

Translating the street



Translating the street

Brigitte Jurack

Harold Offeh & Christine Lucas (All Nations 4 Hair)

Haleh Jamali & Karim Azare and Kazem Kohnechi (K&K Fresh Vegetables and Fruits)

Jeff Young, Martin Heslop & Frank Cavanagh (Frank Cavanagh Shoe Repairs)

Alternator Studio and Oxton Road, 5 March 2016

The work shown in this publication has been produced during three artist residencies. The artists spent time with businesses in the vicinity of Alternator Studio.

Founded by Brigitte Jurack in 2012, Alternator Studio is located in The Old Bakery at 57-59 Balls Road East, Birkenhead CH43 2TZ. Alternator Studio currently houses four artists, with an additional outdoor building awaiting upgrading. The plan is that a dedicated space is made available all year round for short micro-residencies for local and international artists, especially those seeking a large making space close to the docklands and a multicultural neighbourhood. Alternator Studio sees a future for the *Translating the street* project model, using the Oxtan Road neighbourhood as the location for further micro-residencies.

Illustration on p3 The Old Bakery circa 1905

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**ALTERNATOR STUDIO
BALLS ROAD EAST**

INTRODUCTION

Brigitte Jurack

In 2012 I took over one of the three remaining buildings on Balls Road East in Birkenhead. The linked buildings that flank the left-hand side as you come up from Borough Road were originally built in 1900 to house the Disbury Bakery and shop. The buildings are now occupied by a wood stripper, a picture framer and gallery, an office-based business and Alternator Studio.

Alternator Studio sits at the junction with Oxtan Road on which I discovered a diverse range of independent businesses, some of which became my regular haunts. These businesses serve a culturally diverse community, not only in relation to ethnicity, but also in relation to professions and pastimes.

But how to unlock this treasure-trove of stories, cultures and customs? Each door could open the hidden worlds of shelves, boxes, clients and shopkeepers. The idea for micro-residencies

was thus born! Just like the dough rising in the grand bakery, the Studio once again is used to transform the small into the substantial. International artists have been invited to translate the stories of the street, build bridges and make visible the hitherto hidden. *Translating the street* welcomed artists Harold Offeh, Haleh Jamali and Jeff Young to live and work in Birkenhead and to listen to the stories unfolding in three iconic businesses.





Haleh Jamali
Crossing the line (left screen, 5'30") and *Frontier* (3'30"), HD Videos



Translating the street Daniel McMillan

It is Saturday morning, the day before Mother's Day, and I am in Birkenhead town centre. Men carry balloons bearing the message 'mum in a million' to mothers in millions. Kids in puffed gilets throw bangers at the paving of the Pyramids shopping centre. I walk past Poundland, Poundworld and the Pound Bakery on my way to *Translating the street* – an event organised by Brigitte Jurack, founder of Alternator Studio. The studio, located in 'The Old Bakery' building on the outskirts of town, commissioned three artists (Haleh Jamali, Harold Offeh and Jeff Young) to work with local shopkeepers in the surrounding area. Each artist had roughly a week-long residency in the shop, creating work in response to the area and the commission's loose themes of 'site' and 'identity'. The finished works are being shown today in the shops that inspired them.

The first stop on the *Translating the street* map is All Nations 4 Hair – a hair and beauty salon at the bottom of Oxton Road. The closer I get

to the road, the more multicultural the area becomes. Fewer people, less chain store padding. The vacant 'Recession Bar' signals I have arrived. A billing on a chalk board outside memorialises its rapid decline since its promise of 'Marty King' on Sunday 26th July.

Opposite the pub, a fascia sign displays the All Nations 4 Hair logo, reminiscent of the Wella lady in Pan-African colours, strands of hair like bolts of lightning. Its areas of specialism is outlined: "European, Afro-Caribbean, Asian + Extensions". Owner and hair-stylist Christine is inside, steadying heads and directing gazes towards mirrors. She is with Cambridge-based artist Harold Offeh, with whom she spent two weekends. The first weekend of Harold's residency was spent hanging out, as he puts it, with Christine. On the second, he set up a pop-up photography studio in the salon. Clients were invited to have their hair styled and photos taken. The resulting portraits are on display today – pinned to the wall of the salon (recently re-decorated by Christine with an Audrey Hepburn

wallpaper) and screened as a slideshow on an in-store TV. In conversation, Harold references Chris Rock's 2009 documentary *Good Hair*, which explores the multi-billion-dollar African American hair industry and the ironic pursuit of 'natural' hair through artificial enhancement.

