

1. Name of the curated Festival or Event:

Futuremakers: Play and Festivities in the Park

2. Location and date:

Midlands Art Centre, Birmingham. Summer 2017

3. Description (including aim, background, participants and process)(max 400 words):

Futuremakers was a participatory arts event that engaged a public audience to *'play, make, build'* over a period of 8 weeks, culminating in a final event in the Big Review. The project takes a look at curatorial approaches to participatory exhibitions whilst in a festival-like programme structure and celebration of local contributions.

First run at Midlands Art Centre (mac) Birmingham UK, Futuremakers was initially developed as an exhibition to explore the heritage and community through creativity and making. The mac center is located in Cannon Hill Park, a picturesque Victorian municipal park in south Birmingham that plays a prominent role in events for residents, creatives and community groups. Historically, the park has hosted formal themed festivals¹ to religious or seasonal annual celebrations, to informal gatherings of the Victorian bathing ponds that come with its own rituals of how you enjoy and participate in a public space.

The approach of Futuremakers was to establish a creative environment to learn about local history through participating with invited makers that occupied the

institution for two weeks at a time. The makers were, Dual Works with a primary discipline in jewelry and object fabrication; Simon & Tom Bloor, visual artists that work with play structures and storylines; and myself acting on behalf of Co.LAB with our experience of building architectural structures. The makers, alongside organized workshops of children, explored, developed and fabricated a series of 'pavilions' to be set around the art center and park setting.

Exploratory play became the vehicle to recount fictional and collected stories of the park and the building in which the art center is housed in. Work was curated in an expanding exhibition display in the gallery as the children created new art works and playful structures. The ideas were produced while the makers and children workshops took place roaming around the park and capturing spatial and visual qualities of the environment.

All makers built structures along different avant-garde themes: conversations (Dual Works), the story of Stones (Simon & Tom Bloor) and light/shadows (Co.LAB). The residency period and exhibition ended with a final celebratory day-long event – the Big Review. Work generated from the summer period was presented in a theatre space, deconstructing the gallery space into a production 'in the round' and previous participants of the workshops and members of the public were invited to view and play with remnants of the works created to build further structures. In doing so, conversations were made between all different members of the community and those that were part of the creative program. The sharing of ideas, wrapped in local stories, represent simple communality acted out for an inclusive practice between an arts institution and its setting.²

4. Objectives (100 words):

Futuremakers was an endeavor with an objective to offers a small opportunity to opening up 'play' in the wider community and not just those who are in the design or creative 'profession'. The project aimed to do so by:

- encouraging the sharing of creative ideas of what an areas local heritage

should be discussed in visual and spatial forms.

- How can the public celebrate creativity in formal institutional settings?
- Learning of practices to form festival events from past precedents and references on play festivals like Action Space, Sheffield and the Birmingham Arts Lab.

5. Impacts/Reflections (max 400 words):

The Impact of Futuremakers fall under two broad aspects: the participating participants and their practice, and the impact of the event to the wider community.

What was initially set out as events to promote public creativity through physical acts, emerged as a reoccurring process of using stories and narratives through these physical acts that connect them to some personal memory or historical fact of the art centre/park. It is the combination of playfulness and seriousness in the art to take one's understanding of their environment further. The makers' practice generated works of varying scales that facilitated conversations between different groups – artists, general members of the public, participating children, gallery visitors. It is the aesthetic and physical value of the work that allowed us to recognise the value of the place.³ But the challenge for the events and workshops in Futuremakers was to break down our perception of labelled rooms and what activities could occur in them – specifically with the exterior and interior crossover the architecture of the centre offers.

Having to occupy the centre's various facilities and adjacent public domain, sometimes into the park, redrew new boundaries of where art and knowledge is reflected on or where we engage in civic participation. The aspect of roaming in the park is reminiscent of previous precedents of play festivals like Birmingham Arts Lab in the 1970's where peripatetic performances around the suburban landscape of Newtown, their base in North Birmingham. Jazz bands, theatre groups and visual

artists form spontaneous gatherings with local children to generate and experience the making of art pieces away from the established institutions.

These sessions of creativity were radical enough to break down the elitists structures of where art would normally have been experienced. In the documentary *Action Space*, of the group with the same name, founder Ken Turner confirms this sentiment: “we are an association working in the community interested in play, in education, developing art forms, specifically for the non-elite. They are the ones we are trying to reach”.⁴

Action Space, the Arts Lab, and Futuremakers all set up major festivities during official school holiday periods. The fondness one has of this time as a child, in particular in respect to the seasonal occurrence in the summer, contribute to a young participant’s memories of play and the location in which they play in, by connecting associations with aesthetic judgement on their environment that they would otherwise overlook. Creating a festive programme of play allowed all participants to express their judgement either in dialogue or in visual form.

6. References (max 5):

Birmingham Mail , “*Tulip Festival Was A Bloomin’ Great Idea!*”, Chinn, Carl
<https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/nostalgia/birmingham-tulip-festival-bloomin-great-7337900>

Frieling, Rudolf. 2008 . “Towards Participation in Art” in *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now*, edited by. Rudolf Frieling et al., 33-48. London: Thames & Hudson, 2008.

Kidder, Paul. 2012. *Gadamer for Architects*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Huw Wahl, dir. 2016. *Action Space*. UK.

7. Image Captions

Figure 1. Artwork developed by Dual Works, one of the maker-in-residence, and taken around Cannon Hill Park for display and interaction with the public.

Figure 2. Visual work made in one of the maker's workshops, Simon & Tom Bloor asked children to create own stories and memories of the park through creative play and present their work back through artistic play.

Figure 3. Children makes a structure in a session of free play using the maker's artistic process and equipment.

Figure 4. All the structures and artworks generated over the summer is presented back to the public at an event at the end of the festival.

8. Endnotes

¹ Birmingham Mail, "Tulip Festival Was A Bloomin' Great Idea!", Carl Chinn, <https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/nostalgia/birmingham-tulip-festival-bloomin-great-7337900> (accessed 18th April, 2018)

² Rudolf Frieing "Towards Participation in Art" in *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now*, ed. Rudolf Frieing et al., (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008), 48.

³ Paul Kidder, *Gadamer for Architects* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012)

⁴ Huw Wahl, dir., *Action Space* (UK, 2016)

