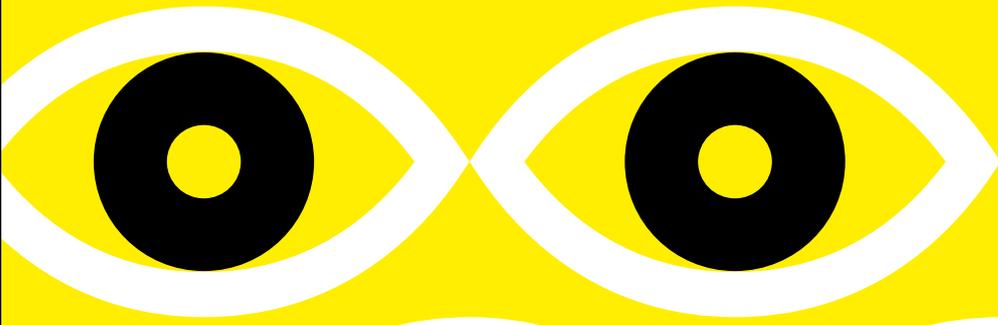
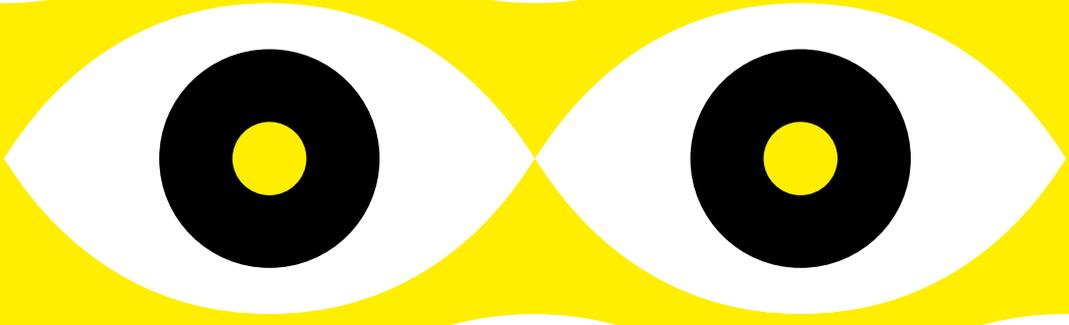




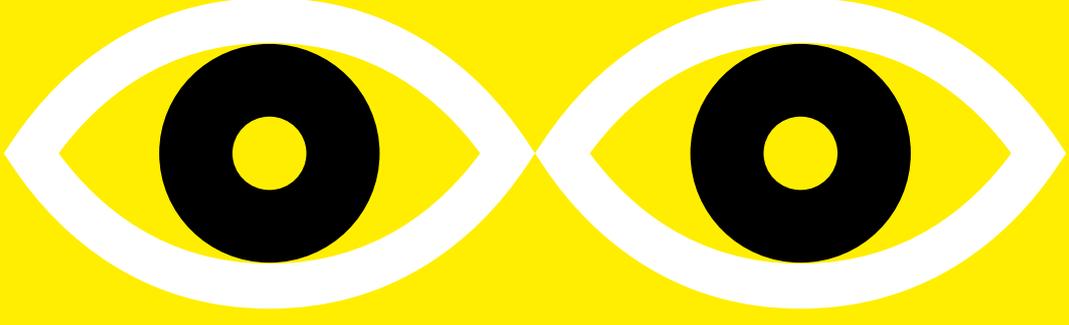
Performance



*in*



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**Public Sphere**



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# THE HOUSING CRISIS, ART, AND PERFORMANCE

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My thanks to performance companies  
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for generously sharing material.

Jen Harvie



## PROLOGUE

In autumn 2015, at East London's red brick Toynbee Studios, performance artist Poppy Jackson<sup>1</sup> performed *Pose*: she sat straddling the front apex of a second storey rooftop, naked, for four hours at a time, with occasional breaks.<sup>2</sup> *Guardian* newspaper theatre critic Lyn Gardner argued that the work was “beautiful, disturbing [...] disruptive”, and “moving to behold”, and that it invoked ancient quasi-erotic pagan building embellishments such as stone carvings of Sheela Na Gig found in Ireland (Gardner 2015; Sheela Na Gig Project 2015). Lewis Church wrote that Jackson sat “quietly, dignified and statuesque” (Church 2015).

<sup>1</sup> Jackson performed *Pose* Friday 30 and Saturday 31 October, 2015, as part of Spill Festival of Performance (Cf. Jackson n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> *Pose* caught the scandalized attention of tabloid newspapers the *Evening Standard* and the *Daily Mail* (Marshall 2015; Linning 2015).

