

# FACTORIES, LANYARDS AND ICEBERGS: A DISCUSSION OF TRADE SHOW

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## Introduction

'Trade Show' is an exhibition, research project and proposition. This essay documents its first iteration at Eastside Projects in Birmingham during 2013/14, describing and analysing some of the artworks commissioned and conversations that resulted from the exhibition. It looks at the context, both geographic and intellectual, within which 'Trade Show' was first seen. Like the project it articulates certain changes in local industry, the shape of international production and trade and the language of the global economy. It explores the roles of art and artists in economic activity.

## City of a Thousand Trades

Birmingham has a rich history of trade. Termed 'the workshop of the world' by proud Victorian Brummies the city's nickname was the 'city of a thousand trades'. *Trade* in this phrase refers to the activity of manufacture carried out by a skilled workforce. *One can have a trade or be something by trade*. Used in this way the word indicates a sense of ownership that contributes to the production of identity and self-worth; to become a tradesperson is to acquire particular status through the rigorous development of skills.

Written by William Morris in 1884 for 'Justice', 'A Factory As It Might Be' described a holistic approach to employment in which *workers* could be thought of as *people* with a right to education, health, a sense of community and salubrious working and living conditions.<sup>1</sup> In this vision part of the reason to employ should be to invest in a skilled workforce of specialist tradespeople who do not fulfil drone-like hours of repetitious work. Opened 11 years after this text was published George Cadbury's Bournville, a factory and purpose-built 'village' on the outskirts of Birmingham, was an attempt at realising a similarly humanist approach to employment.

## City of Lanyards

As a noun trade means 'the buying and selling of goods and services' and as a verb it means to 'buy or sell goods or services' and to 'exchange, typically as a commercial transaction'.<sup>2</sup> A shift in the shape of industry, economics and employment in British cities has gone hand in hand with a shift in the use of the word *trade*. Birmingham, for example, has been regenerated from a city of *trades* to a city of *trade*, a place of commerce.

In 1994 the anarchist and political theorist Colin Ward published 'The Factory We Never Had', a response to 'A Factory As It Might Be' that charts the failure of Morris'

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<sup>1</sup> William Morris & Colin Ward (1994), *A Factory As It Might Be & The Factory We Never Had*, Mushroom Bookshop, Nottingham

<sup>2</sup> Oxford English Dictionary (2001), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1519

vision to take hold. Ward wrote that 'if you travel in Morris' footsteps through industrial Britain in the 1990s you are overwhelmed by dereliction.'<sup>3</sup> Through 'retail-led regeneration' or 'culture-led regeneration' the economic regeneration of British cities links to a predominant commercialisation.

Commerce, retail, culture and heritage have become the identity shaping commodities and desirable attributes with which contemporary cities sell themselves. One of Birmingham's post-industrial 'offers' is the conference centre. The writer and broadcaster Jonathan Meades portrays Birmingham as a 'City of Lanyards' dominated by 'business tourists'.<sup>4</sup> Birmingham's new industry, he claims, 'is talking rather than doing... There is no profession, trade or industry which misses an opportunity to convene. There is no firm whose staff have not enjoyed protracted exhortation and very real bonding somewhere in Brum.'<sup>5</sup>

### **Fields, Factories and Workshops**

Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin's 1899 study 'Fields, Factories and Workshops' describes a plethora of activity found alongside that of large factories. Some of this is work carried out in the home (i.e. weaving, working in wood, metal and bone) by the whole family, some is carried out in small, private workshops and some by small collectives working in factories that they 'maintain themselves or hire in association'.<sup>6</sup> He states that within this mixed economy 'hundreds of petty traders are found in the suburbs and slums of the big cities, and larger portions of the populations of several towns, such as Sheffield and Birmingham'.<sup>7</sup> An emphasis on large-scale factory production does not take into account this breadth of scale in manufacture and economic diversity.

