THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE AT IKON GALLERY, BIRMINGHAM: FROM ART OBJECT TO ART INSTITUTION 1963 - 1978.

by

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this thesis is to reconstruct and analyse the space(s) that Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, UK, occupied and produced in its first two decades of existence, from its artist-led inception in 1963 until ca.1978. With the writings of philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre on space, contradiction, the creative act and everyday life constituting the critical underpinning, Ikon's locations in the city, its interiors and other spatial aspects, which may be less easily identifiable as such, are examined and compared in relation to the spatio-cultural context of Birmingham during postwar redevelopment. By mapping the complex interrelations between the local and wider art establishments, art-historical discourse and urban planning, the aim is to explore their implications for the past and present of Ikon as a contemporary art institution. Ikon is posited as a gesture, a creative act concretely executed in space upon its inception, shifting to a gallery ideologically closer to the establishment it was originally opposing.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACGB	Arts Council of Great Britain
BAC	Birmingham Artists Committee
BCU	Birmingham City University (formerly University of Central England)
BIAD	Birmingham Institute of Art and Design
BIFA	Barber Institute of Fine Arts
BM&AG	Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery
CoA/SoA	Birmingham College of Art/ Birmingham School of Art
CoM	Ikon Council of Management
IRR	Inner Ring Road
JBS	John Bright Street
MAC	Midland Arts Centre
MoMA	Museum of Modern Art, New York
RBSA	Royal Birmingham Society of Artists
UoB	University of Birmingham

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INTRODUCTION

The objective of this thesis is to reconstruct and analyse the space(s) that Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, UK, occupied and produced in its first two decades of existence, from its artist-led inception in 1963 until ca.1978. With the writings of philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre on space, contradiction, the creative act and everyday life constituting the critical underpinning, Ikon's locations in the city, its interiors and other spatial aspects, which may be less easily identifiable as such, are examined and compared in relation to the spatio-cultural context of Birmingham during postwar redevelopment. By mapping the complex interrelations between the local and wider art establishments, art-historical discourse and urban redevelopment, the aim is to explore their implications for the past and present of Ikon as a contemporary art institution. Ikon is posited as a gesture, a creative act concretely executed in space upon its inception, shifting to a gallery ideologically closer to the establishment it was originally opposing. Although this implies a failure on the part of Ikon to fully live up to the potential of its initial rhetoric, I argue that this is not indicative of the absolute failure of the concepts or intentions behind Ikon but instead, of a creative 'residue' and thus an opening for further acts of resistance.[1]

This thesis covers the period of Ikon from a topic of discussion between a group of artists and private art patrons in 1963, its unrealised or failed upstart ideas and

[1] My use of the term 'production of space' will be elaborated in Chapter 1.

eventual opening at the Bull Ring shopping centre in 1964, through its subsequent moves around the city; from Swallow Street in 1968 and Birmingham Shopping Centre in 1972 until John Bright Street in 1978. Aiming at an understanding of the spatio-cultural conditions that gave rise to a series of artist-led interventions, of which Ikon was part, Birmingham's artistic and architectural heritage, institutional organisation and postwar redevelopment are drawn on to demonstrate the processes of socio-spatial production and reproduction Ikon engaged in.

Ikon's current incarnation is in many respects different to its founding mission statement as well as to less explicit aspects of its spatial and display strategies. Change was slow and ongoing so it is not possible to pinpoint a moment when 'institutionalisation' occurred, but I argue that it was well underway by the time Ikon moved to JBS and took definite shape during its stay there. The Oozells Street School at Brindleyplace, where Ikon currently resides, is a space chosen by an institution, while JBS was a space chosen for a gallery which still had to secure the long-term funding and security it enjoys today. This shift in status is significant enough to inform and delineate my scope. Furthermore, Ikon in its current incarnation has engaged in a variety of spatially engaging activities, both on and off site, which merit a separate discussion, one that surpasses the ambitions of a thesis of this length. This also applies to Ikon's accommodation in JBS during the 1980s and 1990s, which will only be discussed here in terms of the initial move and refurbishment plans of around 1978. The inclusion of this move is intended to illustrate a point of departure for Ikon, whose analysis will support the choice of scope.

A historical reconstruction seems necessary here, as many specific aspects of Ikon's spaces as they are approached in this thesis have not been examined before. The

early years of Ikon have previously been researched and documented for the purposes of the catalogue accompanying the retrospective exhibition *Some of the Best Things in Life Happen Accidentally...* of 2004.[2] This contains an introduction to Ikon's foundation, edited interviews of founding members, a list of early exhibitions and biographical information on exhibited artists who played a key role in early Ikon. Information pertaining particularly to the 1970s and Ikon's stay in Swallow Street and Birmingham Shopping Centre has been assembled for the purposes of a similarly retrospective recent exhibition and catalogue, *This Could Happen to You.*[3]

The organisational shift traced in this thesis is reflected in the form the two retrospective catalogues have taken; Ikon from an artist-run space to a more conventionally directed and curated gallery. Both catalogues include an essay by current Ikon Director Jonathan Watkins on the story of the gallery and the exhibited works. In the first catalogue this is complemented by interviews with founding and instrumental artists, while in the latter, a second essay authored by Simon Chapman, Ikon's Director during most of the 1970s, constitutes the sole contemporaneous account published of that period. Both retrospective exhibitions and catalogues focus on the art exhibited at Ikon during the 1960s and 1970s respectively; this thesis aims to shift the focus from exhibitions curated *in* space to the production *of* space within an artistic, curatorial and urban framework. Specific exhibitions, artists and artworks are not discussed, as each of Ikon's spaces has shifted as the locus of extracted/imbued meaning, analogous to the artwork it usually constitutes the 'context' of.

