NUTOPIA A Critical View of Future Cities

Edited by Malcolm Miles and Jennie Savage



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NUTOPIA

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Chapter 8 Intentions and Interventions

Peter Dunn

My work – since the 1980s - has been in context of urban redevelopment; but my most recent work, Global Town Square, seems almost a return to the principles of The Docklands Community Poster Project in which I was engaged for most of the 1980s. The earlier project was part of a campaign reacted to what was called regeneration - I would argue necessarily so - while the current work is proactive in putting Peoples Plans onto the agenda before the developers close the options. Global Town Square required the development of new networking tools, new communications technologies and new social strategies to suit a society using rapidly changing technologies of communication, yet it is rooted in lessons learned from previous strategies, and from an underlying belief in culturally democratic processes as a vehicle for change. The two projects came out of very different contexts but some eerie parallels emerge, and need unpacking. In this chapter, I discuss Global Town Square in relation to the back-story of its development from the 1970s, changing contexts that shaped development, and an assessment of potential for further development - not just in my practice but by others with similar intentions

Weaving identities in the network society

In a world of uncontrolled, confusing change, people tend to regroup around primary identities: religious, ethnic, territorial, national. In a world of global flows of wealth, power, and images, the search for identity, collective or individual, ascribed or constructed, becomes a fundamental source of social meaning. Identity is becoming the main, and sometimes only, source of meaning in a historical period characterised by widespread de-structuring of organisations, delimitation of institutions, fading away of major social movements, and ephemeral cultural expressions.¹

The redevelopment of London Docklands in the early 1980s was the opening salvo in a campaign to produce a Globalisation-ready economy in the UK, in tandem with attacks on trades unions and tightening of legislation limiting picketing and mass demonstrations. This began with the Employment Acts of 1980, 1982, and 1984, and culminated in the 1988 Act, following a landmark dispute between print workers' unions and the News International group in Wapping. The deregulation of financial networks followed: the Big Bang in the City of London, and its expansion eastwards. It was no accident that the nexus of the old imperial infrastructure, the liminal space of Docklands, became the launch pad for the sunrise industries' attempts to establish a new hub on the digital highway² - in the critical time zone between New York and Tokyo. This global revolution was enabled by digital technologies. The economic crisis of 2008 onwards, seeded by that financial deregulation and the toxic assets of re-packaged sub-prime mortgage lending, was also precipitated in the international market place by the herding of computers set up to buy and sell on the basis of similar software models.

Globalisation had an almost instant impact on identity, impacting people's jobs, their wages and conditions of employment. People no longer feel defined by, or identify with, their job or role, as previous generations did within the old industrial structure. In East London, the temptation to return to so-called primary identities has been strengthened by a stirring of racism both during the redevelopment period and subsequently following the London bombings of 2007. While I do not endorse everything Castells says in his more extravagant claims for new technologies, his analysis of the construction of identities within Globalisation is seminal. The crucial issue is how these identities are constructed, by whom and for what purpose. Castells distinguishes 3 main areas of collective identity building:

1. legitimising identity – by dominant institutions or power bases to extend and rationalise their domain (e.g. nationalism);

- resistance identity grounded in opposition to the rationalisations of domination, in conditions perceived as marginal or stigmatised by the dominant legitimising means: identity built on a polarisation from, but in relation to, the dominant forms of legitimisation (its mirror image);
- 3. and project identity growing out of resistance identity to build a new identity that positively redefines a position; and by doing so seeks to transform the structure of an institution or society.

In relation to my own practice, for example working with others in the Docklands Poster Project, we were involved in resistance identity. Later we moved towards project identity by working with those communities to construct alternatives. The creation of a new organisation in the 1990s, *The Art of Change*, as the name implies, reflected a further a shift towards project identity, endeavouring to explore new models of social engagement.

A key transitional work for me was the *Wymering Public Arts Project*, Portsmouth (1996-1999), in which I applied for funding on behalf of the Community Association – who held the money, employed the artists including myself, and therefore held the power. This included a series of seven related artworks using the focus of Agenda 21, from the Rio Earth Summit, to create an environment that celebrated the history, identity, desires and aspirations of the people of Wymering. This project has been described in detail elsewhere;³ suffice to say that the model of working with a community - using exploration of identity as the driving force to transform a physical and cultural space – evolved through a series of works in the public domain and the formation of a new organisation in 2001: ART.e (Art, Regeneration, Technologies, environment).