Jackson's embodiment in *Pose* simultaneously evoked strength and vulnerability: she looked strong; her pose was undoubtedly uncomfortable. As Gardner noted, her positioning right on the edge of, and looking back at, the financial centre of London proposed an urban counter-narrative to the priorities of the City's gleaming towers (Gardner 2015). Jackson specifically straddled part of Toynbee Hall, a building established in 1884 as a residential headquarters for volunteers intervening in the enormous poverty of Victorian East London and still operating today as an anti-poverty charity in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, where 44 per cent of residents live in poverty (Toynbee Hall n.d.). In the siting of *Pose*, Jackson not only faced down the corporate City, she acted as a herald for anti-poverty, and she performed the precarity of a woman today in relation to a domestic-scale, residential architecture. *Pose* staged a young woman both vulnerable and powerful in relation to housing in a time and place where access to the basic human right of decent, affordable shelter is increasingly precarious.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* notes in Article 25: “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control”. (United Nations 1948).

## INTRODUCTION

I start with this example because it encapsulates some of the pressing social and political urgencies and performance responses I address in this essay.<sup>4</sup> My context is the contemporary United Kingdom, though many of the ideological and social conditions are much more widespread, geographically and historically. Since 2010, the UK has been led by a Conservative party committed to austerity economics and neoliberal capitalism, to supporting individual and corporate pursuit of wealth, and to eroding wealth re-distribution through taxation and structures of social welfare and cultural funding.<sup>5</sup> The results have been materially and socially devastating.

Thankfully, people including artists have not simply succumbed to these massive political, structural, ideological, and crucially social changes. The work I look at here responds particularly to being part of a new class known as Generation Rent. Facing what critic Lauren Berlant has influentially termed the “cruel optimism” of desiring something which actually inhibits their flourishing (Berlant 2011, 1), the artists whose work I discuss stage desire for but exclusion from the kind of “good life” that might take them out of profoundly constrained conditions of

<sup>4</sup> I first presented a different version of this paper at the 2015 conference of the American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR), *Debating the Stakes in Theatre and Performance Scholarship*, which invited participants to address “new pressing political urgencies” (ASTR 2015).

<sup>5</sup> The government’s arguments for its strategies are classic neoliberalism; as David Harvey puts it, this approach assumes that “human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey 2009, 22).

living. Using strategies of urban intervention, poetic architectural distortion, narrative, embodiment, performance style, collaboration, affect, and more, these artists trouble relationships between property, propriety, the private, the public, and precarity. In the case of the performance makers I discuss in particular, they “optimistically” stage alternative kinship and support networks; and perhaps angrily, they perform semi-comic scenarios perhaps more akin to situation tragedies than sit coms.<sup>6</sup> These artists stage current problems but only partial “solutions”, emphasising how solutions to our current socio-economic impasse must be social and systemic, not simply the individual acts of some of those people whom this impasse most profoundly disempowers.

My essay is organised in three parts. In the first part, I outline some of the detail of the housing crisis in the UK – in London in particular – and some of its effects. In the second part, I survey a range of urban art interventions which respond to this crisis. In the final part, I examine two recent performances by young, London-based feminist performance art/theatre companies which respond specifically to this crisis.

<sup>6</sup> Berlant suggests that conditions of cruel optimism generate new genres such as situation tragedy (2011, 6).

## PART ONE: HOUSING CRISIS

I live in the United Kingdom, in London, where the devastating and widespread conditions of the UK housing crisis are becoming painfully familiar. From 1980 until 2000, in a tsunami-like policy change initiated by Margaret Thatcher, two million homes owned by Local Authority governments were sold off.<sup>7</sup> To contextualise that, the UK has a strong history of providing social housing, much more so than Portugal. According to the research network *Housing in Europe*, in 2010, social housing made up only 3.3 per cent of housing stock in Portugal (Housing Europe 2010b), but about 18 per cent in the United Kingdom.<sup>8</sup> Between 1997 and 2010, the number of households in England waiting for social housing rose by 81 per cent, to 1.8 million households (Shelter n.d.c.). One consequence of those conditions is that, since 2001, the proportion of housing that is privately rented has skyrocketed by 69 per cent. Accountants PwC have predicted that, from 2001 to 2025, private rental accommodation will treble, with “7.2m households... in rented accommodation [in 2025], compared with 5.4m [in 2015] and just 2.3m in 2001” (Osborne 2016). Within ten years, one quarter of households will rent privately, but over half of 20-39-year-olds will do so (Osborne 2016). Rental housing is, in itself, not a bad thing; but it is bad when the housing is substandard, overpriced and insecure. Sadly,

<sup>7</sup> These homes were sold at a discount of approximately 50 per cent of market price (Harvie 2013, 129; Lowe cited in Harvie 2011, 125).