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[2] Watkins, J. and Stevenson, D., eds., *Some of the Best Things in Life Happen Accidentally,: The Beginning of Ikon* Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 2004, exhibition catalogue, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, July-September 2004.

[3] Watkins, Jonathan ed., *This Could Happen to You: Ikon in the 1970s,* Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 2010, exhibition catalogue, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, July-September 2010.

Research for these retrospective exhibitions was assembled into a body of information now stored at the gallery, with information collected from various informal sources that may not have otherwise entered the gallery's files. Ikon does not yet have an organised archive as such; this collection of documents is in the process of being partially organised and catalogued with the intention of eventually making it accessible to the public. It is not comprehensive; the volume of collected documentation increased as Ikon became bigger and more established. Ikon's archive consists of meeting notes, minutes and administrative documents, official and personal correspondence, personal accounts and transcribed interviews with founding artists/members collected for the first retrospective, as well as reviews and articles from local newspapers. There is also a rich repository of mostly unpublished photographs of exhibition installations, events and openings alongside exhibition paraphernalia like posters and other publicity, invitations and programmes.

In accordance with availability of primary sources, the initial years of Ikon are reconstructed primarily from interviews and personal accounts of artists/members. Meetings were not minuted, other than occasionally surviving informal notes, until the gallery registered itself as a charity in 1967. Official documentation of the early period is limited to correspondence with the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB) as the gallery started to seek funding, along with surviving publicity. The proliferation of official minutes and documents as Ikon shifted organisationally, makes these the primary source used mostly for the later part of the scope of the thesis, when a committee was created to investigate the potential move from Birmingham Shopping Centre in 1978. This shift in use of sources further reflects the way in which the endeavour of Ikon changed in character during these years. I argue that this is in turn echoed in the choices

of space, the design of interiors and the relation of the latter to those of other institutions of both local art establishments and the wider conventions of the period, in a manner that supersedes being solely indicative of responses to the various running urgencies, while not necessarily pointing to an explicit 'spatial' policy.

As part of an art scene within Birmingham comprised of institutions and non-institutional endeavours that have been interlinked in relationships of cooperation and opposition from at least the mid-nineteenth century until today, Ikon members and activities have left traces in local and national archives. Birmingham Central Library and Archives hold newspaper cuttings, maps and photographs concerning local history, education, architecture and urban redevelopment. The ACGB Archive retains correspondence about and with Ikon, internal minutes and funding details. The Royal Birmingham Society of Artists (RBSA) Archive contains a number of interior images of its own galleries and documents pertaining to artist members also active with Ikon. The School of Art (SoA) collection at Birmingham Institute of Art and Design (BIAD) holds information on the Foundation and Fine Art Departments and teaching staff members involved with Ikon during my scope. Finally, the Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery (BM&AG) have a rich repository of images of their galleries' own interiors as well as photographs, artworks and other pictorial information concerning the cultural, architectural and art-institutional development of Birmingham from the nineteenth century to the later postwar period.

The art scene of Birmingham before and during the formation of Ikon was gleaned from published and unpublished sources.[4] Contemporaneous published sources give insight into the rise of the postwar art scene in London, along with later retrospective surveys of the institutional and commercial exhibition of contemporary art there.[5] Conditions of patronage and funding in the UK, and their effect on the production and exhibition of art both in the capital and the provinces, have been most comprehensively discussed in Margaret Garlake's unpublished PhD thesis and an edited collection of essays on case studies.[6] Birmingham's history was gleaned from variously focused surveys ranging from socio-historical to architectural and urban profiles, published histories of individual institutions and primary archival research.[7]

The spaces that Ikon occupied between 1964 and 1972 no longer exist to be physically observed; they have either been demolished or have had major internal and external reconstruction which has affected the previously Ikon-occupied spaces beyond recognition and measurement. What can be observed about Ikon's spaces today is the

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[4] Hill, Joseph, Midgley, William, Harper, Edward S., *The History of the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists,* Cornish Brothers, Birmingham, 1929, Hall, J. Barrie, *A Review of The Royal Birmingham Society of Artists 1821-1999*, Birmingham, 2002, Davies, S., *By the Gains of Industry: Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery 1885-1985,* BM&AG, Bimingham,1985, Swift, John, *Changing Fortunes : the Birmingham School of Art building 1880-1995,* Article Press, Birmingham, 1996, Spencer-Longhurst, Paul, *The Barber Institute of Fine Arts Handbook,* University of Birmingham, Birmingham, 1999, Verdi, Richard, *The Barber Institute of Fine Arts,* Scala, London, 2005. For a history of the Arts Lab see the exhibition catalogue *Birmingham Arts Lab: the Phantom of Liberty*, BM&AG, Birmingham, 1998 also Dean, John, Birmingham Arts Laboratory 1968-1982, unpublished MA dissertation, University of Central England (UCE), Birmingham, 1983.

[5] For a discussion of the period see Robertson, Bryan and Russel, John, *Private View,* Nelson, London, 1965, Crow, Thomas, *The Rise of the Sixties, American and European Art in the Era of Dissent,* Laurence King Publishing, London, 1996, Eshun, Ekow and Jahn, Pamela eds., *How Soon is Now : 60 Years of the Institute of Contemporary Arts,* ICA, London, 2007 and Massey, Anne, *The Independent Group, Modernism and Mass Culture in Britain 1949-59,* Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 1995.

[6] Garlake, Margaret, The Relationship between Institutional Patronage and Abstract Art in Britain c. 1945-195', unpublished PhD thesis, Courtauld Institute, London, 1987, Garlake, Margaret ed., *Artists and Patrons in Post-War Britain*, Ashgate Publishing Limited, Aldershot, 2001.

