

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Teesside University		
Unit of Assessment: 32		
Title of case study: Rethinking Curatorial Practice and the Role of Museums through Art in Action		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2014 to 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Hudson, Alistair Amado, Joao Miguel Morgan, Elinor Stewart, Paul	Director of MIMA Senior Curator Head of Programmes Senior Lecturer in Fine Art	Oct 2014 to Feb 2018 May 2015 to Jun 2018 May 2015 to present Feb 2018 to Sep 2020
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015 to 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		

1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

The constituent-led and engaged approach to curatorial practice devised and implemented at Teesside University's Middlesbrough Museum of Modern Art has stimulated sector discussion on the role of museums and galleries (Arts Council England, Wellcome Collection); shaped the curatorial practice of museums and galleries (Galleria Moderna) and enhanced cultural engagement and understanding with a diverse range of regional audiences through the design and development of exhibitions and events held at the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art on topics of importance to local audiences such as migration, regional industry, and the natural world, evoking resonant links between past, present and future through 57 exhibitions and 407 events.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

Since 2014, researchers at the Centre for Creativity and Culture have undertaken curatorial research on the role of museums and galleries, developing and refining the concept of a "useful" and constituent-engaged museum that is driven by regional approaches to, and understandings of, creativity, heritage, and place. Merging curatorial theory with curatorial practice, the research team have tested, embedded and shared their research through Teesside University's Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (MIMA).

Research-led exhibitions at MIMA, such as Localism (2015), If All Relations Were To Reach Equilibrium This Building Would Dissolve (2016), This is Water (2018), and Fragile Earth (2019) have each sought to shift curatorial focus away from traditional and metropolitan notions of judgement, taste and legitimacy towards a self-conscious, museum-led ambition to "dig where we stand" [3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4]. The research of Hudson, Morgan, Amado and Stewart places engagement and education at the centre of their curatorial approach. Their research abandons the approach that emerged in the 1980s, still with us today, that sees arts initiatives as yoked to 'enterprise', new lifestyles and property regeneration across northern cities. This is a particularly provocative approach that unsettles widely held notions of regeneration, public engagement, and community work.

Taking forward the concept for Arte Útil developed by Argentine artist Eduardo Costa, Localism (Hudson and Morgan) interrogates the idea of the "useful museum" [3.1]. Taking a deliberately 'localist' approach to curation and working in partnership with regional communities to shape the exhibition, Localism enabled Tees Valley communities to reclaim the museum space. A 'family tree' of creativity on Teesside was established through the gathering of artefacts and artworks, and displays were regularly updated based on public feedback and contributions. A forum for public meetings, debates and conversations which were prompted by the exhibition was also provided. Some of the topics Localism addressed included Christopher Dresser and the Linthorpe Pottery, bridge building, the Boosbeck Industries in the 1930s and the existence of

Impact case study (REF3)

mima itself. Local artists were supported to set up workshops teaching skills such as furniture design, weaving and pottery making, skills linked to local heritage and the 'forgotten' trades of the region.

The exhibition If All Relationships Were to Reach Equilibrium, Then This Building Would Dissolve (Amado) builds on the ideas developed in Localism and explores the subject of migration on Teesside and elsewhere [3.2]. The exhibition brought together documents, artefacts and artworks made by Middlesbrough-based asylum seekers and refugees as well as British and international artists. Working in collaboration with charities that work with Middlesbrough-based asylum seekers and refugees, the exhibition went beyond awareness raising and formed part of an ongoing process of relationship building with local communities and organisations with the region. A key element of the exhibition and development of the format devised in Localism was the use of parts of the gallery as a centre for service provision, learning and debate. Free resources include a suite of computers with Internet access, a food bank, workshops, readings, film club, and awareness-raising sessions, as well as activities for making and convening such as a communal weekly lunch, art classes and ESOL (English to speakers of other languages) courses.

Furthering this work, the exhibition This is Water (Morgan) explored the long histories of migration that have forged the current shape of the UK [3.3]. As a town founded on the rapid immigration of workers in the nineteenth century, Middlesbrough provided fertile ground for exploring the commonalities and shared experiences of immigration as well as changing identities and perceptions. By working with a formalised group of constituent advisers, the exhibition brought together art, personal memorabilia, and archival documents as well as materials from the North East Film Archives to give a nuanced portrait of the region's migration histories. During the exhibition, a repository of the stories and voices from the Tees Valley was collated, creating an archive of marginalised voices highlighting the complex identities that form the Tees Valley region and transforming the nature of what constitutes a museum object.