<sup>8</sup> “Social housing accounts for 17.5% of the total homes in England, while it is about 24% of the total housing stock in Scotland, about 17% in Northern Ireland and about 16.4% in Wales” (Housing Europe 2010a).

over a third of privately rented homes fail to meet the decent homes standard (Shelter n.d.b.). And over 12 per cent of the UK population lives in households where housing costs more than 40 per cent of income (Connolly 2015). This is a consequence of not only property price inflation but also wage deflation: between 2008 and 2013, hourly earnings decreased by roughly 65 pence (or one US dollar or 76 Euro cents) in real terms (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2015). Between 2010 and 2013, homelessness increased by a breathtaking 37 per cent (Johnston 2015). By 2013/14, more than 81,000 households were homeless (Shelter n.d.a); at the same time, more than a million homes in England and Wales were empty (Owen 2014).<sup>9</sup> In the area in and around Liverpool in 2010 for example, there were 13,000 empty homes and simultaneously 23,000 people seeking housing (Mendoza 2016).

Among other things, these conditions have spawned Generation Rent, a large young generation unable to escape the overpriced and often substandard private rental sector because they cannot secure mortgages in an inflated housing market where prices significantly outpace wage growth.<sup>10</sup> In summer 2016, home ownership in England reached its lowest level in thirty years (Osborne 2016). A mapping tool produced by the *Guardian* indicates that for a would-be homebuyer on an average income in 2014, 93 per cent of properties in England and

<sup>9</sup> Many of these were foreign-owned and/or holiday homes, but many were social housing targeted for “redevelopment”, often into price brackets outside the means of the “de-canted” former residents.

<sup>10</sup> Research shows “71% of people born in 1970 were homeowners by the time they were 40; for those born in 1990 the figure is likely to be just 47%” (Osborne 2015).

Wales were unaffordable (*Guardian* 2015). A 2015 pan-European housing report showed that, of eight European capital cities, London fared worst in house purchasing price to income ratios (Connolly 2015).

By no means do I think widespread property ownership is the best social solution; for many anarchists and socialists, following Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, all property is theft (Proudhon 1840). But the private rental sector in the UK is profoundly under-regulated and, so, often substandard and unstable. Furthermore, in a wider neoliberalising economy where young people are accruing greater debts from education, interest rates on savings are virtually negligible, and pensions and public healthcare are being eroded, property investment is increasingly not just investment in stable *current* living conditions, but insurance for older age. Home-ownership offers an increasingly crucial security, the likes of which are no longer guaranteed by the UK's formerly strong post-war commitment to care for its citizens from cradle to grave.

Crucially, the housing crisis I have outlined destabilises not only housing but households – the people who live there. When people's housing is insecure, so is their schooling, work, leisure, and healthcare. The housing crisis destabilises a sense of place and belonging, feelings of security, and a sense of self. Most dangerously, the housing crisis destabilises relationships and networks of friendship, kinship and care. And it does so across a huge range of people. The worst affected are those with the least wealth and the least security. But even fully employed middle-aged middle-class parents and adult children are po-

tentially negatively affected when those adult children cannot afford to move out of the family home. On that note, by way of comparison, a 2015 European report recorded that “the numbers of young adults aged between 18 and 34 who are living with their parents is now at an all-time high [in Europe]”; 55% in Portugal.<sup>11</sup>

The housing crisis is a crisis in democracy and the public sphere because it is both a symptom and a cause of ever-growing social deprivation and inequality. The housing crisis is desecrating democratic access to what Henri Lefebvre called the “right to the city” (Lefebvre 2003). Urban access becomes a privilege of class; urban eviction or marginalisation becomes a condition of low income or poverty. This is specifically neoliberal gentrification, where public spaces and housing are passively and actively eroded, and takeover by privatised entrepreneurial spaces is actively encouraged through preferential legislation.

Two important questions follow for me: what needs to be done about this crisis? And, what are art and performance doing about this crisis?

In answer to the first question, we need more and better housing market regulation, with rent caps, limits on multiple property ownership, prevention of non-occupied ownership, restrictions on occupation density, and properly enforced housing quality requirements, including a kind of Hippocratic Oath for ethi-

<sup>11</sup> “The situation is worst in Slovenia, where 74% still live at home, in Italy it's 66% and in Portugal it's 55%” (Connolly 2015).

>>> Coutinho p.270  
 >>> Phelan p.290  
 >>> Raposo p.421  
 >>> Schneider p.34  
 >>> Nogueira p.145  
 >>> Bayraktar p.180

cal landlord behavior. We need greater housing supply, which means building more new homes, reviving underused homes, and filling empty housing. We need support for communities and community sustainability, rather than the kind of passive or active erosion of existing communities that neoliberal gentrification fosters. Fundamentally, we need changed ideological, political and material commitments. Instead of existing ideological commitments to neoliberalism, privatisation and individual wealth-creation, we need to prioritise a shared responsibility to universal, decent, humane living conditions, including decent housing.