Hair entrepreneurs discuss manufacturing hair extensions, forged from Indian hair unwittingly donated during Hindu rituals, for weaves. Black women describe applying sodium hydroxide to their scalps for a more 'natural' (i.e. European) look. A similar tension between artificial branding and 'natural beauty' is found in Harold's prints. Everyday faces clumsily imitate the white smiles and white glows of hair product packaging design. They are offset against digital pastel gradients, rolling shampoo waves, butterfly breezes; visual motifs from packaging Harold found in store. There is certainly an ironic humour present, but the prints are also a loving portrait of All Nations, its owner and the community it serves. Harold notes the communal atmosphere of the salon – recounting conversa-

tions with the owner and her clients, describing it as feeling more like a community centre than a hair salon. I have already picked up on this during my short visit. Passers-by, unaware that there is an art exhibition inside, drop in simply to chat. Did he feel as though he was imposing on this community? Was it an uncomfortable experience? "I thought it really would be... but there is just this thing about being in Liverpool. People just talk, you know?"

I walk to the next local business-cum-exhibition space: Frank Cavanagh Shoe Repairs on Borough Road. The grand Birkenhead Central Library, opened by George V in 1934, is the only remaining sign that the road was once part of a thriving shipbuilding town. The cobbler is located amidst a row of derelict buildings on the side of a dual carriageway, windows boarded, shuttered or absent. It is not immediately clear that Frank is still in business. A window display of tatty, sun-bleached advertisements for shoe products is visible behind a rusted wire mesh. "Fashion is fun with Lady Esquire!" claims an

ad for instant shoe colouring, illustrated with a now monochromatic rendering of the *Mona Lisa* on a boot. A crowd of art viewers has amassed outside the entrance, and there is some deliberation amongst them over who will go in first. Stories have surfaced regarding Frank's unpredictable mood and of the initial resistance met by Liverpool-based writer Jeff Young when he first approached the 86-year-old cobbler for his residency.

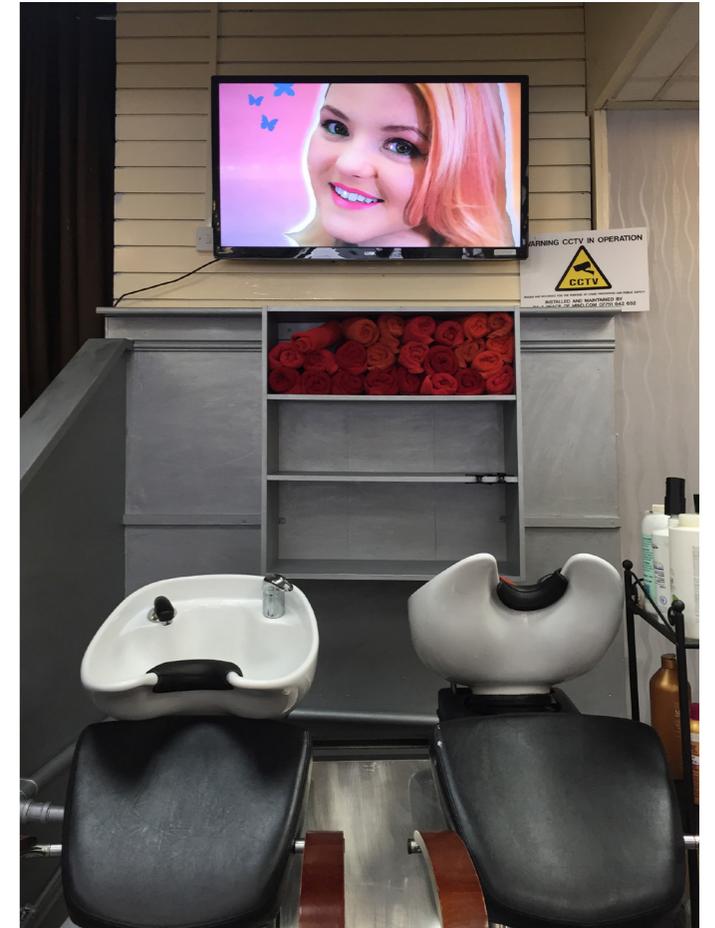
"The very first day I went in, he basically told me to leave," Jeff confirms. "I haven't got time," he said, "I'm a very busy man." Jeff persevered, week by week, having conversations with Frank, bringing in boots to be repaired, acting like any other customer. Frank eventually softened. "One week I went in and two women came in with their shoes. 'I haven't got time to be fixing shoes,' Frank said, 'I'm an artist.'" Over the counter Frank told the artist the 70+ year history of the shop. Photographs were shown of the cobbler as a young man, stories shared of Borough Road's past, opinions on the A552