Global Town Square

Through the past decade, that strategy developed into a new approach, exploring the use of public space within the context of the network society – Global Town Square. The specific form of Global Town Square began in Gravesend, Kent, with the *Futuretown And Beyond* (FAB) project that I initiated in 2000, and two years later with a sister project *Poplar Futures* in Poplar, East London. In thinking about how identities, space and citizenship converge, I could not ignore the historic origins of this relationship. A town square is a social, cultural, political and economic place: it is about identity and identifying. Its historic model in Europe is the ancient Roman

forum, synonymous with the *civitas* (body of citizens), from which our word civic derives. The original term implied participation and involvement in a dynamic, interactive way – albeit exclusively for an elite. Since late Victorian times and the development of town and city councils, the term civic has become conflated with municipal, implying at best well-meaning paternalism. Global Town Square began, therefore, by taking the metaphor of the Roman forum into the 21st Century, to create a more inclusive place of debate and interaction, a crucible of citizenship. The key difference between this and the strategies for social inclusion and citizenship introduced by New Labour after 1997 is that it is not about bringing people into the fold of the existing system, but instead questions it and searches for new models.

The strategy of Global Town Square is to combine material and virtual design, utilising convergent technologies and the potential of global links, to extend physical space into the virtual, hence to expand its social use and aesthetic potential. Local identities are key to locating this space within the global *space of flows* – a term used by Castells to describe the virtual space where the flow of information takes place –

In a way which enables users to feel at home using it. The model seeks to move community-networking, stake-holding and planning for real into a new phase. It does this by mobilising existing cultural and community networks and, through new configurations in decision-making processes to create a dynamic in which people can be involved and see the tangible results of their involvement. This requires the development of a social process, software and hardware prototypes, for the creation of a model that is transferable and may be used in customised form in any town, city or rural community.

The beginnings of this initiative in Gravesend started when I was commissioned to develop a public art strategy for the town and make a lottery bid. It was based on the approach I used in Portsmouth, developing a Public Art element of Portsmouth's Millennium Strategy, and a Civic Sense strategy for the new cultural quarter. These schemes were never fully implemented because their budgets were raided due to the massive inflation of costs for the landmark Spinnaker Tower on the waterfront. From my method of building on existing strengths in community networks, I developed a co-ordinated programme of work that built on the existing



Poplar Futures: mega-screen

Futuretown initiative⁴ in the town and drew upon the government's (then new) proposals for citizenship in the school curriculum. While the government's scheme did not live up to its promise, we were at least able to use it as a lever into the schools curriculum. My aim was to build an arts/ creativity focus delivered through current information and communications technology (ICT) and, crucially, to extend participation to a broader age range and a wider spread of communities. In short, Futuretown was expanded to encompass a life-long learning dimension linked to Widening Participation schemes. I also wished to involve participating groups in research and prototype development (I will return to this later), glimpsing possible futures for themselves and creating a vision for the development of public spaces, physical and virtual, for their town.

The project involves people in a process of imagining their futures

Gravesend: mega-screen

through a range of images – drawings, paintings, models, lens-based and digital media - and texts, to create a dialogue with regeneration agencies. This is pro-active rather than reactive (as in the Docklands Community Poster Project) because we are not fighting a rear-guard action but putting the communities' ideas onto the agenda before the developers have completed their proposals.

Crucially, a range of regeneration and other partners are involved in sponsoring the project, either financially or through participation. Partners and contributors include the University of Westminster, Greenwich University, Tower Hamlets College, English Heritage, Electrosonic PLC, Media Projects Associates, British Telecom, Gravesham Borough Council, Kent Thameside, Leaside Regeneration, London Borough of Tower Hamlets, and Poplar Housing and Regeneration Community Association. As part of signing up, these authorities agree to take the proposals seriously, and to develop or implement them where possible. These Future Visions are given a platform via a website and are publicly displayed on a public Mega-Screen (an 8 meter Interactive Projection system) in the town centre. The Global Town Square, the physical and virtual space where these futures are published, is an archive and an active resource, putting proposals on the public agenda to elicit action. This can be broadly divided into a two-stage process.

Visions, networks, partnerships.