So to my second question: what are art and performance doing to contribute to these necessary material, social and ideological changes to shift the housing crisis? Many things. In autumn 2016 at the London School of Economics, I took part in a long table discussion on the housing crisis and art activism.<sup>12</sup> Speakers there argued that art activism can resist the housing crisis by supporting community strength and cohesive resistance; documenting problems; showing and enabling aspirations; raising awareness; countering and undermining propaganda and mystification; facilitating communication; and challenging housing hegemonies.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> "What Can Art Do for Housing Activism: A Long Table Discussion", organised by Dr Katie Beswick, *Resist Festival of Ideas and Actions*, London School of Economics, 29 September 2016. The long table format for public engagement in discussion was developed by Lois Weaver (Weaver 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Such challenges are visible in the art work, performance and design of, for example, Jordan McKenzie, Marcus Coates, the Space Hijackers, Focus E15, and 2015 Turner Prize winners Assemble.

There are many things art and performance can do for the housing crisis. I concentrate here on what I see as two of the most important things art and performance do: (1) raise the visibility of housing precarity, and (2) expose its damaging social and emotional effects. Although the housing crisis is geographically and demographically widespread, and although it is widely recognised, its deeply damaging effects are often experienced in isolation and in private. When its effects are emotional – which they often are – they can effectively be invisible. Furthermore, neoliberalism's biopolitics obfuscate the systemic, structural failures that produce the housing crisis, and encourage people in insecure housing to feel personal failure and shame. These feelings not only further damage wellbeing, they can also inhibit rage and collective action. The causes and effects of the housing crisis, including its emotional effects, need to be shown as collective – and a collective responsibility – and they need to be made public. These are important things art and performance can do.

In what follows, I next survey a selection of city-sited visual and sculptural art works that make visible, in particular, current housing precarity and the negative, sometimes devastating feelings it provokes. I then focus my analysis on two performances by young London-based feminist performance companies: *Number 1, The Plaza*, first produced by GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN in 2013; and *Letters to Windsor House* by Sh!t Theatre, which premiered at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in summer 2016.

The examples I look at here, mostly from London where I live, use a variety of artistic strategies to comment on Britain's current insufficient housing provision and its over-competitive, over-inflated, class-dominated private housing markets. The aesthetic strategies I focus on are: principally visual and aesthetic, posing current housing as dystopian. In one instance the strategies are textual, narrating the crises. Routinely, the strategies are spatial, occupying public spaces to disrupt the flows that naturalise catastrophic urban change. Most of the examples I look at I call "mutated homes". These examples portray homes as insecure, absurd and *unheimlich* or unhomely by using materials and structures that mutate, are themselves insecure, or somehow disturb their contexts.<sup>14</sup>

In London, the iconic debut in this story is Rachel Whiteread's 1993 *House*. She and important arts commissioners Artangel poured concrete into a disused Victorian three-storey house on Grove Road in East London's Tower Hamlets, about two miles east of Toynbee Hall. They then effectively peeled off the house to reveal the space inside made concrete. According to a recent commentator, it was "an impenetrable inversion of domesticity, a machine for not living" (Warde-Aldem 2013). It famously divided opinion. Some saw it as patronising and/or

<sup>14</sup> One of the most important predecessors in this strand is Gordon Matta-Clark's 1974 *Splitting*, in Englewood, New Jersey. In likely the most famous instance of his anarchic interventions in architecture, his "anarchitecture", Matta-Clark cut two parallel slices from the wood frame house and removed the cut-out material, leaving a home literally split apart, fundamentally disrupted and rendered unusable while barely changed and entirely recognisable.

ugly. Others saw it as both a prescient and a haunting evocation of changing patterns of life in London's rapidly gentrifying East End adjacent to massive corporate developments at Canary Wharf that were then recent in a barely post-Thatcher era (Harvie 2013, 138-9).<sup>15</sup>

Fast-forwarding fifteen years, for his 2008 work *Seizure*, originally produced on a disused housing estate near Elephant and Castle, Roger Hiorns, again with Artangel, filled a small flat with copper sulphate solution, and then drained it to reveal the entire flat covered with brilliant blue crystals. The work did not dispute the principles of social housing, but for Hiorns and many visitors including me, its claustrophobia, darkness and literal spikiness highlighted the small flat's insufficiency as a human environment, and thus the insufficiency of its realisation of some of the most important principles of social housing (Harvie 2011).

More recently, Argentinian artist Leandro Erlich, hosted by the Barbican art centre, built 2013's *Dalston House*, also in East London. Horizontally on the ground, he laid a life-size three-storey Georgian house façade, complete with brass door knob and knocker and interior lighting and scenes. That house front faced a tilted, suspended mirror. Visitors were welcome to move on the horizontal façade, appearing in the mirror as though they were hanging from the door frame or sitting on upper window ledges, apparently placed in unlikely positions or locations (*Metro News Reporter* 2013). In some cases, this pro-

<sup>15</sup> See also work by Michael Landy in Harvie 2013, 139-40.

duced strong images of physical precarity, suggesting housing precarity. Other times, people took the opportunity to articulate aspirational – or optimistic – visions rather than dystopian realities by making strongly proprietorial images – for example, with a couple, dressed as though for a date or a celebration, holding flowers and holding hands, and floating near the top of the front door. The mirror also invoked this kind of housing security as a mirage, a phantasm of Berlant’s cruel optimism.