[7] Sutcliffe, Anthony and Smith, Roger, *Birmingham 1939-1970: History of Birmingham Volume III,* Oxford University Press, London, 1974, Cherry, Gordon E., *Birmingham: A Study in Geography, History and Planning,* John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, 1994, Borg, Neville, 'Birmingham' in Holliday, John, ed., *City Centre Redevelopment: a Study of British City Centre Planning and Case Studies of the Five English City Centres,* Charles Knight and Co. Ltd., London, 1973.

approximate locations its housing buildings occupied. Ikon's physical space has been reconstructed in this thesis like a performance, a destroyed work of art or an ephemeral artwork would be from surviving documentation. Much of that is in the form of personal accounts which can contradict each other on the 'facts' and be polemic with personal investment. Having originally been assembled for a different aim to that of this thesis, this body of information constitutes the unpublished residue of its published outcome, namely the two aforementioned retrospective exhibition catalogues.. I am aware that the process I describe is similar to the way archives and other historical documentation is used to reconstruct history and that is really my point here, that I am attempting history in the same way, while being open to its speculative and approximate character.

The sources primarily used for analysis in this thesis are photographs, maps and other images gleaned from archives and used to visually reconstruct as far as is possible the space(s) of Ikon and the city of Birmingham within my scope.[8] Images related to Ikon and the interiors of BM&AG and RBSA are mostly unpublished and provide comparative insight across the time and space of the galleries within the framework of the visual information of the city they resided in. To aid this pictorial 'narrative' in its capacity to elucidate in a different and supplementary way to that of linear exposition in text, the images placed at the end of the thesis have been grouped by spatial relevance and then loosely chronologically within that, as opposed to in correspondence to their order of first reference in the text. Accordingly, historical reconstruction and analysis follow a loosely chronological format insofar as this aids

[8] These are located at the end of the thesis.

linear exposition - this again is not meant to be historically reductive or teleologically indicative.

As aforementioned, Henri Lefebvre's writing constitutes the critical framework of both analysis and research of this thesis. Lefebvre's work has been primarily approached in Anglophone academia through the so-called 'spatial' disciplines of geography, planning and architecture, concentrating on his writings concerning space and cities. During the 1990s, scholarship centering around a political-economy application of Lefebvre's 'theory of space' stood in opposition to attempts at imbuing his thought with the seeds of postmodernist theory coming from cultural studies.[9] A self-proclaimed 'third wave' of international Lefebvre studies has been distancing itself from this bifurcation,[10] substantially contributing to the understanding of Lefebvre's writing *of* and *as* a totality. Such a development in approach is important for not only the understanding of Lefebvre's philosophical positions themselves, but also their heuristic potential across areas of knowledge.

Lefebvre's ongoing metaphilosophical and epistemological project aimed at a transdisciplinary, or a-disciplinary, attempt at knowledge and I argue this can resonate with the project of contemporary art history, one which this thesis aims to engage with. Lefebvre often points to the relationship between art and its history with philosophy as

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[9] Centred around David Harvey and Edward Soja respectively. For discussions of Lefebvre's influence in English-speaking academia in the last two decades, see Kofman, Eleonore and Lebas, Elisabeth, 'Introduction' in Lefebvre, H., *Writings on Cities,* Oxford, 1996, pp. 3-53, Elden, Stuart, 'Rhythmanalysis: an Introduction' in Lefebvre, Henri, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, Everyday Life,* trans. Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore, Continuum, London, 2004, pp. vii-xv, Harvey, David, 'Afterword' in Lefebvre, Henri, *The Production of Space,* trans. Donald Nicholson Smith, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 1991, pp. 425-432, and Goonewardena, K. et.. al., 'On the Production of Henri Lefebvre' in Goonewardena, K., *Space, Difference, Everyday Life: Reading Henri Lefebvre,* Oxford, 2008, pp. 1-23.

[10] Goonewardena, K., *Space, Difference, Everyday Life,* p. 3.

bilaterally heuristic,[11] yet the potential of his contribution has been relatively underexplored in the discipline of art history.[12] My use of Lefebvre will therefore initially be put forward in the first chapter, connecting this to my argument concerning Ikon. My intention here is not to follow a particular line of Lefebvrean thought, or even Lefebvre himself closely, but rather to further the particular quest of this thesis.

My analysis aims to critically engage with discourses of museum studies and exhibition cultures, discussing historical and ideological aspects of exhibition display, interiors and architecture of galleries and museums of contemporary art from the late nineteenth century through the scope of this thesis, with insights from present debates.[13] Of primary interest is the evolution of conventions of Western contemporary art display and the emergence of the 'white cube' aesthetic; this forms the focus of critical engagement in relation to Ikon's evolving display strategies. Marie Staniszewski's trace of the white cube's emergence at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York[14] and Charlotte Klonk's more recent survey of historical gallery spaces in Europe and the United States[15] provide critical stances on the debates of contemporary display, alongside Rebecca Deroo's investigation into the institutional and artistic responses of

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[11] See for example Lefebvre, Henri, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, Everyday Life,* pp. 24-29, 64-66, Lefebvre, Henri, *The Production of Space,* pp. 92, 111, 123-127, 164-167, 251-252, 278, Lefebvre, Henri, *Writings on Cities,* pp. 93, 100, 157, 164-165, 175-176.

[12] An exception to this is Prior, N., *Museums and Modernity* also Deroo, Rebecca J., *The Museum Establishment and Contemporary Art* whose analysis focuses more on Lefebvre's concepts of everyday life as they related to the May 1968 student uprisings and strikes in France.