The first step initiated in Gravesend in 2000 was to form a steering group representing the main partners. In Gravesend, this comprised a Kent Thameside representative and former Gravesham Borough Council (GBC) chief executive, the GBC arts and leisure officer, an English Heritage Education Officer, a Tourism, Regeneration Information Centre (TRIC) manager, a TRIC and Kent Thameside Committee member, the GBC Town Centre Manager, the GBC Environmental Regeneration Manager, and observers from funding bodies. This group gave us our initial networking and through their contacts among tenants and community organisations we publicised the project and invited participation. We contacted local schools and community groups, circulated draft briefing notes for teachers and workshop facilitators, followed by inset days when we worked through the workshop processes with them and refined the briefing notes, then began the Visioning process. We later developed a sister project, Poplar Futures, and created a forum shared across both websites, so that participants in both towns could enter into dialogue and exchange ideas.

The core process resides in the visioning workshops, where experienced artists and communicators work with participants to develop ideas, encouraging them to go beyond initial stereotypes, critique the issues and refine ideas in order to communicate their visions. Workshop participants are asked to identify and explore a site of significance to them (e.g. around their home or a place they see as a central focus for their community, the town centre or market area); and encouraged to start from their own experience, then develop their ideas more broadly by thinking about the impact of the environment and other people (for example, the elderly or differently-abled). They do not have to take cost into account in developing their ideas, though in some cases – particularly with more experienced

participants - they are encouraged to think about whether an idea might be expensive or take a long time to implement. Having established their preferred option for change, they explore the best way of presenting this. Participants then upload their futures onto the websites in each area.

Visible Local Identities become the key to locating these virtual spaces. Each group designs its own cyberspace portal, and the sites are linked via an electronic forum and ideas from different areas can be compared and debated. Non-participants can view these dialogues but cannot take part directly but can post comments on a separate, mediated public forum. There is a digital postcard facility that enables participants or visitors to the site to select an image, add a message, and email it. In Gravesend, hard-copy exhibitions were also exhibited in the Information and Regeneration Centre, and were attended by the Mayor and key department heads. Workshops have inputs from local colleges and training agencies so that participants may see opportunities for further learning and training - pathways for their personal futures is developed alongside their contributions to the communities' visions. During the first workshop phase, over 400 participants took part in Gravesend, and over 300 in Poplar, and similar numbers have participated in the two or more successive phases in each place - over two thousand participants in total.

We began to explore these pathways more intensively in 2006/7 with women's groups from the Bangladeshi and Somali communities in Poplar. This was done through workshops at Ideas Stores – a new initiative in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, a public learning resource centre with an internet café and learning labs – and in other localised venues in the network. These workshops included taster sessions in collaboration with arts and cultural industries courses, buddying and peer mentoring with students from partner institutions, and workplace placements via partner organisations. They were funded by the Flexible Discretionary Fund (Pilot), Department of Works and Pensions; partners included Tower Hamlets College, the Curriculum Co-ordinator for the Idea Stores, and the Lifelong Learning Co-ordinator for London Borough of Tower Hamlets. The Buddying Pilot is funded through University of Westminster Innovations & Widening Participation programme. We plan to extend the project to other areas of East London.

Sites, transformations

The second stage involves identifying a physical forum for Global Town Square where ideas can be displayed and interactive prototypes tested. In Gravesend this is sited at the Garrick Street Transport Interchange. Here we have created an interactive outdoor projection system: a 6m screen and ground-level pod activated by a thermal (hand heat) system to alter displays and to execute simple voting mechanisms. We launched this with a Festival of Light and Renewal, running from November, hence taking festivals from Diwali through Christmas, Honika, and the Chinese New Year to Muslim New Year in March. Over 300 images were generated, some attached to those traditional cultural festivals but many exploring the theme in other ways. This was followed by community proposals for the new Transport Interchange - due for redevelopment - put beside the draft ideas of the architects commissioned to develop the scheme. Later, proposals for a cultural quarter around the market and old town were explored. Currently the images used comprise animated stills with text, but the system has the capacity for full-motion video. This will be developed in future projects, possibly through mini-festivals of moving image.

In the square fronting Chrisp Street Market, Poplar, East London, we located an eight-meter Mega-screen on the side of a tower block, adjacent to the Ideas Store and opposite Poplar Housing and Regeneration Community Association (HARCA). This system became interactive in the winter of 2008, activated via a touch-screen on the glass frontage of the Ideas Store. It has the ability to upload or download materials from mobile phones within a defined project context (funding permitting).