In a new essay, 'Economic meltdown, or what an iceberg can tell us about the economy', J.K. Gibson-Graham (pen name of the feminist political economists, Katherine Gibson and the late Julie Graham) uses the metaphor of an iceberg to describe how unacknowledged or hidden activity constitutes the majority of our economy. In this image the 'tip' represents the visible activity associated with factory production, industry and global finance.<sup>8</sup> Although Birmingham has much disused industrial space, Digbeth and the Jewellery Quarter maintain many specialist small scale manufacturing businesses. Birmingham's most highly specialised, artisanal businesses in which lone, self-employed people form small workshops appear to have proven to be more resilient than their monolithic factory cousins.

### **Trade Show: one site in a network of production and exchange**

'Trade Show' was first aired at Eastside Projects, an artist-led space in Birmingham's still-industrial zone, Digbeth. It is *from* and *within* the context outlined that 'Trade Show' emerged and was seen. But it is important to note that 'Trade Show' was - and is - not *about* Birmingham. It is not about any one place but about relationships between places, contexts, sites and modes of production, consumption and communication. It was developed as a way of enacting the possibility of adopting more fluid roles within production, negotiation and consumption.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 27

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Meades (9 March 2014), Entertaining Ideas: Jonathan Meades: On Birmingham, public talk at Town Hall, Birmingham

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Meades, Birmingham, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=glpXvufqbuM> accessed on April 8 2014

<sup>6</sup> Peter Kropotkin, Fields, Factories and Workshops

<https://archive.org/stream/cu31924032409710#page/n145/mode/2up> accessed April 23 2014

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> J.K. Gibson-Graham (2013) Economic meltdown, or what an iceberg can tell us about the economy, Eastside Projects, Birmingham

The project was conceived and curated by two people: the artist, Kathrin Böhm, whose conceptual and socially engaged projects form an international, often itinerant practice; and the artist-curator and Director of Eastside Projects, Gavin Wade, who uses his rootedness in Birmingham and his programme at the gallery as a position from which to look outwards and bring people in, making the space and its programme symbiotically permeable and internationally connected. 'Trade Show' was developed as a project that would continue beyond its time at Eastside Projects, as a show that would travel to other places and as a set of propositions that could insert themselves into different contexts.

In 2014 aspects of the project travelled to Colombes, on the outskirts of Paris, where they were seen in the context of R-Urban, a 'bottom-up strategy that explores... urban resilience by introducing a network of resident-run facilities' to create dialogue between fields of activity including economics, housing, urban agriculture and culture.<sup>9</sup> This project is coordinated by atelier d'architecture autogérée (aaa), a collective founded by Constantin Petcou and Doina Petrescu in 2001.

A web of exchanges of the tangible and intangible, quantifiable and unquantifiable lies behind every work of art produced, exhibition curated and sale of artwork made. 'Trade Show' attempts to make visible some of these conversations and relationships. It makes the faceless exchanges that happen behind the veil of international big business more human by utilising a spider's web of people to convey ideas and dialogue through different networks and locations. In a sense it exhibits the form of trade routes.

'Feral Trade', a 'grocery business and public experiment' led by Kate Rich, one of the projects presented in 'Trade Show', puts this proposition into practice by making visible the interactions and journeys behind the trade of goods.<sup>10</sup> The 'Feral Trade' products are available only through trade routes that operate on a social, personal level. Utilising individuals' travel to deliver products by hand it harnesses 'the surplus freight of existing travel'.<sup>11</sup> The project highlights the routes hidden within each pack of coffee that, like most chains of transaction, generally go unobserved.

### **Shops, products and trade: the language of Trade Show**

The language of 'Trade Show' is important. Its title references trade fairs, or industry shows, sites of the display of technological or artisanal goods that have their origins in eighteenth century World Fairs. J.K. Gibson-Graham's newly commissioned essay, a jargon-free exploration of trade, exchange and labour couches 'Trade Show' in clear terms. Part of the power of economics lies in an assumption, by the great mass of us who are not economists, that it is not something to be understood, that it is separate from our lives.