In Fragile Earth (Morgan), global and regional perspectives are brought into dialogue through an exhibition focused on the exploitation of resources, trade networks and production of waste within the socio-economic and ecological context of the Tees Valley [3.4]. The exhibition drew on 3 years of intensive research that foregrounded public dialogue between artists and ecology experts. Building on the idea of going beyond the exhibition, Fragile Earth consisted of a series of events and activities that took place across a whole year. The exhibition was used as a starting point to interrogate relationships between plants, animals and humans at a time of climate crisis and involved the work of 22 artists. This approach was combined with consultation with community groups through Design Thinking workshops and supplemented by interviews with international artists and curators. The result was a curatorial and community interrogation of colonial infrastructures, discourses in agriculture, botany, archaeology, as well as ecological conservation and technological determinism.

These exhibitions have been underpinned by theoretical and empirical research on curatorial theory and practice. The Constituent Museum (Morgan) examines the relationship between audience, expert and institution through an array of theoretical essays, case studies, and fictional writing. Morgan's curatorial research informed the book's conceptualisation [3.5]. Through sustained research spanning three years, Morgan edited texts, developed talks and staged a major conference, putting her research into dialogue with an international network of thinkers and influencing subsequent theory and practice. International contributors span specialisms in philosophy, education, social theory, art history and theory.

Work on art, critical pedagogy and capitalism (Stewart) has also furthered debates on both art and curatorial practice [3.6]. In this critical examination of art production, Stewart draws specific attention to the processes and context for art production. He argues that art practices with a social intent needs to involve a commitment to involvement to benefit those involved but not framed as participatory/participant through a critical understanding of the role of institutions, the contexts in which they operate, the bodies that occupy them, and the traditions, hierarchies and norms that influence how art and art institutions operate.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Impact case study (REF3)

[3.1] Hudson A, Morgan E. 2015. Localism [exhibition]. Middlesbrough Museum of Modern Art. Further details at: <https://visitmima.com/whats-on/single/localism/>.

The research underpinning this output was supported by a consortium grant from the EU Culture Programme. Uses of Art. EUR110,000. Lead: Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, Holland. Partners: Teesside University (Hudson), Ikon Gallery (Birmingham), Tate Liverpool, John Moores University, Whitworth Art Gallery (Manchester), FRAC Poitou-Charentes (Angoulême) and the Internationale confederation of European museums.

[3.2] Amado M. 2016. If All Relationships Were to Reach Equilibrium, Then This Building Would Dissolve [exhibition]. Middlesbrough Museum of Modern Art. Further details at: <https://visitmima.com/news/if-all-relationships-were-to-reach-equilibrium-then-this-building-would-dissolve/>.

Contributors and artists include the Collection of Investing in People and Culture, Right to Remain, Babi Badalov, Chto Delat, Burlesque Design, Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Isabel Lima, Stephanie Misa, and Zanny Begg & Oliver Ressler, among others. This exhibition was awarded the Journal Culture Award for North East Museum of the Year.

[3.3] Morgan E. 2018. This is Water [exhibition]. Middlesbrough Museum of Modern Art. Visitor Numbers: 26,491. Further details at: <https://visitmima.com/whats-on/single/this-is-water/>

Exhibiting artists: Nika Autor, Lucy Bridger, Ladan Hussein (Cold Specks) and Seth Pimlott, Jasleen Kaur, Andreja Kulunčić, Alenka Pirman, Erika Tan, Katarina Zdjelar.

This exhibition was supported by funding from the European Commission. Creative Europe Programme. grid.270680.b. 2017-2019. New Mappings of Europe. EACEA 45/2016. EUR200,000. Led by Moderna Galerija. Partners: Teesside University (Middlesbrough, UK), the Museum of Yugoslavia (Belgrade, Serbia), the Academy of Fine Arts (Vienna, Austria).

[3.4] Morgan E. 2019. Fragile Earth [exhibition]. Middlesbrough Museum of Modern Art. Visitor Numbers: 25,791. Selected for REF2021 (research portfolio available). Further details at <https://visitmima.com/whats-on/single/fragile-earth-seeds-weeds-plastic-crust/>

Exhibiting artists: Maria Thereza Alves, Zheng Bo, Allan Sekula and Noël Burch, Miriam de Búrca, Laura Harrington, Andy Holden, David Lisser, Shahar Livne, Anne Vibeke Mou, Otobong Nkanga, Uriel Orlow, Faiza Ahmad Khan and Hanna Rullman, Zina Saro-Wiwa, Cooking Sections, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Diane Watson, Wayward.