Critiques and future objectives

The Global Town Square project has been shaped by a necessity to develop it within the constraints of funding for public art and community development projects, based on discrete elements all of which required specific outcomes and emphasised practical and immediate results - rather than exploring long term, strategic possibilities. Bids to the National Endowment for Science, Technology and Arts (NESTA) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) were not successful. For its scale and ambition the project has been under-funded, particularly in having the time and resources to take up emerging ideas and developments from participants. Yet we see these projects as only the first steps in a more developed Global Town Square, where elements of the physical environment are activated through convergent media systems to entertain, stimulate, inform and educate through a range of hardware and software prototypes. As well as creating and displaying the workshop contents, we will seek to curate a range of festivals and events foregrounding art, technology, and social networking (physical and virtual). By demonstrating the potential of this model I believe that future manifestations of Global Town Square can be developed as a place of innovation for creative use and democratic engagement with new forms of *Architechnology* or *Architec* (combining place design with interactive technology interfaces).

Transitional practices

Back in the 70s I referred to my approach as a Transitional Practice,⁵ and in many ways I would still regard it as such, though for different reasons. Back then, I and many of my contemporaries were trying to develop forms of engaged art practice whose aim was to contribute directly to social change. I called it transitional because it came from a critique of high modernism prior to establishment of a new modus operandi. Put simply the argument was: Increasing specialisation affected all spheres of production including art, which became a specialist form of consumption, too - economically and culturally elitist. This culminated in the high modernism of the late twentieth century, that lost the idealism and egalitarian politics of early modernism to become the ultimate fetishised commodity. To create a rupture with that tradition, we shifted the context of our practice out of the commercial gallery system. Within a culturally fragmented urban underclass, the only shared stories are those from popular culture (not theirs but received) or the narratives of their oppression. An art practice based upon this could not be regarded as an end in itself but a temporary, transitional phase that would contribute to, and be transformed by, the transformation of society. The analysis and the strategy were simple, though not necessarily simplistic, based as they were on debates and cultural/political practices from the 30s, updated via structuralist and post-structuralist debates post Mai 686.

An early work, *The Present Day Creates History* (Peter Dunn and Loraine Lesson,1977-78) explored such a narrative of oppression in an exhibition on the social impacts of regeneration in Peterlee – the first New Town in a mining district in the North East – and Ruislip, a suburb of Metroland, West London. The concept behind this work, which gave rise to its title, was Brechtian – taking the ordinary, everyday, the given, and changing

perceptions of it.⁷ Apart from the problems we encountered by trying to contextualise the nostalgia of found sepia-toned images with discursive texts, it became apparent that we were *mediating* people's narratives back to them – it was still not theirs, and less fun than popular culture: worthy and dry. It was necessary, we felt, to get directly involved in an activist practice.

An art for its time

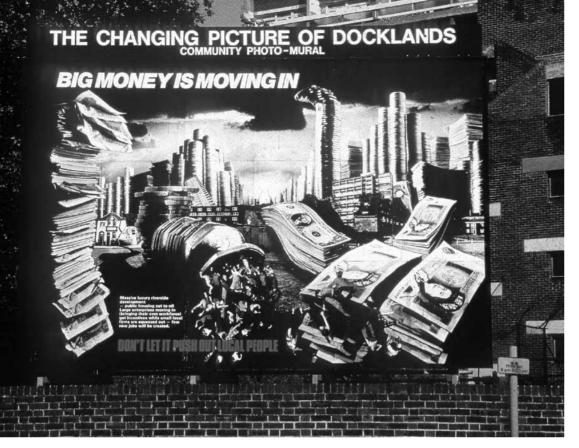
The context for this decision was very different from that of today. Yet, as I said above, uncanny cycles are emerging. The Miners Strike of 1973 reduced the economy to a three day week, and precipitated the downfall of the Conservative government. The incoming Labour government's relatively mild socialist agenda, though crucially with plans to nationalise North Sea oil and gas, was undermined by a run on the pound. The Callaghan government had to seek emergency assistance from, and was reduced to a creature of, the International Monetary Fund - who refused to take the immanent income from the North Sea as collateral and imposed severe government spending cuts. This brought the labour movement into direct confrontation with the government, culminating in wildcat stoppages and that government's demise. During the early years of the Thatcher government there were demonstrations, strikes, and civil unrest in Brixton, Toxteth (Liverpool 8), and St Pauls, Bristol. Revolution was in the air and the Sex Pistols assaulted the airwaves. There was an enormous surge of critical, visual and intellectual creativity in the UK as well. This energy was powered by a belief that art could play an active role in social change - be interventionist. This ranged from highly theorised critique to community activism⁸; across performance and *actions*, mural painting and printmaking, film, video, photography and mixed media installations. Some took inspiration from the idealist phase of early modernism in Germany and Revolutionary Russia9, some looked back to pre-modernist forms of Social Realist mural painting¹⁰, or took the Situationist route of using elements and forms from popular culture to subvert ideologies reinforced by consumerism¹¹.