'Trade Show' asks that we strip economics of the power it yields through means of alienation in order that we can think of trade and transactions in more concrete, less abstract terms. As Gibson-Graham points out: 'The more we go along with the idea of the economy as an engine that must be fuelled by growth, the more we are locked into imagining ourselves as individual cogs - economic actors only if we work to consume. The machine-economy vision ignores the myriad ways that people and organisations interact...'.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> R-Urban, <http://r-urban.net/en/sample-page/> accessed 18 April 2014

<sup>10</sup> Feral Trade, <http://www.feraltrade.org/statement/> accessed 18 April 2014

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Gibson-Graham (2013), Economic meltdown, or what an iceberg can tell us about the economy, Eastside Projects, Birmingham

Böhm's ambition 'is to reclaim the language and practices of economy and trade'.<sup>13</sup> By using 'terms related to known spaces [to] evoke strong and concrete images and memories' she aims to make economics more tangible.<sup>14</sup> This policy of adopting clear, unspecialised language is part of an attempt to develop a more human understanding of economics in which peoples' labours and interactions are understood to be part of a diverse economic system: think Kropotkin's rich portrait and Gibson-Graham's iceberg, not the monolith factory.

'Trade Show' does not propose an alternative economic system; it aims to highlight existing conditions and practices, take different routes through prevailing structures and exercising models for questioning. It posits that when we take models for granted we can be taken for granted. Richard Douthwaite's briefing, 'The Ecology of Money' begins with a provocation: 'Most people think that there's only one type of money because one type is all they've ever known.'<sup>15</sup> 'Trade Show' suggests that the function of art should be to question assumptions like these.

### **'Is art an economic activity?'**<sup>16</sup>

This question launches the artist collective Freee's polemical pamphlet 'Economists are Wrong'. Freee claim that economists begin with an assumption that art is an economic activity. 'Trade Show' starts with the provocation that art is connected to economic activity and has economic functions, but that it has many other roles besides. It states that art's economic involvement does not necessitate its use as commodity and begins with the proposition that because value and exchange are at the heart of artistic activity art can be critical of their existing structures. At Eastside Projects 'Trade Show' showed only 'art projects that actually [traded], where negotiation and trade [made] the piece'. Böhm and Wade 'didn't want to make a show about commenting [on] or simply reflecting trade'.<sup>17</sup>

'Trade Show' does not attempt to distance itself from trade and economics, but to enter into a conversation about them. In an introduction to the show at Eastside Projects Wade stated that it was an 'attempt to demystify' not to devalue 'what is happening in capitalism', a way of stating that we 'value existing models too highly' and a method of questioning 'how art can approach that, not in an aggressive way, but [through] generosity and exchange'.<sup>18</sup>

### **Transparency of operation**

Morris believed that 'the factory could supply [an] educational want by showing the general public how its goods are made'.<sup>19</sup> In this sense 'Trade Show' is a Morris-esq factory for art. Ward explains that Morris 'anticipated the principle that...the American anarchist Paul Goodman called the "transparency of operation"', the idea that the technology of a product should not be so abstract that its mechanisms are mystifying to its user.<sup>20</sup> 'Trade Show' makes visible some of art's systems of production, exchange and consumption.

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<sup>13</sup> Kathrin Böhm (June 2013), Research Paper and Report for R-Urban

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Douthwaite (1999), *The Ecology of Money*, Green Books, Bristol, 9

<sup>16</sup> Freee (2011), *Economists Are Wrong!* Eastside Projects, Birmingham

<sup>17</sup> Kathrin Böhm & Gavin Wade (10 December 2013) Curators Introduction, Eastside Projects, Birmingham

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> William Morris & Colin Ward (1994), *A Factory As It Might Be & The Factory We Never Had*, Mushroom Bookshop, Nottingham, 28

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 28

As part of an aim to diversify funding in this time of funding cuts, many public galleries have begun to appropriate commercial models. A drive to sell artworks, albeit in low-risk, multiple form was documented in 'Trade Show' by the 'Editions Shop UK', which merged prints from commercial and public galleries in a salon hang so that it became impossible to know which works come from where.