British sculptor Alex Chinneck has made several mutating buildings and homes (Chinneck n.d.). 2013’s *From the Knees of My Nose to the Belly of My Toes* took an unused three-storey house in Margate, Kent, and created a slipping façade for it that appeared to warp into the front garden and exposed the interior of the top storey. In the same year, for Bankside’s Merge Festival, his *Under the Weather but over the Moon* changed the façades of two adjacent three- and four-storey properties at the south end of London’s Blackfriars Bridge so that the buildings appeared to be upside-down. For the 2014 Merge Festival, on the site of a former candle factory in London’s Southwark Street, Chinneck built a two-storey Georgian house, apparently solid red-brick but actually made of wax. Titled *A Pound of Flesh for 50p*, the house was gradually melted over thirty days (Merge 2014), perhaps literalising the overheated market in housing.

All of these examples disorient audiences’ relationships to urban space, urban architecture, and human spaces of living in the city. They speak with poetic urgency to the insecurity, precarity, and insufficiency of housing now, performing housing that is largely unwelcoming, inhospitable, and disturbing. At the same

time, they stage the fantasy of a house and a home. Cultural critic Lauren Berlant might identify these as examples of what she calls cruel optimism, “the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object *in advance* of its loss” (Berlant 2006, 21; emphasis original; see also Berlant 2011). In these art works, despite deteriorating social and economic conditions under neoliberalism which corrode lives and might, for example, prevent home ownership, people tenaciously hold on to fantasies of the “good life”, fantasies such as that of home ownership.

My final example of visual art features not allusive imagery but explicit critical commentary. In artist Rebecca Ross’s 2015 *London Is Changing*, she solicited online comments and posted them on electronic billboards in central London locations. Comments included, “Our studio complex is being redeveloped into flats”, from a printmakers based in South London; and “London is miserable unless you’re rich” by an artist “relocating from Hackney [in East London] to the United States” (Lewis 2015). The campaign made explicit the gentrifying, displacing conditions experienced by respondents.

These examples interrupt public space with their visible differences and counter-narratives and challenge increasingly accepted and naturalised urban norms such as the prioritisation of profit, capital and business over the social needs of people. Even more so than in the case of works I discussed above, Ross placed her testimonies of housing crisis in the flow of urban traffic. They occupied not just traffic corridors and the sight-lines of passers-by, but the very billboards usually deployed to advertise things for sale, including property, in this western

capitalist city quite typically dominated by consumerism. For me, all of these works made powerfully visible housing precarity and its painful, sometimes traumatising effects.

I start with these art works to demonstrate how prominent and urgent the housing crisis is as an issue for contemporary artists in the UK, how its visibility is increasing too for audiences in public space, and how it is specifically articulating feelings in response to the crisis, feelings of precarity, loss, displacement, and disturbance.

I turn now to look at how the housing crisis, its stories and its feelings have been addressed in recent performance by two young feminist companies: GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN and Sh!t Theatre.

#### GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN'S NUMBER 1, THE PLAZA

GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN is artistic director Hester Chillingworth, and performer-makers Lucy McCormick and Jennifer Pick (GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN n.d.a.). Since about 2008,<sup>16</sup> THEVAN has made raucous, playful, sometimes aggressive, direct address, theatre/live art installations and performances that cast a fascinated and disgusted eye on the warped values of contemporary culture, especially its sexual politics. Shows

<sup>16</sup> Stewart Pringle notes the company has been making work together for seven years in his review of *Number 1, The Plaza* (Pringle 2015).

are usually performed by McCormick and Pick, who refer to each other by their real names, as personae who may well be versions of their actual selves. In the pair's established onstage dynamic, Pick is more rule-bound and sardonic and McCormick is, apparently, cheerier, and given to wild excess (Pringle 2015). This dynamic is captured in a publicity still for 2013's *Number 1, The Plaza*: in a bright, white loft apartment tastefully furnished with select antique furniture and plants, Pick sits tidily, legs demurely crossed, hair pulled tight back, looking with possible disapproval at McCormick, who leaps in front of her in a bright pink, black-fringed sort of cheerleading outfit, her midriff and panty crotch exposed and her face obscured by long blonde hair.

