of the intimate acts of his most intimate parts. Inevitably, therefore, McKenzie's homosexuality, his

sexual appetite and the (presumably) private locations in which the masturbation has taken place become active in our interpretation of the images. McKenzie's genitals are a site from which we are no longer wholly separated, as the inside meets the outside of his sexual impulses at the boundary of our vision.

The site-based nature of the work comes into play at this conceptual level, as we attempt to navigate the relationship between the body of the artist, the artwork itself and our own body and its borders with the world. In his writing and interviews McKenzie has frequently used site-based metaphors to explain the work, describing *Spent* as a 'mapping' of desire and then, revising this description, as a mapping of 'mechanical reproduction, repeatability, and the boredom of making over and over again' (McKenzie 2012: 6).

Like the work of the artists it references, *Spent* relies on a defamiliarisation aesthetic, which shocks the viewer into seeing the world differently. As Johnson explains in *Theatre & the Visual*, experimental art movements have long worked with something like Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* 'as a crucial strategy for shifting the political economy of looking' (2012b: 64). In *Spent* the destablising of the art object undermines the primacy of vision in the reception of the artworks. The knowledge of the making process invites us to enter into a conceptual relationship with a live event from which we are perpetually divorced. We are invited to ponder the abstracted geographies of ejaculate, which appeal to the common by challenging conservative attitudes towards the body,

the gallery and the art world.

Writing about Ron Athey's blood-letting performances, Johnson argues that

> Athey's images refuse the convenient logic of symbolisation, and cannot be
> analysed to reveal a single story or meaning that sets the work free from its
> affective difficulty. Instead, the images, sounds, moods, and attendant emotions
> conspire to produce highly personal responses, which the audience members
> work through to come to their own conclusions about the work.
>
> (Johnson 2012b: 68)

Spent places viewers in a similar position; the absence of the performance moment,

coupled with the vivid presence of the images themselves, creates a symbolic no-man's

land in which viewer's own beliefs, prejudices and world-views are brought to the

surface. The works invite the viewer to oscillate between identification and repulsion;

undermining the strange beauty of the images (always further distanced from the

viewer by a frame or a screen) with contemplation of the intimate live moment of their

creation.

Thus the geography of ejaculate — the movement of semen from the body onto the

canvas and into the gallery space and, conceptually, beyond (by, for example, the

dissemination of the images online and in print publications) — playfully queers the art

object. As in his body-based performance works of the 1990s, McKenzie here is inserting

himself into the well-worn debate about the limits of 'art'. The live-but-passed moment

of climax invites polarised interpretations — inevitably including those that are

reactionary, moralistic and contemptuous. For example, when *Spent* was shown at the

Centre for Recent Drawing, London, in 2008, the *Islington Gazette* reported that a local

Anglican Priest had voiced concern for McKenzie's moral wellbeing. 'All we can do is

pray for the artist,' Father Kit Cunningham said. 'The extraordinary thing is that

someone actually thought it was art and put it on at his gallery. […] We are clearly

dealing with a very mixed up person' (PinkNews 2008). The moralistic response *Spent*

received from the *Islington Gazette* — particularly Father Cunningham's suggestion that

this is 'not art' — is a predictable, much-trodden reaction to avant-garde body-based

practices, as McKenzie has wearily noted[iv].

Thus, *Spent* serves, among other things, to indirectly satirise the oft-repeated, reductive

analyses of contemporary artworks that frequently appear in media coverage.

Audiences are required to face the limitations of their own (dis)comfort. Underpinning

moralistic responses to *Spent* are conservative and reactionary attitudes towards

sexuality and excess — and unspoken but implied conceptions of what or who is

welcome in a gallery space. The inevitable moralistic responses to the work reveal that

there are limits to bodily freedoms, which are still subject to control and legislation 'in

the dubious name of protecting the moral majority from invented threats from

"outside"' (Johnson 2012c: 145). Through the use of bodily fluids, *Spent* manages to

confront these taboos, bringing 'other' bodies alive within the gallery — homosexual

bodies, pornographic bodies, aroused bodies. Bodies which speak to the 'common' in terms of their explicit sexual nature and confrontation of alternative sexuality. *Spent* is unashamedly 'dirty', transgressing the borders between public and private, providing unexpected confirmation of Turner and Hodge's assertion that in Live Art practices, the 'particularities of site have a stickiness, a web-like tendency to cling.' (Hodge and Turner 2012: 93)

