Action → Critical Action

LIBRARY - STREET - MARKET

BIG/BOLD ACTIONS - SMALLER ACTIONS

OCCUPY & MARKING
WALKING ON BAGS OR SITTING ON PAVEMENT
CHANGING THE SITE SUGGESTIONS FOR CHANGE
For the young people – eight students aged 14 and 15 years-old from Westminster Academy – the project provided a space to think about their future beyond school and to critically consider their roles and responsibilities in relationship to their community and the wider world.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Spend some time in a place you like or you are curious about.

The camera pans from the ground to the sky revealing the horizon in the middle of the market street as Siana walks the line.
I think in-between the market stalls, it's a bit free. There's a bit of freedom, because everyone can talk to each other — Aaron

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

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

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

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The camera follows our bodies as they mark the boundaries of spaces. Our gestures respond to the nature of each space — Siana touches the books quietly, while Aaron taps the rails noisily.

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

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

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

This shows that we control the area — Aaron

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What spaces do you like or would like to spend time in?

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

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

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

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It feels like you’re free to do what you want. You get motivated inside through it — Aaron
Walking along the wall of a terraced housing block

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

PUSHING THE LIMIT

Use your body in a new way in a public space.

Can we physically test what is possible in public spaces?

1ʹ 30ʹ 60ʹ

Use your body in a new way in a public space.

Walking along the wall of a terraced housing block

The camera moves along the wall, following Jaber’s footsteps as he negotiates the boundary between public and private.
Through this project, in various ways, we have tried to challenge not only our imagination but also the monotonous stereotypes about young people that are rather common nowadays. As shown in both the library and outside on the street, we have attempted to rearrange the chairs in numerous ways to suggest our creativity — Siana

Critical Action

Reappearance of site-specific props from one site (library) into another (street)
The camera captures a series of shots of a green chair occupying different spaces on the site. The chair sits amongst its peers in the library, then reappears in the middle of unused market stall frames, in the middle of the market corridor and finally, barricades the street entrance.

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

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What do our public actions in the film mean? What limits are we and the film pushing?

Naming the film Action of Room.

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

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

Do places that have no clear function provide opportunities to act out alternative uses of space?

Moving from inside the library to the courtyard outside, the interior of the library works as a backstage for a theatrical use of the courtyard.

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

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

Critical Action

Kevin

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We made two types of footage — one is disruptive and the other is peaceful — Aaron.
And then sometimes people might come through and then we have to stop the video, let them come and then wait for it. And then start again. I think that’s what happens when you’re doing something in public and outside, you just respect other people — Bruno

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

Titles set expectations and convey the message of the public event (film). Our title aims to:

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

Can we change spatial and social hierarchies and arrangements?
I learned that there’s two types of teenagers — well, there’s probably more but in the video we’ve only shown two — one of more movement and one of less movement. And it just shows how we used public spaces to our own advantage — Hana.

How powerful is gentle resistance of a public limit? There are many ways to ask questions through public action: by gently being present, by boldly and actively occupying spaces or through initiating conversations with residents.

The camera as a distant observer or invisible witness. The confidence of the action — peeking over into a public space to see what is happening — conveys curiosity rather than an invasion of privacy.

The camera moves slowly, comfortably recording the pavement sit-in, revealing the framework of the market corridor as a backdrop.

Using a traffic cone to cross a visual and physical limit.

Critical Action

Action of Street

Sitting on the pavement

Action of Street

Using a traffic cone to cross a visual and physical limit.

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

Critical Action

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

Critical Action

What and who are at each side? What do both sides have in common?

The division between Church Street market at one end and the antique market at the other is clearly marked by the clients, the cars, the facades of the buildings and the exclusivity of access to some of the shops.

Critical Action

Can we break the limit by doing something positive?

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

Critical Action

Of Street

The camera records a continuous shot as Kevin crosses between the two sides of the different market types. As Kevin moves, the juggling is juxtaposed against the changing language of the facades of the street. The fruit was borrowed from a stall vendor.

Critical Action

1 30 60

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Film was used as a medium to support and document a series of explorative public actions as opposed to realizing a planned narrative.

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

The process of turning footage of public actions into a collective film also generates speculations about each young person's ownership of the film's narrative. In the end, three films were produced.

Can film be used as a research tool?

Editing as a process of constructing narrative and negotiating collective meaning

— Urban Takeover

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

Experimenting with ideas and brainstorming — Hanaa
Suggest a fictional or imagined scenario to change the site.

What would you like to change on Church Street?

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

What would you like to change on Church Street?

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

Interviewing local people on Church Street

Well I’ll go with Jaber’s idea for a food fight — Nahid
How can we make friends on the site? How can we cross the social limit?

It wasn’t always easy to start conversations and build relationships with people who live and work on the street. We tried to engage people by:

1. Asking people their opinions about our proposals for Church Street
2. Finding a common language by asking people or materials to become participants in our actions
3. Asking people to help us by lending props or materials for our actions
4. Inviting people to become audience members for our actions.

Many people have contributed to our common footage. Not only the editors, the people who support us, but also the ones who work in the street, in Church Street. Once one of the people allowed us to take their trolley in order to fulfill our project. He trusted us and that helped a lot and made our work easier — Siana

The footage of our interviews reveals how the presence of the camera can create distance between people. The films show how the camera gets the attention of the interviewee, but it also captures awkward angles, gets in the way of communication and makes some people uneasy by creating a formal setting.

Conversation about public space simultaneously explored the mechanisms through which group decisions can be made. Differences of opinion began to emerge and objections became a powerful way of asking pertinent questions about power and representation.

How do we make collective decisions? What is democratic representation?
Do differences of opinion amongst a group create a rich dialogue and a better understanding of a topic?

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

Critical Action

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

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

Public <-> Private

Back <-> Front

Inside <-> Outside

Edge <-> Centre