'Editions Shop UK'. Stuart Whipps, courtesy of Eastside Projects.

### **Gregg's beige, Iceland red, Lloyd's Pharmacy white**

For 'Trade Show' the exterior of Eastside Projects became an advertising space awash with letting-agent style signs that advertised the projects within the exhibition. This utilisation of the building's façade aped the incessant appropriation of public space for advertising. Inside the gallery these signs continued, punctuating the walls of the main gallery space. The programme at Eastside Projects has always created a dialogue between interior and exterior as part of its desire to unpick and rework the notion of the gallery as a public space.

The next work encountered was the 'Trade Entrance', a new door fabricated especially for the exhibition that reinstated a bricked-up doorway to offer visitors a choice of entrance, asking: are you a gallery or a trade customer? Fabricated close to the gallery the door's metal frame utilised the colours found to hand in the manufacturer's workshop: Gregg's beige, Iceland red, Lloyd's Pharmacy white. The result was a bespoke product that borrowed from and amalgamated the visual language of high street companies. No branding company in their right mind would have commissioned such a beast. But somehow for 'Trade Show' it worked.



'Trade Entrance'. Stuart Whipps, courtesy of Eastside Projects.

The 'Open Shop' counter, a sort of open mic space for local producers and traders was designed by British Artist-Designer Martino Gamper as part of a new welcome desk. The door, the welcome desk and Myvillages' 'market stall' were firmly sited, through their production - as the gallery is, through its location and physicality as an ex-industrial space - in Digbeth, Birmingham's still-industrial area. Importantly the first business to take up residence in the 'Open Shop' was Avonstar, Digbeth's go-to guys for artists' fabrication.

### Layered

Each exhibition at Eastside Projects reworks the physicality of the space, often leaving a layer or remnant behind. For this show the giant concrete plinth poured by Mike Nelson for his solo exhibition in 2012 became a trading floor. To those visiting for the first time this 'feature' of the space may have been read as something harking from the building's manufacturing days, something that has always been in there, but for the gallery's regulars it is part of a narrative of artworks and conversations produced, adapted and made useful by and for the gallery's activities. The new welcome desk and the show's 'Trade Entrance' were reconfigured for Eastside Project's next exhibition and will continue to contribute to the life of the space.

### The Centre for Innovative and Radical Fishmongery

Many of the objects, videos, installations and documents that constituted the first iteration of 'Trade Show' embodied the conversations and activities of socially engaged projects and activity that had happened previously or that would happen elsewhere. For 'Trade Show' the Myvillages' 'International Village Shop' made a new market-stall to house their installation. Founded in 2003 by Kathrin Böhm, Wapke Feenstra and Antje Schiffers, Myvillages is a group that works with rural locations as sites of production.<sup>21</sup> The 'International Village



'Trade Entrance'. Stuart Whipps, courtesy of Eastside Projects.

<sup>21</sup> Myvillages, <http://www.myvillages.org/index.php?a=about> accessed on April 8 2014