At Home (*Border Patrol*)

Border Patrol comprises a set of found objects, collected by McKenzie and documented as photographic images, which are displayed in life-size on a white background. The objects were all used to prop open the communal door that offers access to the corridors, lifts and stairwells of the block of flats where McKenzie lives. Although the artwork is aesthetically different from *Spent*, there are some resonances between the works, particularly in terms of their relationship to liveness, which indicate a stylistic coherence in McKenzie's approach. Like *Spent,* the images that comprise the *Border Patrol* collection are fun and otherworldly, though incomprehensible outside of a conceptual frame. And, as in *Spent*, the images are eventually subsumed by the act of their making. Here, however, it is the moment of their original use and the act of their collection that constitute the displaced 'live' events; again, this 'liveness' imbues the work with a political potency and invokes a removed site to challenge received understandings and appeal to the 'common'.

Border Patrol extends McKenzie's use of his own home as a site for making, presenting

and contextualizing artworks. As mentioned above, McKenzie's home is located on a

council estate in Bethnal Green, located in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets,

which is the third most deprived borough nationally according to the London Centre for

Social Impact (2011). 'Council estate' is the colloquial British term for a social housing

estate, referencing the fact that these spaces were once owned and managed by the

local council[v]. As I and others have argued elsewhere (see Hanley 2007, McKenzie 2015,

Beswick 2016) council estates have a particular political potency: they are sites which

are regularly invoked in popular media and the newspaper press to suggest criminality,

social ruin and moral decay. In the dominant discourse council estate residents,

especially those who, like McKenzie, rent their property at a discounted rate (rather

than own it outright or rent privately at market rate) pose a threat to outsiders. As Lisa

McKenzie (2015) has pointed out, estate residents are often positioned as 'other' to

liberal middle class values, and are rarely given a platform on which they might speak

about their experiences of estate life.

Border Patrol challenges the dominant discourse of the estate in a number of ways,

invoking the geographies and politics of site, which underpin national estate discourses.

At a perceptual level, the bright colours and incongruous objects transform the

imagined estate site from one of poverty and crime to one of potential, intrigue and

possibility. They serve as a reminder of the humanity of the residents who live there.

The unusual and at times whimsical images, particularly those with vivid colours,

challenge perceptions of estates as essentially bleak sites and enable viewers to imagine the variety of individuals who inhabit the block — most obviously, they invoke the reality of children, not as the dangerous or feral gang members often portrayed in the popular news media, but as toddlers and infants dropping toys as they play in the street outside.

At a conceptual level, *Border Patrol* facilitates a reconsideration of the relationship between residents and outsiders, queering conventional understandings of the estate resident as the threat. The title 'Border Patrol' also references the fact that the estate has become a site through which national conversations about immigration are often played out — as, in UK politics and the newspaper press, the conflation between the question of who has or deserves access to welfare benefits (such as subsided rent or housing benefit), and the strain that immigration places on an already overloaded welfare benefits system, frequently invokes the space of the estate: often suggesting that immigrants are sinister undesirables whose presence amplifies the danger of estate spaces.

By patrolling the border of his block, removing door stoppers to secure the estate against undesirable 'others', McKenzie draws attention to the reciprocal nature of fear: the fact that the outside poses a threat to residents. As McKenzie explains:

The back door space in my block of flats is seen as a tense crossing space by my

neighbours where the inside meets the outside. Gangs, individuals, addicts and dealers use the corridors and stairwell and in order to gain access use a multitude of found objects as 'door stoppers'. (McKenzie 2016)

In doing so, he suggests that the moral landscape of the estate is nuanced; that the simplistic divisions between residents and non-residents, immigrant and indigenous populations that circulate in popular debates are reductive. The work refuses polarised readings that fit into existing tropes of welfare benefit and immigration discourse.