[3.5] Byrne J, Morgan E, Paynter N, de Serdio AS, Železnik A. eds. 2018. The Constituent Museum. Valiz with L'internationale. Selected for REF2021 (research portfolio available).

The research underpinning this edited collection was supported by the funding listed in [3.1].

[3.6] Stewart P. 2020. Art, Critical Pedagogy and Capitalism. Routledge. Selected for REF2021 (research portfolio available).

This book offers a re-examination of art production through considering the process of learning as the production of art itself. The peer-review of this work, arranged by Routledge, stated 'it could be a go to text on art schools and capitalism'.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (MIMA) was incorporated into the University in 2014. It has provided the platform and mechanism for implementing this research into practice and for sharing practice-led research. In 2015, Hudson wrote a 2015-18 vision statement for MIMA that placed the idea of the "useful" museum at the heart of MIMA's work. The aim was for MIMA to be 'a place that is created and given meaning by the sum actions of all its users' [5.1]. Through the exhibitions Localism, If All Relationships Were to Reach Equilibrium, This is Water, and Fragile Earth this ambition was tested, refined and realised, leading to MIMA's 2019-22 Business Plan that articulates MIMA's renewed focus on "art in action" and a constituent-engaged artistic programme [5.1]. Since 2015, MIMA has held 57 exhibitions and hosted 407 events. For context, MIMA receives 90,000 visitors a year.

Impact case study (REF3)

Research-led exhibitions and events exploring the idea of a “useful”, constituent-led museum and held at MIMA have sought to provoke discussion on the role of museums, especially so in relation to community and place. MIMA’s work has led to representatives from both the Wellcome Collection and Museum of London visiting MIMA to learn more about their curatorial approach. For the Head of Engagement at the Museum of London, MIMA’s community board was particularly striking: ‘I was thinking about the community board and why it seems like such a radical thing to reach for – I’m glad to have it in my mind’s eye as an ambition to reach for’ [5.2]. According to the Acting Director of Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, who led the EU New Mappings Project: ‘MIMA’s research into constituent-led approaches to creating public forums for discourse with diverse communities was key to the development of the project...the network of organisations learnt from MIMA’s community programmes, including Community Day and the Cultural Conversations programme with new communities. Through discussions and workshops, we adapted these methodologies and approaches in each of our projects’ [5.3]. For a formal reviewer from Arts Council England, the Localism exhibition ‘was intended to be a provocative exercise, one designed to whip up debate about both what the function of the museum is and can be and, more specifically, what mima’s role might be in the specific geographical and economic landscape within which it is located (and the challenges that come with that). In that respect, it was extremely successful’. [5.4]

As a result of this constituent-engaged approach to museum work, MIMA was included, in 2016, in the Calouste Gulbekian Foundation Inquiry into the Civic Role of Arts Organisations. MIMA was one of 80 international organisations to be featured in their case study bank that profiled best practice in civic engagement from around the world [5.5]. For the Director (North-North East) of Arts Council England: ‘MIMA’s research-informed approach to curatorial practice has led to a reinvention and challenging of the role of the museum, disrupting approaches within the sector. Seeing itself as a “useful museum”, MIMA seeks to influence society positively. For the Arts Council, this approach aligns well to our central mission of valuing the creativity of all, ensuring access to the arts and is one of the reasons for our continued investment in MIMA’ [5.6]. MIMA’s engaged approach was also cited by the Chair and Chief Executive (Sir Peter Bazalgette and Darren Henley) of Arts Council England in 2016 as part of the Countries of Culture inquiry, which launched in March to examine the wider cultural landscape. MIMA was selected as an example of the ‘growing contribution of universities, who want to make their local areas great places to work and study’ demonstrating the importance of MIMA’s work in rethinking not only the role of museums and galleries, but also the role Higher Education can play in community and civic engagement. This inquiry led to Arts Council shaping policies and approaches to building relationships with HEIs nationally. [5.6, 5.7].