The title *Number 1, The Plaza* locates the pair in a suggested luxury accommodation; it is number one, in a location so special it can abandon banal suffixes "street", or even "avenue" for the distinctive prefix "the". (Reviewer Matt Trueman observes its resemblance to a show flat at Number 1 The Avenue in East London's Bow. [Trueman 2014]). Set in both "their" home and a show home, the show, though staged sparsely, features two gleaming chrome bar stools, references to a breakfast bar and the invitation, "*Red front door. Gold number 1. Tiny peephole. Take a look around. GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN want to open up and let you in. Right in. So you can really get a feeling for what it's like on the inside*" (GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN n.d.b.). McCormick and Pick wear tight, low-cut, glittering cocktail dresses, long hair extensions, and large mics, their battery packs strapped to their thighs like garter belts... or the strap that secures a weapon to the leg of action heroine Lara Croft (see figure 1). They



FIGURE 1 Jennifer Pick (left) and Lucy McCormick (right) in GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN's *Number 1, The Plaza*, directed by Hester Chillingworth. Photograph: Ludovic des Cognets

carry drinks; wine for McCormick and whisky for Pick. They chat with the audience and sing musical numbers from Willy Russell's 1983 musical *Blood Brothers*, about twins separated at birth, one raised in wealth, and one in poverty. They give us a tour of their flat. They argue, wrestle, and throw and smear copious quantities of a substance that they present as shit – and that looks like shit – all over the stage and all over each other. Their dresses ride up and they are not wearing underwear (see figure 2). Reviewer Stewart Pringle observes that, though the show is billed as “an evening with”, “it’s more like a night in, one that’s gone on too long and devolved into karaoke and re-criminations” (Pringle 2015). According to THEVAN’s own publicity, “Someone’s left a passive aggressive note on the kitchen table; it’s about entitlement, property and privacy. Welcome to the show home, everyone. *Number 1, The Plaza* is a souvenir album from a joyride through extravaganza, cabaret, reality, live art, theatre and filth” (GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN n.d.b.).

*Number 1, The Plaza* presents a fantasy of urban “good life” featuring a swanky address, stylish design, dressing up and cocktails. But this is definitely a fantasy, at best only partially realised, more likely nowhere near achieved. In the dichotomy of those who have and those who have not invoked by this show’s references to *Blood Brothers*, McCormick and Pick are have-nots who fantasise about a better life. They wear party dresses, but their diets reportedly feature the inexpensive, carbohydrate-rich staples of children and students: pasta and pasties. They carry their “shit” in Tupperware, one of the most important tools of the thrifty household. Their flat is literally shitty. And most importantly, though their relationship has elements of af-



FIGURE 2 Lucy McCormick (left) and Jennifer Pick (right) in GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN's *Number 1, The Plaza*, directed by Hester Chillingworth. Photograph: Ludovic des Cognets

fection, camaraderie, and collaboration, Pick repeatedly puts down McCormick, the women fight, verbally and physically, and they smear each other with shit. There is affection here, but also dislike and punishment. Why do they live together? This is not the fun-times flat-share imagined in the NBC TV sitcom *Friends* that ran for a decade from 1994. This is the hard times of the situation tragedy of young women's urban lives in the UK in the twenty-teens.

*Number 1, The Plaza* is not a bleeding-heart plea for pity; Pick and McCormick's aggressive self-exposure, shit-slinging, and clear preference for alcohol leave no room for tea and sympathy; as much as it is the performance personae who fail to achieve the good life, it is the audience who are positioned to feel uncomfortable. However, the show does stage a metatheatrical exposé of the pressures on and in this pair's relationship and on whatever hope they might have for conventional fantasies of a good life that neoliberal contexts have put so far beyond the means of so many. *Number 1, the Plaza* playfully and aggressively makes public so much that would be private; it reveals how these women interact behind closed doors, it exposes their bodies, and it displays their shit. In so doing, the show explores the troubled dynamic between propriety and its near-namesake property, between public and private in contemporary culture.<sup>17</sup> These performers work hard to take charge of those public/private dynamics but these dynamics ultimately do not advantage people such as these in contem-

<sup>17</sup> I am grateful to Lynne McCarthy for her work on property rights that informs my thinking here.

porary neoliberal culture. The uncomfortable affect the show produces places performers and audience within these failing, unstable conditions that fail nothing so much as they fail social reciprocity. Reviewer Billy Barrett concludes, “The sight of two performers pretending to be in a luxury London pad while actually rolling around in sewage is a pretty grim sign of the times” (Barrett 2014).

### SH!T THEATRE’S LETTERS TO WINDSOR HOUSE

*Letters to Windsor House* premiered in summer 2016 by London-based Sh!t Theatre and also addressed the housing crisis, particularly its effects on so-called Generation Rent and on the friendship of the Sh!t’s two members, Louise Mothersole and Rebecca Biscuit. This show too made visible the precarity of housing now, but its narrative and performance forms especially allowed for detailed exploration of some of the emotional damage caused by housing insecurity. Sh!t Theatre describe the show in their typical semi-ironic style as a “Detective show for Generation Rent” (Sh!t Theatre n.d.). For me, the show is funny and ironic but also painfully revealing about how the headline-grabbing but abstract “housing crisis” actually manifests in acute, traumatising, and tragic personal pressures, especially on friendship.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Sh!t Theatre’s Rebecca Biscuit and Louise Mothersole describe making *Letters to Windsor House* in detail with me in my podcast *Stage Left with Jen Harvie*, episode 1, “Sh!t Theatre” (Harvie 2017).