In this way, McKenzie participates in a discussion from which estate residents are often excluded. He uses the site of his home to 'speak back' to reductive debates surrounding welfare benefits which often play out in public discourse. As such, *Border Patrol* speaks to a growing body of resident-artists who use their estate homes as sites from which to contest dominant understandings of council estates and resist the fetishisation and stigmatization of estates and their residents.

As artist and academic Lynne McCarthy has explained, exploring her motivation for creating an installation work, displayed in her home as part of the 2010 Market Estate project (in which artists were invited to make works in homes on the Market Estate before it underwent demolition and regeneration):

> I mark a theatrical intervention on my own performativity rather than allow the fetishization of my home by someone else. Understanding the currency of representation, this becomes a political point for me […] On this occasion I

become a participant in the staging of my own politics.

(McCarthy 2010)

Like LUPA (Lock Up Performance Art, discussed above), *Border Patrol* expresses a turn towards the common by positioning the estate as a legitimate site for the creation and reception of arts practices – and by highlighting McKenzie's own status as an estate resident. By playfully presenting the mundane, everyday practices of working-class spaces as 'art', McKenzie draws attention to what Butt describes as the 'largely under-examined and unspoken limits of Live Art discourse and culture' (2012: 49). These unspoken limits include the classed nature of so-called 'high' and 'low' art tastes and practices — with so-called low culture (as articulated by Butt 2012) often understood to have emerged from working class spaces, interests and pastimes. Butt's use of the term 'commoners' to describe artists who appeal to the 'common' is useful here in positioning McKenzie's role in the frame of *Border Patrol.* His status as a council estate resident, as a commoner — reinforced by the present-but-invisible estate site — pushes against his role as the creator of 'art works', signaling the unspoken ways that cultural practices are classed and inviting us to 'think again about how we approach relationships between high and low culture, elite and popular, and the valued and valueless in the field of performance' (Butt 2012: 49), and indeed, culture more widely.

Moving into the Mainstream (*Shame Chorus*)

Shame Chorus was a performance project devised by McKenzie and realized in collaboration with numerous partners, including the psychoanalyst and cultural critic

Susie Orbach, the London Gay Men's Chorus, the Freud Museum, writer Andy White and

numerous composers. The performance event involved a live recital of new songs and

spoken word on the issue of shame in the homosexual community. All the songs were

composed in response to recorded psychoanalytic interviews conducted by Orbach with

members of the Chorus. Orbach asked interviewees to recall memories of feeling

shamed — events that may have, in part, shaped their feelings about themselves and

their sexuality. These recorded (and anonymous) interviews were given to established,

well-known and emerging composers from a range of music genres who were

commissioned to turn these memories into original songs/choral works that were then

sung by the Chorus 'in a collective act of catharsis, community and liberation' (Beswick

2014). The event was preceded by an online fundraising campaign on the crowdfunding

website Indiegogo[vi], which McKenzie promoted through his social media accounts and

other online platforms, including the digital press. The London iteration[vii] of the

performance event took place in the London Irish Centre — a community-focused

building in Camden, North London — in a sprawling ballroom with an audience of 300

people. The event was supported by a number of high-profile public figures, including

comedienne Jo Brand, activist Peter Tatchell and writer and television personality

Stephen Fry. It was attended by several prominent, high profile, openly gay media

figures including journalists Owen Jones and Matthew Todd, both of whom have

significant platforms in the mainstream press, writing for popular news outlets and

appearing regularly on television and radio. The event ended with a question and

answer (Q&A) session in which audience members took to the floor to articulate how

shame had impacted on their lives, and the role the project had played in helping them accept or overcome feelings of shame.