dual carriageway, described by Frank as having 'killed' Birkenhead – a sentiment shared by Jeff. It is the subject of his work, a composition with regular collaborator and composer Martin Heslop titled *A552 Hex*.

In it, Jeff delivers a hex on the A552, a spell "against abandonment and managed decline" over electronic drones, crumbling distortion and chiming xylophones. The music flows and shifts with the narrative, shaping the imagery every bit as much as Jeff's words. The narrative takes us through the labyrinth of the Pyramids shopping centre, gutted pubs and rotting bingo parlours, the decaying memory of Birkenhead. Contrary to a rumour that Frank hastily cleared the work away this morning, it is available to listen over the counter of the shop on a compact CD player. Inside, Frank is busy touring visitors around the workshop, talking through machinery dating back to 1936, telling stories, cracking jokes. It is difficult to believe that it is the same man we were discussing outside the door. Behind the counter is a selection of small rusty tins and

faded boxes, shelves holding shoes waiting to be mended or collected. Frank lifts a pair from the top shelf, blowing dust off them for effect. "Seventeenth of the fifth o five" he reads from a handwritten tag, "I don't think he'll be in for them." What is the longest it took for somebody to collect their shoes? "I had one guy come in after three and a half years. He brought a ticket out of his pocket. '...come back tomorrow for those,' I said."

"Has today's exhibition been good for business?" "To be honest with you, no. People have been coming in, but I've not been busy with shoes, no." Despite Frank's claim, there is a steady flow of people arriving with shoes for repair, citing the cobbler's interview on Sean Styles' show on Radio Merseyside, broadcast yesterday in an effort to promote today's event, as the reason for their visit. The interview found Frank in good spirits, telling the story of his fall into the trade, ruminating on the history of Borough Road. "Cracking road... mad busy, all the shops were taken. I knew most of them..."





the shopkeepers in those days.” The decline of Borough Road is made explicit in Jeff’s work. It references the Rubicon stream now culverted under the carriageway, the vanished Happy Valley Pub that Frank used to frequent, lives lived behind now-fly-posted windows.

“Behind every rusted shutter on Borough Road there are ghosts, the ghosts of shopkeepers... they are there like a memory we can’t quite retrieve.” Frank’s enthusiasm amidst his recent fame is affecting. He comes across as modest but ultimately proud, proud that people are showing an interest in his life and in his work, interest in a dying trade. “Shoe repairs is easing off,” he admitted on Radio Merseyside, “It’s a throwaway society, no doubt.” I remember a passage from Jeff’s work, “when a building grows old we witness it dying. We want it to survive but we feel powerless to save it and when the time comes and it dies... we are stricken with nostalgia for the cinema we hardly ever visited, or the old tiled butcher shop where we never bought meat.” I return to Oxton Road,

past shop fronts with neon cards in windows, prices penned by hand with fat black and red marker pens.

The last exhibition is at K&K Fresh Vegetables and Fruits. It exists in stark contrast to Frank’s. Flashing green LEDs outline the window. Glass has been removed, I learn, in an effort to open up the shop and draw more people in. Inside we find a rainbow of produce from around the globe, displayed in wicker baskets, plastic trays and cardboard boxes. A repeat pattern fruit and veg print, noticeably faded when viewed beside the real deal. Rows of coloured bunting hang from the ceiling. The familiar greengrocer scent.