Another strand, from conceptual art, saw a politics of representation as the battleground¹². Feminism, Gay and Black radicalism impacted on the cultural sphere, attacking the establishment and fuelling debates on social engagement – *Who's Art, for What Society*¹³. Establishment critics who opposed this work complained it was aesthetically dull and earnest,

nostalgically recalling the colourful 1960s.14 The aesthetics were indeed different - as Brecht says (to paraphrase from his Collected Poems), there are still songs in dark times but they are songs of dark times. And this was post-'68. The dreams of flower power were shattered – and the gloves were off: demonstrators were shot in the US, tear-gassed and beaten in Europe and the UK. The Troubles in Northern Ireland were at their height, and the National Front were on mainland streets. It was not a time for subtle aesthetic nuance or playful hedonism; it was a time for directness and action. The whole edifice of late modernist exclusivity was rejected; the search was on to find new ways of engaging society. There was a lot of passion. Boundaries were being pushed in all directions. There was heated debate in conferences, seminars and exhibitions. This does not mean that it was all good; experimentation means that failures are inevitable. But there was no shortage of nerve and the desire to find a way to contribute to social change was real. The very *idea* of success was elusive in the movement's highly critical terms, even before attack by its enemies. Bernard Levin, a Times critic, declared in banner headlines in his review of the Art for Whom show at the Serpentine: 'This Poisoning the Wells of Art.'15

Out of this intellectual and artistic ferment, the modernist frame was broken and many of the boundaries around what was deemed suitable media and subject matter for art were swept away. Our strategy of working with campaigns provided a visual arm of socially useful production that involved using video and photo-documentary, posters, leaflets, pamphlets, exhibitions and bill-boards. This began with the *Bethnal Green Hospital Campaign* (1977-78),progresede through the *East London Health Project* (1978-79)¹⁶, and culminated in the *Docklands Community Poster Project* (1979-89)¹⁷. We created a series of slow-animation sequences called the *Changing Picture of Docklands*, mounted on six 18ft x 12 ft billboards in the area; produced posters and flyers, took part in and documented changes and actions such as the People's Armada to Parliament that involved over 2000 people taking to the river in boats; we also created mobile issue-based exhibitions that culminated in the *Docklands Road Show* to tour other Docklands areas zoned for redevelopment.

The people of this area of East London (where I am based and where most of my work still takes place) have long been devalued and disregarded, but have a history of fighting back. Against the odds, these communities battled for almost ten years against government and developers, and won



Big Money (Docklands Poster Project)

some important local victories. But by Thatcher's third parliamentary term, it was over. Nevertheless, the Development Corporation was forced to make changes. So our interventions had an impact, but were rear-guard actions, defensive and ultimately limiting. I had instinctively begun to shift my practice into a more proactive mode when I discovered Castells, which lent me a theoretical and empirical basis for the shift from resistance to project identity.

Conclusion

That journey from the seventies, in trying to construct a practice that intervenes in the process of social change and remains true to principles of democratic engagement, is far from simple. At times, it feels that the possibility of achieving these goals is ever more elusive. I am still heartened by the fact that there is a new generation of artists who are breaking the rules and trying to forge new practices using new technologies and networks.

Space is form; place is a social context. Engaging with form and/or social context involves culture. Cultures bind people together but are also what

people fight over – particularly when defined by nationalism, ethnicity, or religion. Identities and ideologies are key, yet seldom fixed in practice (only in stereotypes). In globalised, urban and largely networked social contexts, artists working in the public domain operate within constantly changing social relations. This is daunting, and it is not surprising that many artists retreat to the comfort zone of gallery society.