In the live moment of performance, *Shame Chorus* operates as a relatively simple celebration of the successes of the gay rights movement. It manifests itself in the lived moment as a celebration and catharsis, shared, at the London event, by the mostly gay audience who attended. Speaking with me for a blog post promoting the funding campaign for *Shame Chorus*, published in the online newspaper *The Huffington Post*, McKenzie stated that the event marked an attempt to deal with taboos that continue to haunt the gay community:

> I think we're at a point in the evolution of gay rights where we need to talk about complex issues […] Some of the gay men I've spoken with have asked why I want to talk about shame, why I can't celebrate [it] instead. But I think we have come so far towards equality in the last few years that now is the time that we need to confront the more difficult aspects of sex and sexuality, in a mature way.
>
> (Beswick 2014)

In a later interview I conducted with him, McKenzie expanded on his earlier motivations for the project by discussing how *Shame Chorus* operated conceptually. For McKenzie, the project marked a move away from the antinormativity of his earlier work, and attempted to engage in a critique that showed respect for so-called 'normative' homosexual culture.

This engagement with normativity is an emerging method within queer scholarship, wherein, as Weigman and Wilson explore, 'antinormativity' might be considered 'a privileged rhetorical formulation' (2015: 10). In *Shame Chorus*, the attention to normativity situates the work in an ongoing debate about the gay rights movement and the direction organised gay politics has taken in relation to normative heterosexual culture. Seminal queer theorists such as Michael Warner have been highly critical of the mainstreaming of gay politics — arguing that the official gay movement adopted a politics of disgrace, 'repudiating its best histories of insight and activism, it has turned into an instrument for normalizing gay men and lesbians' (Warner 1999: 25). Warner argues that the movement has, 'in too many ways, […] chosen to articulate the politics of identity rather than to become a broader movement targeting the politics of sexual shame' (Warner 1999: 31). In recent years, this kind of criticism of the normalization of the gay rights movement has become more widespread — at least in the online sphere, with the expansion of digital means of public debate such as blogs and social media – especially in the wake of the expansion of 'normative' gay rights, such as the legalization of gay marriage in countries including the UK and the USA.

The aspects of *Shame Chorus* that I draw attention to above: namely the online campaign, the London performance location, the appearance of notable celebrity figures and the emotionally charged Q&A event, each signify, in different ways, how this project marks an attempt to engage with the sites of mainstream, 'normative', culture.

In this way, the 'homonormative' community constitute the common; the group beyond

the theoretical concerns of antinormativity to whom McKenzie wished to appeal. The

collaboration with the London Gay Men's Chorus, well known for covering popular

music genres including folk, pop, R&B and show tunes, and the staging at an easily

accessible community venue, are clear attempts to move into a popular performance

sphere: to appeal to a demographic outside of the culturally elite Live Art sector, and

engage in dialogues in social spaces which have a 'common' appeal.

This is a departure from the kinds of antinormative queer works that characterize

McKenzie's previous practice. If *Spent*, for example, works as a gentle satire on

normativity, extending McKenzie's earlier *oeuvre* in order to confront conservative

taboos both within and beyond the gallery space, *Shame Chorus* moves in the other

direction. The work takes the so called homonormative culture seriously, and in doing so

reveals the limits of the critiques of that normative culture that circulate in queer

scholarship and politics. That is, it acknowledges that the triumphs of the normative gay

rights movement have enabled freedoms for many who identify as gay. However,

Shame Chorus is not a reductive celebration of normativity. It also speaks to the fact

that normative politics has created its own culture of shame whereby the easiest

response for gay people is to assimilate into the normative culture — making alternative

choices difficult.

This tension between normativity and antinormativity is simply staged in a spoken word

section of the performance titled 'Duchess'. Performer and writer Andy White reflects on how shame works to create a deep desire for normality:

> I had a real crush on a boy that bullied me at school. He was good looking and sporty and popular; everything I wasn't. I suppose I wanted to be like him. Actually, I think I wanted to be him. One thing I'm sure of, I really didn't want to be me.
>
> (White 2016)

Duchess does not find relief in the alternative queer culture that she embraces in an attempt to come to terms with her sexuality.