Sh!t Theatre replace the “i” in Shit with an exclamation mark. Duo Mothersole and Biscuit have been making work together since at least 2010 (Sh!t Theatre n.d.). They perform as “themselves”, use direct address, and mix comic style with sequences of song in a kind of vaudeville, addressing political issues such as underemployment head on. They perform in partial drag, always appearing in full-face make-up that often makes Mothersole look surprised and Biscuit slightly displeased. They usually wear matching cheap and unglamorous costumes – shirts, shorts and bandanas in *Letters to Windsor House* (see figure 3).

As the opening sequence of *Letters to Windsor House* makes clear, Windsor House is the actual and quite run-down ex-local authority flat Mothersole and Biscuit live in in a poor area in north London, though this building once had illusions of grandeur, being named after a royal castle, as are its neighbours, Buckingham House and Holyrood House (Sh!t Theatre 2017, 19-20). The show’s opening sequence is accompanied by slide images and illustrates how Windsor House is surrounded by poverty and deprivation: a psychiatric hospital, the visibly poorly resourced St John’s Deaf Centre, a homeless encampment, and a hotel with bedbugs rated “1.5 out of 5 on TripAdvisor” (idem, 23-24). Also nearby are two new luxury housing developments on the site of former social housing, “55% of which have been pre-sold to investors in Singapore”, notes Mothersole (idem, 24).

*Letters to Windsor House* features slide shows, comic action with cardboard boxes and a bouncy sofa, brass instruments, a disco light, and harmonised songs, many from Lionel Bart’s 1960 musical *Oliver!* based on Charles Dickens’ 1837-9 novel *Oli-*



FIGURE 3 Sh!t Theatre's Louise Mothersole (left) and Rebecca Biscuit (right) in *Letters to Windsor House* / Photograph: The Other Richard

*ver Twist*. Through the evidence presented by previous tenants' mountains of accumulated mail, the show narrates Biscuit and Mothersole's investigation into the lives of those many previous tenants. What emerges is a picture of people "hailed" by their mail as would-be tax-payers, precarious workers, debtors, and consumers, as most mail is from advertisers, former employers, and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs – the UK's tax-collecting agency. Eventually, Mothersole and Biscuit open some mail and extrapolate from it to concoct former tenants' life stories marked by underemployment and comparatively minor league tax evasion amongst a class of Generation Renters who live in housing insecurity. The Sh!ts' treatment of other people's mail ultimately points up not their disrespect for other people's property but rather the cruel displacements, acute instability and often undesired hypermobility that are experienced by so many in the unregulated commercial rental sector. Here, personal communications – and implicitly, personal identities – literally become part of the collateral damage, where rents rise frequently and rapidly and tenants are forced to move even faster in search of affordable accommodation.

Eventually, Mothersole and Biscuit discover that their landlord is illegally subletting his council flat to them, implicating Mothersole and Biscuit who are nevertheless trapped. They cannot afford to move, though in many ways they would like to: the flat is small, with little privacy and no social space besides the kitchen. They are trapped in a rental limbo that is not only potentially criminal but developmental. One previous male tenant receives leaflets for baby formula. Speculating why, they ultimately conclude that it is for his own consumption:

L[ouise]: Simplest explanation –

B[ecca]: Rob Jecock was receiving baby milk,  
Rob Jecock is an

*Resigned nods:*

B & L: Adult baby. (idem, 54; emphasis original)

It is a reasonable conclusion in an economy which inhibits independent adult living, infantilising its citizens. Biscuit and Mothersole, too, play dress-up, jump on the furniture, and build shelters out of cardboard (idem, 31, 60). They present a slide from Stephanie Polsky's book *Ignoble Displacement*:

There are many similarities between the Victorian liberal agenda and the neoliberal agenda of the present-era Cameron government concerning the housing of low-income people. The logic of contemporary Conservatism is truly Dickensian: their main concern is to prevent the poor from making demands on society.

(cited in Sh!t Theatre 2017, 46)

Mothersole and Biscuit are certainly neglected by the state, and likely abandoned by it. In these circumstances, they have become mutually dependent, over-attached, and unable to separate: Biscuit responds to Mothersole's private messages (idem, 32); neither can move out or on. "You feel responsible for my welfare", says Mothersole; "I feel trapped", says Biscuit (idem, 52-3). Their relationship is mutually sustaining, but also, in the circumstances, mutually constraining (see figure 4).

It is not only citizens who cannot mature in these contexts. Britain itself has regressed, as the show makes repeated resonant references to the pre-Welfare State of Victorian London depicted by Charles Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Oliver Twist*. An audio bed of the song “Consider Yourself” from the musical adaptation *Oliver!* reminds audiences how the character Fagan traps vulnerable children in his exploitative criminal enterprise by giving them something approximating love: “Consider yourself at home! Consider yourself one of the family” (idem, 30). *Letters to Windsor House* stages Fagan as commensurate with the Sh!ts’ criminal landlord; hateful, inescapable but also himself a victim of disadvantageous circumstances, possibly himself also a Generation Renter.