Alongside the argument that artists cannot be experts in social matters and should stick with form and aesthetics, is the assertion that art should not be used to put a band-aid on social problems. I agree. However artists themselves - seeking funding, and feeling that society does not value art - collude in claims that art can do almost anything on the social agenda. Artists are frequently required to pull rabbits out of hats while making the hat at the same time. But, if we can sometimes create a bit of magic, we cannot perform miracles. Artists are, however, citizens, social beings operating alongside and with everyone else. We don't have to set ourselves up – or be set up - as social analysts, having all the solutions or none of them. We make our work out of the social fabric we inhabit: physically, culturally, ideologically. We try to focus that fabric, so that the work is a distillation of the desires of a constituency, through a transformative critique, and through collaboration and communication. In a sense, the work is a lens which creates a focal point in the energies of transformation: it can shift a way of thinking, of seeing, of being in the world. It can be robust or fragile, profound or transient, ignored or attacked. But it cannot be precious unless people value it.

¹ Castells, M., 1996, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, vol.1, *The Rise of the Network Society*, Oxford, Blackwell, p. 3
² See Digital Highways, Local Narratives, Dunn, P., 1991, keynote paper, *Fragmented Power; Art Voices for 2000* [reproduced, AND, 27 1992] and as a multimedia installation, *Ten 8*, Digital Dialogues, 1991; exhibited, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, Canada

³ *The Wymering Public Art Project*, [booklet], 1999, Portsmouth, Portsmouth

City Council

⁴ *Futuretown* was a scheme introduced in the late 1990s to raise awareness among young people of the importance of Britain's towns and cities, initially sponsored by Sainsbury's and Boots the Chemists PLC, and later

⁵ 'Towards a Transitional Practice', 1977, Strike; Art For Whom [exhibition catalogue] 1978, London, Arts Council ⁶ Aesthetics and Politics: debates between Block, Lukacs, Brecht, Benjamin, Adorno, 1977, London, Verso; Gramsci, A., 1975, The Modern Prince and other writings, New York, International Publishers ⁷ Bertolt, B., 1965, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*. London: Methuen ⁸ See journals including Art and Language, Frameworks, Control, Radical Philosophy, Black Phoenix and Studio International (1976-77, Third Text, Block, and AND. At the more activist end, see Art and Politics, Up Front, INCITE, Left Curve, Variant, Transmission, ZG, Wedge ⁹ Art in Revolution was exhibited at The Hayward Gallery, London, 26 February to 18 April, 1971; see also Herzfelde, W., 1972, Photomontages of the Nazi Period, London, Gordon Frazer Gallery and Universe Books ¹⁰ From 'Frescoes from Florence' (1969 London, Royal Academy of Arts) to Diego Rivera's Mexican murals (1987, London, Hayward Gallery); see also Rochfort, D. 1987, The Murals of Diego Rivera, London, South Bank Board and Journeyman Press [Rochfort was a prominent UK muralist] ¹¹ The Situationist International was founded in 1957 by Guy Debord and Asger Jorn ¹² This was influenced by translation of French and Italian Structuralist, Psychoanalytic and Semiotic texts into English at that time, notably, Barthes, R., 1973, Mythologies, London, Paladin; Althuser, L. 1969, Reading Capital, Paris, Maspero

supported nationally by the Government's Urban Task Force.

¹³ See exhibitions including: Art into Society, Society into Art, 1974, London, ICA; Art and Politics, 1977, London, Air Gallery; Art for Whom? 1978, London, Serpentine Gallery; Art For Society 1978, London, Whitechapel Art Gallery, Belfast, Ulster Museum; Who's Art, What Society, 1979, Belfast, Art & Research Exchange; on Black and Asian artists: The Thin Black Line, 1985, London, ICA

¹⁴ Marina Vaizey and David Sweet, writers for Artscribe, were the most prominent advocates of these views - e.g.: 'as an artist is primarily concerned with the pursuit of quality, it is advisable that one should carefully censor both overt and indirect social references in one's work' (David Sweet, 'Art and Social Constraints', Artscribe Nov '77)
¹⁵ Levin, B. *This Poisoning the Wells of Art, The Times* May1978
¹⁶ Block, 1, p22, 1972

¹⁷ Bird, J., 1990, 'Dystopia In Docklands', *Art in America*, 78, 7, July;
Dunn, P. and Lesson, L, 1986, 'The Changing Picture of Docklands', *Block*12, pp 41-44; Dunn, P., 1986, 'The Changing Picture of Debate', *AND* 8, pp 6-12; Dunn, P. and Leeson, L. 1986, *The Changing Picture, Photography Politic:* 2 ed Spence, J, London, Methuen, pp 108-118