[13] For example Prior, Nick, *Museums and Modernity, Art Galleries and the Making of Modern Culture,* Berg, Oxford, 2002, McClellan, Andrew, *The Art Museum from Boullée to Bilbao,* University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2008.

[14] Staniszewski, Mary Anne, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art,* The MIT Press, Cambridge: MA, 1998.

[15] Klonk, Charlotte, *Spaces of Experience: Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000,* Yale University Press, New Haven, 2009.

French contemporary art after the events of May 1968.[16] Artist Brian O'Doherty's articles first appearing in the 1970s and 1980s,[17] constitute a committed critique of the conflicts between conceptual art and the gallery space, from a contemporaneous and engaged perspective, to which I am indebted for the concept of 'gesture', discussed further in Chapter 1 and throughout my analysis.

The historical reconstruction of Ikon's galleries in their spatial and cultural context over time will accompany analysis over the remaining chapters, based on an analysis of space as a dialectically determined social process proceeding from the simultaneity of thought, action and experience. The breadth of my study is here both limited and widened: I am juxtaposing Ikon spaces with other spaces which are perhaps unlikely, like museums and galleries which are organisationally different but relate to Ikon dialectically somehow else. In line with my argument, early Ikon is compared more closely with similarly spirited works of art than other non-institutional art spaces, while the later part of my scope invokes comparisons with international art establishments and ideologies of gallery spaces. I am especially doing this to tease out aspects of space that would not be examined by looking at, for example, organisationally similar galleries in other cities or countries, which given my particular approach, is rendered beyond my scope here.

Keeping critical analysis and historical approach imbricated in the text is intended to further support the dialectical argument made within it. In Chapter 2, therefore, I widen my historico-spatial scope around Ikon to discuss aspects of nineteenth century Birmingham's art, education, culture and city planning, alongside

[16] Deroo, Rebecca J., *The Museum Establishment and Contemporary Art: The Politics of Artistic Display in France after 1968,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006.

[17] Published in a book revised and expanded by the author, O'Doherty, Brian, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (expanded edition), University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999.

the postwar responses by local artists who were involved historically and ideologically in the formation of Ikon. The later chapters develop in relation to the theoretical and historical concerns outlined in Chapters 1 and 2, all of which which I argue are dialectically linked. Ikon spaces are compared throughout with each other and other contemporary art spaces in Birmingham, in terms of their various 'spatial' characteristics. These considerations inform the discussion of Ikon's relation to the 'white cube' aesthetic and other visual, sensory and spatial conventions of Western contemporary art spaces. Trends of urban redevelopment, the national and international art scene and concepts of resistance and appropriation, are all hopefully demonstrable as dialectically interrelated and indicative of the complexity of the production of gallery space through Ikon's variously charactered incarnations.

In Chapter 3, by positing Ikon as an artist-led gesture in its wider spatial, cultural and art politico-historical context in postwar Birmingham, I aim to critically engage with Ikon's inception, founding mission, upstart ideas and eventual first gallery at the Bull Ring as a creative act and an art object, installation, performance and/or event. I argue that as such, Ikon constituted a spatially productive intervention executed concretely in the abstractly planned social space of the city of Birmingham during postwar redevelopment, while simultaneously resisting the institutional conventions in artistic association, exhibition and education dominant in the city since the nineteenth century. A parallel is drawn between Ikon at this stage and similarly spirited installations, events and happenings engaging in the critique of art institutions from within the gallery, in Europe and the United States of the 1960s and 1970s.

Discussion moves to Ikon's later galleries in Chapter 4, from Swallow Street in 1968, to West Court in 1972 and finally the move to JBS in 1978. I argue that Ikon's

character during these moves changed from spatial intervention or gesture to a more conventionally run and curated gallery space, and that this shift is demonstrable in Ikon's spatial (re)production. This is traced in the comparison between the later spaces to Ikon's founding mission and spatial strategies, alongside practices and arising conventions of display of politically or institutionally critical art in contemporary art institutions and non-institutional art spaces of the West. By setting Ikon in the social tensions immanent in Birmingham's postwar redevelopment and the responses of its art establishment, I aim to explore the further tensions between Ikon's founding intentions and ambitions, running exigencies and the politically and ideologically charged climate of Western contemporary art of the 1960s and 1970s. I will conclude with an opening to analysis for Ikon's current gallery in Brindleyplace. This will in turn give rise to potential openings for further research of Ikon and the exhibition of contemporary art in Birmingham on the one hand, alongside the heuristic possibilities indicated for the discipline and practice of art history as a project on the other.

CHAPTER 1

HENRI LEFEBVRE, SPACE AND HISTORY (OF ART)

1.1 Space: thought, action and experience

> And we are concerned with nothing that even remotely resembles a system.[18]

This is the last sentence of Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, a statement that encapsulates the 'Lefebvrean' project. Lefebvre was wary of philosophy as a reductive analytical process and considered the systematisation and particularisation of academic disciplines epistemologically restrictive and ultimately pernicious. He rejected the absolute constraints of formal logic, moving instead for a dialectical process which does not ignore content for the sake of abstraction and where 'every proposition with a real content is both true and false, true if it is transcended, false if it is asserted in the absolute'.[19] This dialectic aims to supersede attempts at synthesising two opposing concepts, positing three terms from the outset; for example, 'the triad 'time-space-energy' links three terms that it leaves distinct, without fusing them in a *synthesis*'.[20]

These terms are linked dialectically in a way that invites potentially infinite seeding of contradiction to be engaged with and/or sublated. The third term is the

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[18] Lefebvre, Henri, *The Production of Space*, p. 423.