The exhibitions and their associated events (talks, film club, lunches, and community days) have also enhanced cultural engagement with modern art through a curatorial approach that centres the interests and needs of the local community. For the senior editor at FREIZE, a leading magazine of contemporary art and culture, MIMA provides a ‘powerful rejection of how the art world, too often, reduces activism to radical cosplay. This is an era in which political culture is being reformed in ways that may well be far more dramatic than what happened in the 1980s, and that’s the context in which mima proposes an articulation, rather than imposition, of a democratic cosmopolitanism, charting a progressive path out of here’ [5.8]. For a reviewer for Art Agenda, an online ‘publisher of rigorous and engaging writing on contemporary art’, the curatorial approach to Fragile Earth enabled news of engaging with and thinking about climate change and ‘provides a welcome example of how to make a meaningful, thoughtful, and deeply humane exhibition about the complex and emotionally charged issue of climate change in the twenty-first century’ [5.8]. For a reviewer in the Gazette, Teesside’s local newspaper, If All Relations Were To Reach Equilibrium This Building Would spoke to the role museums can play in giving voice to marginalised communities: ‘For the many individuals fleeing Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa, parts of the Middle East and other regions this is a huge platform to give a voice and an understanding to a plight; and the humanity behind these people forming a part of a multi-cultured Teesside society’ [5.8]. This exhibition was subsequently featured on the Arts Council 2016/17 Annual Report as an example of an arts organisation ensuring ‘everyone has the opportunity to experience, and be inspired by, the arts, museums and libraries’. [5.9]

Impact case study (REF3)

MIMA's engaged approach has also contributed to the cultural offer of the Tees Valley, MIMA acting as an 'important broker of sectoral discussion'. For the Creative Place Manager at Tees Valley Combined Authority: 'Research undertaken by Teesside University researchers at the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art has made a significant contribution to our regional cultural offer, as well as local community engagement and cohesion. MIMA's ethos as a museum owned and led by local communities drives positive change and the museum is a proactive hub where communities come together and reflect on ideas of place, culture, and identity. MIMA's research-informed outreach programme goes beyond the museum's walls, working with schools, THIRTEEN Housing Group, and nursing homes to develop a deep and meaningful engagement on issues of migration, climate change and regional industry' [5.10].

MIMA's role within the regional cultural economy of the Tees Valley is also seen through the continued investment and recognition of MIMA as a national portfolio organisation and for its important role within the North East [5.6]. Since 2014, Arts Council England have invested GBP4,086,056 in MIMA. More recently, an investment of GBP2,900,000 was made by Arts Council England's Creative People and Places fund for a MIMA-led Borderlands programme. The programme seeks to build cultural engagement in two areas of Teesside with extremely low levels of participation [5.6].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[5.1] Strategy Documents (pdf). MIMA. 2015. Where do we go from here? A vision statement for 2015. And MIMA. 2018. MIMA Business Plan 2019-22.

[5.2] Email correspondence (pdf) from the Wellcome Trust (UK), received January 2019, and Museum of London (UK), received on March 2019.

[5.3] Signed Letter (pdf). Testimonial from Acting Director of the Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, project lead for the EU Creative Europe New Mappings Project. Received on 18 February 2021.

[5.4] Artistic and Quality Assessment Form (pdf). Arts Council England. 2016. Review of Localism exhibition.

[5.5] Report (pdf and link). Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. 2017. Rethinking Relationships: Inquiry into the Civic Role of Arts Organisations. Gulbenkian Foundation UK Branch. Available at: <https://gulbenkian.pt/uk-branch/our-work/the-civic-role-of-arts-organisations/phase-one-the-inquiry/>.

[5.6] Signed Letter (pdf). Testimonial from Director (North – North East) of Arts Council England. Received 19 February 2021.

[5.7] News item (pdf and link). Arts Council England. 2016. CMS Select Committee: The Arts Council and the wider cultural landscape. Available at: <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/news/cms-select-committee-arts-council-and-wider-cultural-landscape>

[5.8] Collection of reviews of exhibitions held at MIMA (pdf and link). Teesside Gazette. 2016. Meet the refugees making their home in Middlesbrough. Available at: <https://www.gazettelive.co.uk/news/teesside-news/meet-refugees-making-home-middlesbrough-11577715>. FRIEZE. 2017. Postcard from Middlesbrough. Available at: <https://www.frieze.com/article/postcard-middlesbrough>. Art Agenda. 2019. Fragile Earth: seeds, weeds, plastic crust. Available at: <https://www.art-agenda.com/features/286425/fragile-earth-seeds-weeds-plastic-crust>.

[5.9] Report (pdf and link). Arts Council England. Annual Report 2016-17. Available at: <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Arts%20Council%20annual%20report%2016-17%20-%20Web%20version.pdf>

[5.10] Signed Letter (pdf). Testimonial from Creative Place Manager at Tees Valley Combined Authority. Received on 24 February 2021.