At the back of the shop, Sheffield-based K&K artist-in-residence Haleh Jamali is standing beside her work. With her are our gracious hosts, Kazem and Karim, dishing out home-made couscous and handing press releases to guests. Kazem remarks that the exhibition has pulled in quite a crowd, even for a typically busy Saturday - a mixture of art folk, K&K regulars

and curious locals. The residency, it seems, was not met with scepticism by any of them. He is talking locals through Haleh’s work - two videos displayed side-by-side on TVs mounted above sacks of spuds and onions. Each has been made in response to one of the two Iranian-born greengrocers. The first video *Crossing the Line*, features Kazem delivering an unscripted monologue.

He contemplates social-identity, the borders of Iran, life in the UK. A narrative is weaved from the footage the artist shot in and around the greengrocers during her residency: talk of gunshots, the sound of chestnuts being thrown into a roasting pan (a standard at K&K during the winter months), high heels walking on a wet footpath. The second video, *Frontier*, features a static image of Karim, mirrored horizontally, “inspired by his stories of living on the border of Iran and Iraq as a child.” Orange and blue mists, bodies of land and water, Karim’s buoyant photoshop-enhanced head hovering. Haleh tells me of her residency, of the clients, of her





typical day working 9 – 5. One story sticks with me, of an early start to meet Kazem at the fruit market at 5 in the morning. “That’s how Kazem starts his work every day. He goes there, he picks up the fruit and vegetables. At around eight he arrives here and they set up the shop, at eight thirty they open. That fruit market is a very interesting place actually, it’s a very man orientated place, I think I was the only woman there. There’s a café there... they all go there after they have finished their shopping. Kazem told me a story about a man there, who apparently had a shop before, now he doesn’t. Every day he wakes up at five in the morning and still he goes there because he likes the chat. He’s missing his time working as a grocer.”

5pm. Signs flipped, shutters pulled. Shopkeepers, artists and intrigued Radio Merseyside listeners make their way to the top of Oxton Road where they have been invited for a meal and a live performance of *A552 Hex* at Alternator Studio. The performance, with its themes of urban decline and decaying memories, in what used

to be a mechanics, and before that a bakery, takes on new significance.

Over soup, locals discuss the imminent construction of a discount supermarket on a plot of land opposite the studio. According to an article published in the Liverpool Echo in November last year, plans exist to “transform the eyesore stretch of land” by planting a Lidl on it. It is unclear what this transformation means for the future of independent shops, and their keepers, in the Oxton Road area.

Translating the Street does not attempt to answer that. The project serves as a poetic testament to the businesses that are still here, a reminder that they remain, and goes some way towards initiating a conversation on their future. Here’s hoping it is a conversation that is nurtured through future instalments.

“and then when it’s gone we begin to forget what it even looked like. The building is erased from the streets and from our imaginations. And that erasure of place and loss of memory is the plan. We are expected to forget. And that is how they change the world without asking for permission.”

A552 Hex

Link to BBC Radio Merseyside interview with Frank Cavanagh and *A552 Hex* - <https://soundcloud.com/alan-dunn/frank-cavanagh-radio-merseyside-interview-and-jeff-young-martineslop-a552hex>

P14

Harold Offeh *All Nations*, digital prints

P15

Jeff Young *Borough Road circa 1910*, A5 card

Right

Haleh Jamali and Jeff Young in K&K





You grow up and you will see the world



Opposite
Still from Haleh Jamali *Crossing the line*
This page top
Jeff Young and Martin Heslop performing
A552 Hex in Alternator Studio
This page bottom
Harold Offeh in All Nations 4 Hair



Special thanks

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Contact details

For future *Translating the street* projects, contact Brigitte Jurack (b.jurack@mmu.ac.uk). Find “Alternator-Studio-and-Project-Space-at-The-Old-Bakery” on Facebook

www.brigittejurack.de

Opposite
Haleh Jamali, Karim Azare and
Kazem Kohnechi in K&K