[19] Lefebvre, Henri, *Dialectical Materialism*, trans. John Sturrock, Jonathan Cape, London, 1968, p.42. The 'Lefebvrean dialectic' has been variously understood and described among his scholars, in relation specifically to space its is discussed by Lefebvre throughout Lefebvre, H., *The Production of Space* and especially pp. 328-343, see also pp. 401-423. The most comprehensive recent discussions can be found in: Schmid, Christian, 'Henri Lefebvre's Theory of the Production of Space' in Goonewardena, K., *Space, Difference, Everyday Life*, pp. 28-45, which is a short translated article. His full study appears in Schmid, Christian, *Stadt, Raum und Gesellschaft: Henri Lefebvre und die Theorie des Produktions des Raumes*, Franz Steiner Verlag, Munich, 2005, see also Elden, S., *Understanding Henri Lefebvre*, pp. 36-43.

[20] Lefebvre, H., 'The Critique of the Thing' in Lefebvre, H., *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, Everyday Life*, p. 12, emphasis in text.

'other', a residue that is irreducible and inexhaustible by reasoning or logic systems whose objective is coherence. The aim of this kind of dialectical analysis is therefore not a closed 'valid' system, but an open, happily approximate committed *engagement* with possibilities and openings; their *resolution* is beside the point because it can only be an articulation of an abstraction divested of content.[21] Each contradiction holds the seed of its own resolution's unmaking, always yielding a residue that escapes coherence and necessity and can thus be at least partially creative rather than merely (re)productive.

Lefebvre was also deeply suspicious of ahistorical, asocial and apolitical claims to truth, coming from any discipline or non-academic discourse. He maintained this judgement for advanced capitalist society, and especially the bearing of its ideology on the production of space. Lefebvre's three-dimensional account of the production of social space proceeds from his dialectical process and does not have a concept of 'space in itself' as its epistemological starting point. Instead, 'space' denotes a simultaneously material, linguistic and significative process.

Lefebvre posits the following conceptual triad of dialectically interlinked dimensions of the production of space, which are simultaneously individual and social:[22]

- *Spatial practice* denotes the articulation of the network of connection and association between daily reality and urban reality, and thus simultaneously the separation of the linked elements and activities in space; for example, connections between residence, workplace and places of leisure, as well as motorways and air travel.[23] These elements constitute the perceptible, by all the senses, aspects of 'space', or *perceived space.* Spatial

[21] For example Lefebvre, H., *The Production of Space*, 1991, pp. 420-423 and Lefebvre, Henri, *Critique of Everyday Life Volume II: Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday*, trans. John Moore, Verso, London, 2002 pp. 108-110, 180-192.

[22] Schmid, C., 'Henri Lefebvre's Theory of the Production of Space', pp. 38-39.

[23] Ibid., p. 36 also Lefebvre, H., *The Production of Space*, p. 38.

practice both yields and presupposes a society's space, dialectically producing and appropriating it while also facilitating the function of the means of production and the reproduction of social relations.[24]

• *Representations of space* comprise discursively designated descriptions, and thus also demarcations, of space as space, especially (more or less coherent) theories arising from disciplines like architecture, planning, geography and also philosophy and art (and its history) as I discuss below. Alongside spoken and written discourses are maps, plans, signs and images.[25] These all presuppose an intellectual act and thus constitute *conceived space*. Directly linked with the production of knowledge and thus power, Lefebvre sees this as the dominant/dominating space of society, codetermining activity.[26]

• *Spaces of representation*[27] refer to the dimension of the production of space that involves the process of signification by which the physical 'order' in space is imbued with symbolic meaning referring to something other than the space 'itself': power, gender, religion, nature, memory. This physical 'order' can thus become a vehicle conveying meaning, like a monument or a landscape.[28] This is the space directly experienced in everyday life by human beings, the *lived space* of its 'users'. For Lefebvre this is the dominated space in urban societies and as such is experienced mostly passively, sought to be differentiated or appropriated by its 'users' through imagination

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[24] Lefebvre, H., *The Production of Space*, p. 38.

[25] Lefebvre, H., *The Production of Space*, pp. 38-39.

[26] Lefebvre, H., *The Production of Space*, p. 39.

[27] The English translation reads *representational spaces*, but this misses out the terminological inversion intended in the original text (see Schmid, C., 'Henri Lefebvre's Theory of the Production of Space', p. 44, note 34) and also is somewhat misleading as to the directionality of representation, rather than emphasising dialectical interrelation.

[28] Schmid, C., 'Henri Lefebvre's Theory of the Production of Space', p. 37.

or creativity.[29] In this way it is not exhausted by analytical reduction, but always gives rise to a remainder expressible only through the creative act and thus also always containing the seed of potential contradiction and resistance to power, stimulating historical movement.[30]

This triad constitutes the contradictory dialectical unity through which social space is continuously produced and reproduced, in a threefold determination, happening in time. 'In this way the epistemological perspective shifts from the subject that thinks, acts, and experiences to the process of social production of thought, action, and experience.'[31] The production of space links material production to the production of knowledge and that of meaning. Lefebvre here does not strip individual 'users' from their agency but rather draws attention to the contradictions inherent in absolute differentiation between action stemming from agency and the process of reproduction of social relations. This echoes the way he approaches the contradictions between theory, action, art, philosophy, everyday life and so forth.

Lefebvre's project, influenced by Marx, was concerned with alienation and the potential for human liberation under capitalism, seen as supplanting increasingly more facets of everyday life, especially in planned urban environments. The possibility of resistance in urban everyday life, which itself became alienated and alienating, constitutes the surplus remainder, the spontaneous and creative act, what Lefebvre would deem the 'poetry of everyday life', something he differentiated from 'highbrow' art. He did not disallow the poetic or creative potential of canonised art, but rather

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[29] Lefebvre, H., *The Production of Space*, p. 39.