Repeatedly, the show poses contrasts between fantasies and realities of British life. The fantasies are posed most audaciously by a promotional video for the new private development coming soon near Windsor House, a video which visually implies that the location is near Harrods department store and a branch of Marks and Spencer – it is not – and claims the area is a sort of rural idyll, “a beautiful piece of rural England”; it is not (idem, 40). To semi-occupy these fantasies of bygone British leisure and plenitude, the Sh!ts do Morris dancing and play Rule Britannia (badly) on brass instruments. As I discuss below and as illustrated in figure 5, they literally inhabit red pillar box post boxes, a British design icon spread throughout its empire. The Sh!ts wear “Ladies Printed Country Blouses” from a “really upmarket Scottish clothing company” (idem, 69) that their flat has received promotional post for; the blouses are tastefully patterned with animals such as grouse and pheasant, animals



FIGURE 4 Sh!t Theatre’s Louise Mothersole in the arms of Rebecca Biscuit in *Letters to Windsor House* / Photograph: The Other Richard

“where the plural is the same as the singular”, and animals “you can shoot” (idem, 70). In contrast to those fantasy pseudo-memories of British/London life hinting at bucolic and leisured rural living, the Sh!ts show locally-recorded videos and photos of squalid dumped garbage, homeless housing encampments, drug-taking in a phone box, and atrocious housing conditions. *Letters’* set is crowded by cardboard boxes, which signify as the playthings of their childlike selves, but also as homeless housing and discarded, accumulated rubbish (see figure 1). They show the fantasy precisely as fantasy. They jump on the furniture, “*as though trying to grab for something just slightly out of reach*” (idem, 46; italics original in stage direction).

Caught in a situation tragedy, Mothersole and Biscuit cannot prevent themselves repeatedly imagining tragic, even melodramatic conclusions to the previous tenants’ stories. They imagine that a new mother dies (idem, 55); a man gets caught up with the Turkish mafia and becomes so stressed, he suffers a debilitating stroke (idem, 48-51). The real tragedy that unfolds is that of Mothersole and Biscuit’s friendship, which strains under the pressure of their housing insecurity. Mothersole fantasises that they are a family; Biscuit wants more independence.

In one of the most poignant sets of sequences of the performance, Mothersole and Biscuit stand on far sides of the stage and don cardboard constructions shaped and painted in loving detail as red pillar box post boxes, with Queen Elizabeth II’s E II R insignia replaced with a carefully crafted B & L for Becca and Louise. They alternate peering and speaking through the postal slots (idem, 32-3; 52-3; 81-2; see figure 5). Each of them

has one hand accessible through a side of the box, enabling them to hold and read letters. With physical and verbal awkwardness, they read these letters to each other, confessing their strong but conflicting feelings about living together: Mothersole wants to sustain the mutual dependence; Biscuit wants to, but cannot, move on; they love each other; but it is not easy. These are parts of what the housing crisis does: inhibit movement, inhibit expression, restrict development, and put acute, potentially traumatising pressure on friendships.

## CONCLUSIONS

This work by artists of Generation Rent indicting the conditions they are living in is a lo-fi theatre of economy with a narrative which explicitly addresses the attractions of a better quality of independent living and the limitations of living without that as well as the restrictions to achieving it. The work narrates the particular pressures on relationships that current conditions produce. Especially in the case of *GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN*, the work is unabashedly scatological, not politely smoothing over the conditions of oppression, but proliferating, smearing, and spreading them. Both companies transgress conventional proprieties, *THEVAN* physically and the Sh!ts in stories about their sex lives and relationships and in opening other people’s mail. These revelations put pressures on conventions of propriety, privacy, and privacy’s putative opposite of publicness, all in an underlying context of compromised property and social relations. Both companies’ performance of the double act dem-



FIGURE 5 Sh!t Theatre's Louise Mothersole in *Letters to Windsor House* / Photograph: The Other Richard

onstrates strong homosocial, possibly queer, mutual support as well as the acute, needling pressures that these dark times put on all forms of kinship networks. The duo form also allows both companies to present ambivalence, encapsulating outlooks both more “optimistic” or hopeful – personified by McCormick and Mothersole – and “pessimistic” – in Pick and Biscuit. And though these works are playful, funny, energetic, surprising, amusing, and visually rich, they are also dark, un-optimistic situation-tragedy cabarets. They feature shit and beat-up cardboard boxes. Their women are powerful but they are also infantilised and suffering. These shows are savage, uncomfortable indictments of the impasses these young women of Generation Rent – and so many others – find themselves in in this awful age of neoliberal austerity. These performances and the artworks discussed above show the housing crisis and show its discomfort and pain, things we need to see more clearly to be motivated to act for change.

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