> I started mixing with other gay people and I reinvented myself; the hair went blonde, if it had sparkles I'd wear it. I got louder, I got camper; I talked about my sex life. And it was mostly imagined. […] My friends called me the Duchess of Bow and I'd strut around being fabulous; pretending I was some Chelsea rich-bitch. Obviously that wasn't me but once again I was trying to be someone else. I really couldn't be me. I couldn't afford to be me.
>
> (White 2016)

Eventually, the Duchess is able to shed her desire to fit in. She is neither able to exist within a heteronormative, nor a 'queer' identity. She abandons her attempts in either direction and exists somewhere in-between, in a marginally more permissive culture, and with the assistance of medication for depression.

By staging these everyday stories, accessible in sites that appeal to a mainstream audience, McKenzie offers a space and a live moment in which those adverse to queer normativities might celebrate the complexities of its manifestation alongside members of the so-called normative community. To return to Hodge and Turner's concept of the relationship between ground and groundlessness in spatial Live Art practices, *Shame Chorus* enacts a spatial politics that appeals to the common by disrupting the established theoretical narratives and material conditions through which the politics of homosexual shame is often understood, grounding the work in a socially engaged context.

Conclusion: The Impossible Task of Scholarship

As I indicate above, site, liveness and an attention to various articulations of the 'common' are useful frames through which to consider McKenzie's work, and to map its concerns back onto the thematic, disciplinary and theoretical concerns of the UK Live Art sector at large. My close analyses have sought to illuminate how simple, playful, yet theoretically loaded practices can be understood as working to challenge prevailing discourses about the world, rendering moments of possibility where audiences might find their status quo momentarily disrupted. McKenzie's ongoing methods of making and presenting work clearly draw on and extend tropes that circulate within Live Art practices more widely, identified in the writing of scholars such as Butt, Johnson, Heddon, Turner and Hodge and others, as outlined and unpacked above. Nonetheless, I find it frustratingly impossible to neatly package McKenzie's considerable career within

a set of theoretical frames — in part because the richness and scope of the work cannot

be contained, and in part because the works I have chosen not to include in this chapter

sit on the periphery of my consciousness, threatening to undermine and disrupt the

readings I offer above.

While McKenzie's experiments with form and disciplinary infidelity might not be usual,

his work does demonstrate how slippery and unwieldy the task of documenting a

contested, ever-changing set of practices proves to be. If McKenzie's work reveals

anything significant about the landscape of the Live Art sector within the UK then,

perhaps it most usefully illustrates the limits and possibilities of scholarship; revealing

why it is that Live Art as a set of practices has — perhaps out of necessity — emerged

alongside the sub-discipline of scholarship which documents and interprets those

practices. The works of Live Art offer a challenge to scholars; their complexity and

contradictions expressed in forms which require theoretical articulation — which are at

once beyond the scope of words, and yet unable to be fully appreciated without them.

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[i] Including Marina Abramovic's 'Seven Easy Pieces' (2005), Matthew Barney's 'The Cremaster Cycle' (1994-2002), Annie Sprinkle's 'The Legend of the Ancient Sacred Prostitute' (1991), Vitto Acconi's 'Seedbed' (1972) and Duchamp's 'Paysage fautif' (1946) (McKenzie 2012: 32-40).

[ii] On his website McKenzie documents this event as 'Look at the (E)state We're In'. However, this was the title of a later conference (discussed below), in which the brackets were moved to surround the E; the original DiY was billed as above.

[iii] This project has the same name as the DiY I describe above, but is a different event.

[iv] Responding to Father Cunningham's comments in an interview with popular online magazine *Vice*, McKenzie said: 'I find it quite amazing that work around bodily fluids is still considered outrageous. Take the most iconic image of Jesus. There have been hundreds of paintings that feature blood coming out of his wounds. It's literally been going on for centuries' (Viceland 2008).

[v] Unlike many other estates, which have been sold or stock-transferred to housing associations and owner occupiers, McKenzie's estate, the Approach, is still managed by Tower Hamlets, the local authority.

[vi] This website allows members of the public to make a funding donation towards proposed projects using a credit or debit card. The flexible funding option, which McKenzie used for this project, means that all monies donated are given to the project regardless of whether or not it meets its target, minus a 5% fee.

[vii] The performance was also staged at the 2016 b-side arts festival in Dorset, England.