[30] Lefebvre, H., *The Production of Space*, pp. 119-121, 262-269 and Schmid, C., 'Henri Lefebvre's Theory of the Production of Space', p.40.

[31] Schmid, C., 'Henri Lefebvre's Theory of the Production of Space', p. 41 also Lefebvre, H., *The Production of Space*.

maintained a constant critique of the assumption that the creative act could be defined as a particular area with a particular scope determined by specialised knowledge or professionalised disciplines, similarly to the production of space. Engaging with the contradictions in this differentiation can hold heuristic possibilities for a socially aware understanding of art history and its artistic or institutional subjects in relation to life as it is lived by engaged and embodied human beings.

In reality, lived space inevitably becomes differentiated and creatively appropriated in a way that wittingly or unwittingly exposes aspects of this negatively operating dominance. This is because space is inhabited and used by embodied human beings rather than their abstractions. Unanticipated resistance in turn incites an ever more advanced and subtle negative operation of spaces of representation which increasingly attempt to 'escape meaning's net'[32] by essentially rendering resistance unintelligible in the face of the constructed requirement for coherence, and thus by extension 'futile'. That it cannot be expressed exhaustively in language or reasoning because it intends neither coherence or validity is the strength of the creative act. In terms of its simultaneous discrediting, assimilation and appropriation by the prevalent systems of thought and knowledge, its weakness lies there also. The normatively productive capacity of oppositional resistance, resulting in knowledge and discourse which can be further assimilated and deployed, has been penetratingly examined by Michel Foucault in, for example, his formulation of the repressive hypothesis and its relation to medicalised sexual discourse.[33] Lefebvre relocates the possibility for resistance by positing the necessarily *contingent* nature of the binary opposition of power and

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[32] A concern present throughout Lefebvre's writing, see also Lefebvre, H., *The Production of Space,* p. 49.

[33] Foucault, Michel, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality vol. 1,* trans. Robert Hurley, Penguin, London, 1998, pp.17, 42-45, 65-68.

resistance; there is always the third term, the analytically irreducible surplus, the creative act.

It is perhaps difficult to expound in a linear medium like historical writing, yet less difficult to imagine, giving space *equal* say as time in the understanding of history. Such an opening potentially disorders assumptions about the methods of acquisition and production of knowledge, both because of and despite the limitations of the medium I here operate within.[34] What is crucial in this thesis is not to shift privilege from something conventional to something oppositional or novel, proceeding from a misrepresented abstraction. Rather, I argue against the necessity of privileging any aspect or teleology, maintaining a constant critique of the limitations of abstraction and abstracted means of investigation and ultimately embracing the approximate nature of enquiry and the openings it provides or even necessitates. Lefebvre's writings on space, the 'urban' and cities provide openings for such an endeavour by emphasising the importance of experience in differentiating lived space; experience here is not being privileged over thought (or action as its antithesis) but rather de-obfuscated as a legitimate vehicle of knowledge, in dialectical codetermination. Proceeding in this way does not constitute an addendum, a 'theme' deployed to differentiate a predetermined method of inquiry, but is meant to incite committed engagement with a total project.

I see this process as analogous to attempts at challenging the pictorial surface in abstract painting, the corporeality of the artwork in conceptual or ephemeral art, or the exercise of institutional critique within museum and gallery spaces. As gestures these are

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[34] For the view of Lefebvre's work as 'disordering' established knowledge I am indebted to Soja, Edward W., *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places,* Blackwell, Oxford, 1996, pp. 92-95. Soja's work has been criticised for departing from Lefebvre significantly in the application of his own theory, while imbuing Lefebvre's thought with postmodernist characteristics. Although I agree with this criticism, I find Soja's insistence, throughout his writing, of the value of Lefebvre's 'disordering' tendencies, in the spirit of Lefebvre and particularly helpful.

creative acts, movements towards knowledge. This holds attendant preoccupations in everyday life and the attempts at its (re)production, with the creative act as a form of resistance.[35] Lefebvre's proclamations about self-management and the revolution of everyday life were considered generative texts for the protests and strikes of May 1968 in France.[36] It is most indicative of the Lefebvrean project to consider his writings not merely as accompaniments or descriptions of the event-led revolutionary stance of these protests but part of the events themselves, attempting to transcend the contradictions in the triad of thought, action and art.[37] I claim this of Ikon in its formative stages and in this vein argue for Ikon as a creative act in itself, rather than merely a receptacle for or context of such acts, events or gestures. Furthermore, by extension, I argue for the possibility of scholarship to fulfill its potential as such a creative act.

1.2 Urban space and gallery space: Ikon as gesture of spatial resistance

Understanding the social production of the gallery space as dialectically codetermined proceeds from the above. Decoration schemes, display strategies, theories of perception, historical traces and even artworks themselves can constitute representations of space which in varying degrees are superimposed onto the physical space of the gallery in order to 'create space'. The emergence of the white cube traces an attempt towards the annihilation of space as context, stemming from an abstracted definition of space 'in

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[35] Lefebvre, H., *The Production of Space*, pp. 31-46, 173-176, 229-246.

[36] Lefebvre, Henri, *The Explosion: Marxism and the French Upheaval,* trans. A. Ehrenfeld, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1969, see also Poster, Mark, *Existential Marxism in Postwar France: From Sartre to Althusser,* Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1975, pp. 238-259.

