

Between Utility and Uselessness

Jonathan Orlek

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As you enter Queensgate Market there are no immediate views of the characteristic curved concrete roof. No longer outside and not yet in view of these voluminous and exposed forms, a suspended ceiling hangs low, sometimes in reach, with electrical cables slipping through its gaps. At ground level market stall boxes, arranged in back-to-back rows, create un-named streets and unusual neighbours. Their customised interiors are illuminated from inside and above by arrays of fluorescent strips. As I wander through the market, perpetually and deliberately lost, it is this transitional space—in which behaviours are closer and more amplified than the rest of the market—which draws my interest. It is unavoidable. It doesn't matter which entrance you pick.

An exhibition space called 'Market Gallery' is being inserted into this in-between space, as part of *Temporary Contemporary*, a new initiative to activate an interest in art, design and architecture. The Market Gallery will occupy three otherwise vacant units. Behind well-used metal shuttering and a display of unusual woollen hats, sheets of MDF are being neatly chamfered, stud partitions constructed, messy sinks and storage space concealed with care. Cables hang more deliberately. It is to be a white cube space, more or less, a space within a space. I have been asked to write something for the inaugural exhibition—*Place, Space, Action*—and in anticipation have come to the market as it is being quietly transformed. I am observing the market and its participants as an initial step towards speculating on what *Temporary Contemporary* might offer as an initiative for creating spaces of action. The open call for *Place, Space, Action* requested works which measured 12 x 12 x 12 inches, raising questions about the boundaries of art objects and their relationship to less tangible social and psychic spatialities.

People participate in the everyday workings of the market in different ways. There are some who walk through the space with direction. Others more slowly, carrying recent purchases disguised in mismatching plastic bags. A few vendors are present, busying themselves by unloading, packing and rearranging stock, but most are largely out of sight, concealed by installations of rolled up rugs, densely hanging hardware, and thinly partitioned offices. I am surprised not to find more visitors browsing, idling, observing, wasting time, riffing through. Everything and everyone seems to have entered into Queensgate Market with a specific and predetermined purpose. And of course, in coming here to write through the space, so have I.

I have convinced a friend to join me, invited a new participant to the market with the promise of lunch. Surrounded by uncategorised options—represented through hybrid forms (photography, dry wipe marker, printed text, laminate, emoji, cartoon)—I'm offered a quote from Jessica Friedmann's *Things that helped*, the book he is currently reading:

*The reflective quality is there because we are witnessing what remains of another person's creative act, and through the artistic object we find ourselves embroiled in the drama of self and other. This back-and-forth dialectic between spectator and artwork occurs despite the fact that a painting, sculpture, or drawing is also just a thing, an object like any other in the material world. [...] It is not a tool. We can't eat with it. Art is useless.*¹

Read softly but with conviction, it is almost a performance. He knows what he is doing, and I know this is bait: he is an activist and thinks me to be closer to an architect. I discover later that the text belongs to someone else, he is quoting a quote. It has been clipped, perhaps a little harshly. The next line would have read: '*I am well aware that with architecture, for example, this becomes murky.*'² So much could be written in between.

Artist-led activities have been hosted within many indoor markets in Yorkshire. In 2006, Zoë Sawyer and Anna Tonks set up *theartmarket*. They moved into a unit in the Merrion Centre, in Leeds, for two years and used the space to run workshops, residencies and exhibitions. These activities frequently played with the expectations of a market stall. Visitors were allowed to handle and rearrange paintings in the space, exchange artworks and buy leftover stock. The ability for art to construct and make visible diverse economies of exchange was also the focus for 'Trade Show', a group exhibition at Eastside projects in 2013, curated by Gavin Wade and Kathrin Böhm. Using J. K. Gibson-Graham's illustration of an 'economic iceberg', the exhibition reimagined Eastside projects as a trading show of alternatives to '*paid wage labour; production for markets; capitalist business.*' Many of the projects exhibited, including *International Village Shop* by Myvillages and *Harrods Fish Counter* by Sam Curtis, sought to produce alternative economic exchanges by blurring local trading systems with artistic processes. In the same year, just before its controversial demolition, a stall in Castle Market, Sheffield, was turned into a residency space by Victoria Lucas during *Art Sheffield*. The film, book and archival project which resulted from this residency captured the dying moments of a vibrant building and its social life, and questioned the architectural and sociological motivations for it. In 2014 and 2016, Katie Etheridge and Simon Persighetti took over one of the market stalls in Kirkgate Market, another indoor market in Leeds, during Compass Festival. Visitors to the Personal Shopper market stall were encouraged to take '*miss-guided*' tours of the market, to experience the space through its many users. These tour performances were part of a three year project called *Personal Shopper* and the long-term engagement of the artists in the market allowed sensory experiences, memories and personal narratives of others to be called upon.

These examples have made use of specific markets and trans-local market economies as sites for artistic intervention, analysis and appropriation. Participatory processes were designed to alter the expectations of market visitors, often in an attempt to challenge dominant and abstract forms of (market) exchange. Framed in this way, and using the lexicon developed by art theorist Stephen Wright, these projects could be labelled as '*art-related*', rather than '*art-specific*', since artistic skills and competencies were deployed with the aim gaining '*bite in the real*'.³ Wright argues that these stealthy art-related projects, '*cannot be adequately understood unless their primary ambition to produce a use-value is taken into account*'.⁴ As a contrast, the division between the Market Gallery and the utility of Queensgate Market is clear: there will be no mistaking art for non-art, invigilators for hiding rug vendors. This division has the potential to pull visitors outside of everyday realities and produce a space of potential—to make, theorise, act (differently). It will bring audiences, as well as participants, into the indoor market; the effects and consequences of this are yet to be determined.

In the centre of Queensgate Market, where it is most spacious, is a café. It arrives, predictably, at the point of disorientation. Everything which is ordered here is presented on a blue plastic tray. Continually replenished and in wait of a purchase, it feels inappropriate to leave this behind, reject it at its point of supposed utility. I catch myself holding a solitary coffee securely in one hand and pretending to use my tray with the other. '*Durable and resilient to withstand the rigours of commercial use.*' It measures 12 x 16 inches; not quite, but coming close, I think.

¹ Siri Hustvedt, *Living, Thinking, Looking* (London: Sceptre, 2013), 339. As quoted in Jessica Friedmann, *Things That Helped: Essays* (Scribe UK, 2017).

² Hustvedt, *Living, Thinking, Looking*, 339.

³ Stephen Wright, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership* (The Hague: Van Abbemuseum, 2014).

⁴ Wright, 53.