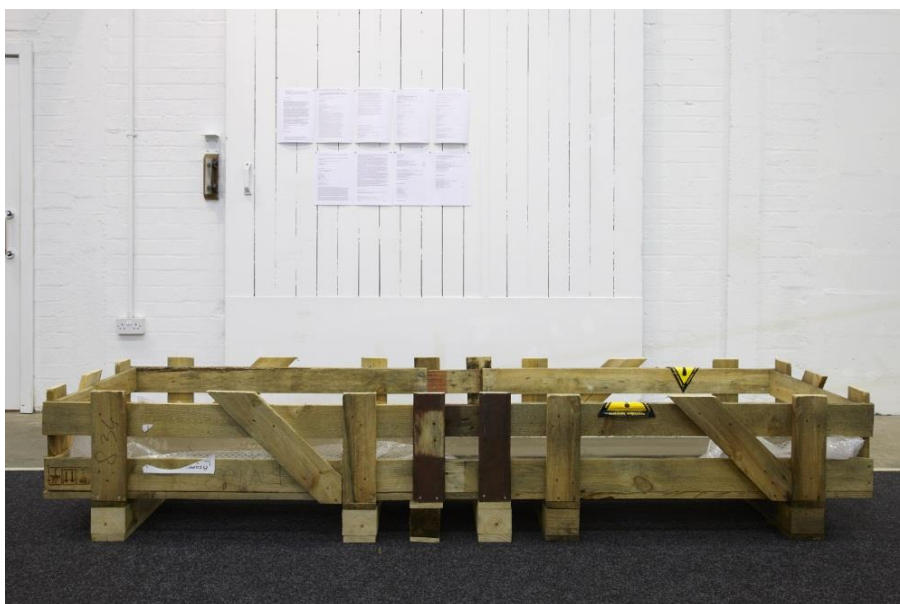


Shop' (initiated in 2007) is an itinerant project that develops spaces for the consumption of existing and newly developed products. The products come from a process of sustained dialogue with communities about how to represent certain histories and characteristics of the place in which they live.



'International Village Shop'. Stuart Whipps, courtesy of Eastside Projects.

Jens Haaning's 'Redistribution (Birmingham - Karachi)', a new work commissioned for 'Trade Show', took the form of a crated strip light unit and documentation of written correspondence printed on A4 paper. This was one of the show's more oblique works. An involved engagement with it yielded the rewarding narrative of an inquiry into resources, inequalities and environmental concerns. The piece proposed to replace the light fittings at Eastside Projects and send the obsolete fixtures to be used in Karachi, Pakistan. Presented in the form of a funding application to the Danish Arts Council it revealed the language of international arts funding. Rather than proposing a tidy, generous circle of exchange the work entered into existing imbalanced power relationships between nations and their resources and facilities.



'Redistribution (Birmingham - Karachi)'. Stuart Whipps, courtesy of Eastside Projects.

Sam Curtis' work formed a visually compelling document of subversive activity. Two videos, 'Ikea' and 'Harrods Fish Counter', and a new performance at Birmingham's Indoor Market explored the realm of commercial display and its hierarchies of power. The videos document what Curtis terms 'residencies' at Ikea and the Harrods fish counter during which, by becoming an employee, he learnt the trade of these commercial contexts and co-opted their systems of display. In Harrods the fish counter is unusual for its creative freedom. In a heavily branded shop it is the only department in which the employees have control over their displays. In Birmingham, Curtis developed his project, 'The Centre for Innovative and Radical Fishmongery', as a public competition in which local fishmongers were tested for their speed and knife skills.



'The Centre for Innovative and Radical Fishmongery'.  
Courtesy of Eastside Projects.

As well as the objects, images and structures within the gallery space 'Trade Show' was formed of activities, performances and events. Like any good socially engaged show it was a forum for discussion. Importantly though, the project was not a talking shop, but a platform for testing prototypes and exercising methods of working. In it chairs were made as part of CASCO's contribution, 'Sitting Is a Verb', texts were discussed at Book Club, local traders set up in the 'Open Shop' and Kate Rich brought her 'Feral Trade' café to the space. These activities, like 'Trade Show' in its entirety, offered an opportunity to subvert existing models, trial approaches, exchange ideas and produce and distribute activity.

### **The Tenets of Trade Show**

We will conclude with a selection of rules from the 'Code of Trade' that Böhm drew up for the R-Urban shop. As 'Trade Show' continues these should be three of its guiding principles:

No cheating.

No greed.

And definitely no cup-cakes.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Kathrin Böhm (June 2013), Research Paper and Report for R-Urban