[37] This is astutely argued of Lefebvre's project in Nadal-Melsio, Sara, 'Lessons in Surrealism: Relationality, Event, Encounter' in Goonewardena, K., *Space, Difference, Everyday Life,* pp. 161-175, especially pp. 168-169.

itself'. The fundamental contradiction of the white cube aesthetic lies in its attempt to simultaneously claim neutrality and exert it *blatantly*. To produce space that retains the gallery as a signifier of meaning while deferring its source to the artwork itself, the white cube tries to render the gallery space invisible by deeming it neutral, and thus imbuing the process with necessity, objectivity and universality. The artwork thus remains contained by the gallery space and only meaningful as art within it. The white cube's assumptions about the decoration and ambience of the gallery space vary only in colour and other sensory and material particularities to earlier display theories.[38]

What differentiates the white cube aesthetic is the claim that its particular decoration scheme can constitute an absence of content, thus elevating its concerns to the higher, abstract pursuit of neutrality - or truth. In attempting to accommodate modern art that was seen as commanding its own meaning, and thus space, the white cube aesthetic was trying to nullify the gallery space as ideological context by physically stripping it down to space 'in itself'. By equating the extraction of sensory content with neutrality, the white cube constituted an abstraction claiming universal validity by purporting its own ideological absence. This claim to neutrality came to belie the function of the gallery space as context, perhaps even from its creators.

This context, by being (in) space, was thus necessarily secreting something other than space 'in itself'. Ideology did not produce the space of the white cube, but the latter came to resemble ideology insofar as it sought to definitively resolve the contradiction between artistic autonomy, institutional power and aesthetic truth. The white cube's ideological position lies in its espousal of abstraction, where the alteration of perceived space according to conceived space aims to exhaustively predetermine the outcomes of

[38] As they are described, for example, in Klonk, C., *Spaces of Experience.*

lived space. The creative act would undo the necessity of this by probing the contradictions still inherent. This can analogically be claimed of urban planning; in fact, it is in urban space where this can be observed or imagined more clearly, because urban space is not conventionally seen as being as removed from everyday life as the gallery interior; a further contradiction which indicates the attempts to disarm the creative act of its potential of resistance.

Marie Staniszewski traces the insistent claim of the visual neutrality of the emergent traditional decoration scheme for modern art to represent and facilitate political neutrality, or rather, apolitical display. This in turn gave rise to a platform for dissent by the increasingly politicised art which was being barred entry to and by this avowedly neutral space.[39] O'Doherty detects in these politicised artistic responses a spatially aware engagement with the 'white cube'. The latter was separating everyday life from art and enervating both artwork and spectator by operating negatively. Thus, the white cube was simultaneously divulging, obscuring and perpetuating both artworks' and spectators' alienation from the creativity inherent in the process.

A confluence of conceived and perceived space with the explicit intent of producing both a discourse and a corresponding physical space in a coherent manner aims at an ideal, an abstraction, however it is decorated. This tendency is especially discernible in Klonk's survey, where each attempt seems to be based on the interrelation between the formal aspects of the work to be displayed, the expected/intended audience and the theories of perception and space du jour, yet deemed an analysis of experience. The idea of everyday life is abstracted, almost in the form of 'population studies'- though Klonk, from the outset, discredits an involvement with what she calls a

[39] For example Staniszewski, M., *The Power of Display,* pp. 263-267.

'Foucauldian episteme', which she deems, without reference or counterargument, to be based on a description of humans as entirely docile bodies lacking agency.[40]

The ennobled gallery space of the white cube was claiming its raison d'être from the similarly valorised artwork but was in fact referring back only to its own projected sterility, which was aimed at positing it as the *necessary* vehicle of meaning, in turn perpetuating its authority as arbiter of taste. This furthered the authority of professionalised discourses surrounding the 'Artwork' as separate from the purview of artists and spectators, by being designated within the conceived space of the 'creators of context': architects, curators, art historians and critics. Thus, the 'neutral' gallery space eschewed directly *engaging* with the individual artwork. Such engagement was (un) consciously avoided insofar as it threatened the absolute *containment* of the artwork, both physically and conceptually. This gave rise to the dialectic of creative acts of institutional critique and the institutional assimilation thereof, a dynamic discernible in the relationship between early Ikon and its subsequent incarnations.

A Lefebvrean engagement with the oscillations of power and contradiction through creative acts and everyday life can be observed and executed in space and can furthermore be spatially productive insofar as fragmented lived space is appropriated and abstractly homogenised space differentiated. Both for art institutions and non-institutional art spaces, the process of emergence of such space is dialectically linked. Pointing to the real value of the artwork, and I argue also of its history, being less contingent on the arbitrary judgement of its absolute success or failure than on its susceptibility to openings, O'Doherty posits '[g]estures are thus the most instinctive of

[40] Klonk, Charlotte, *Spaces of Experience,* p. 11.

artworks in that they do not proceed from full knowledge of what provokes them. Indeed, they are born out of a desire for knowledge, which time *may* make available.'[41]

The fact that the white cube has predominated in the West as a particular way of exhibiting art after modernism indicates a preference which had been fully institutionalised by the time Ikon was founded. That was the case in London's postwar contemporary art scene, while not yet in Birmingham by virtue of a lack of both an institutional scene and a private market for contemporary art. Parallels are discernible between Ikon as a gesture within the city and the artwork as gesture within and towards the space designated for its exhibition. I argue the opening of Ikon was a response analogous to the gallery-aware artwork, in the space and functions/intentions of a city that did not/could not provide the 'white cube' where such an artwork would normally be exhibited in the first place. Furthermore, Ikon challenged the valorisation of art and its separation from everyday life as it was specifically manifesting itself in the postwar art establishment of Birmingham. It did this by deflecting the traditions of connoisseurship, collection, scholarship *and* contemporary art display, as they were accumulating in the Western art world and presenting themselves in their peculiar ways in turn in Birmingham. It did this concretely through the production of the social space of the gallery.

The 'theory of space' expounded above, within the context of Lefebvre's overall view of historical and social change and the importance of the creative act, renders space devoted to the exhibition of art an especially fruitful ground for investigation. [42] Shifting from the discourses of art and its history as visually and temporally privileging,

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[41] O'Doherty, B., *Inside the White Cube*, p. 106, my emphasis.

[42] Lefebvre himself insists on the importance of the study of art and its history in conjunction with that of philosophy for the understanding and furtherance of his wider meta-historical and meta-philosophical project, see for example Lefebvre, H., *Writings on Cities*, pp. 93, 100, 157, 164-165, 175-176.

I attempt to posit the dialectical process that space denotes as a third term for analysis. This will allow me to discuss Ikon as a creative act executed concretely in the space and time of the city of Birmingham, a city which was becoming increasingly abstracted during postwar redevelopment. I propose that Ikon was definitely productive, rather than *re*productive, of space when it first started. Ikon immersed itself as an event in the contradictions of expected gallery locations, interiors and audiences, while the art institutions of the city were engaged in reproducing abstract urban and gallery spaces along with concomitant social relations. I aim to trace the change of the spatial character of Ikon over time, as it shifted locations and organisational aims. I also hope to show how the space that Ikon produced engaged with not only the historical space of the city it was in, but also the abstract/conceived space of the white cube interior on the one hand, and planned urban space on the other, as these came to dominate their respective 'disciplines' in the West. In doing so, I will argue that Ikon's creative focus shifted from the production and transformation of differential lived space to the partial reproduction of the conceived gallery space by the time of its penultimate move to JBS in 1978.

CHAPTER 2

THE EDUCATION AND EXHIBITION OF ART IN BIRMINGHAM: BEFORE AND AROUND IKON

This chapter links the nineteenth-century spatio-cultural conditions of the city with those persisting in the postwar period. These in turn gave rise to a series of artist-led interventions and gestures in the city's education and exhibition of art, beginning with the Birmingham Artists Committee (BAC) in the 1950s, which were responding to the lack of independent exhibition spaces in the city. These events intermingled with the founding of Ikon both historically and ideologically, with many overlapping artists/ members. Ikon's beginning as a concept in 1963 was responding directly to the ongoing need for a contemporary art space, and its opening as a gallery in 1964 was to a certain extent both a culmination and a byproduct of the aforementioned artist-led events. These all indicate a strain of resistance towards a social space codetermined by the educational, artistic, architectural and planning forces of tradition and modernisation.

2.1 The spatio-cultural conditions of Birmingham from the nineteenth century until the end of the Second World War

In postwar London, contemporary and avant-garde art could be widely viewed in independent and commercial art galleries, the city having become a new 'art capital of the world'.[43] Alongside the numerous commercial galleries of West London, the Whitechapel Art Gallery had been set up in the East End of London, unconventionally

[43] Robertson, B., *Private View,* p.3, see also pp. 28-31.

located for contemporary arts at the time, and was by the 1960s pursuing a high profile, adventurous exhibition policy.[44] The Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) had been established in 1947, with the founding purpose of creating a space for artists, writers and scientists to debate and exhibit outside the confines and traditions of both the Royal Academy and the commercial art market of West London.[45] Although seen as having been partially dominated by fashionable art dealers by the 1960s, the ICA remained a space for artists and their publics to convene and discuss freely in debates which at the time were hailed of historical significance for postwar British art.[46]

Birmingham, England's second city, had no such independent or oppositional space, notably because no institutional or commercial establishment for contemporary art existed there in the first place. This points to the curious isolation of the local art scene by the end of the Second World War, simultaneously from the city itself and the wider art world. Birmingham's postwar art establishment, both in terms of art education and exhibition, seemed dominated by a gaze to the traditions of the nineteenth century, while the city itself was undergoing extensive postwar urban reorganisation. A space for artistic association outside the established art institutions and accompanying art circle of Birmingham was needed, where young local contemporary artists could show their work and where contemporary art developments could be exhibited to the public. This need had persisted from at least the interwar years to the postwar period.

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[44] See Yule, Mary, ' "A place for living art": the Whitechapel Art Gallery 1952-1968', in Garlake, M. ed., *Artists and Patrons in Post-War Britain*,pp. 94-124. and Robertson, B., *Private View,* especially pp. 7-29.

[45] Garlake, M., The Relationship between Institutional Patronage and Abstract Art in Britain c. 1945-1956, p. 20, see also Taylor, Brandon, *Art for the Nation: Exhibitions and the London Public 1747-2001,* Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1999 pp. 189-190 and Eshun, E., *How Soon is Now*.

[46] Robertson, B., *Private View,* pp. 30-31.

The nineteenth century art circle in Birmingham consisted of the RBSA, the SoA and the Art Gallery (BM&AG),[47] all closely linked organisationally and geographically. Complex interrelations of cooperation and opposition between artists, wealthy private citizens and municipal intervention facilitated the symbiotic foundation of these three institutions, accompanied by engagement and debate with the local press and public.[48] This elicited reviews of Birmingham as 'perhaps the most artistic town in England' in 1887.[49]

Physically, the spatial aspects of these institutions echoed their founding and organisational links. Their buildings were erected during a late Victorian spate of civic building around Chamberlain Square in the city centre. Figure 1, compared with a similar view fifty years later (Fig. 5) indicates the steadfastness of this architectural enclave in time. Perhaps understated in its ornamentation and size in comparison to the architecture of other cities, this was nonetheless a cluster of definitively monumental buildings, especially so in contrast to the haphazardly proliferating industrial surroundings.

The interiors of the BM&AG and RBSA can be traced together in their development of display strategies, which to a certain extent correspond to the progression of hanging styles from the nineteenth century museum to white cube interiors.[50] From elaborate and crowded (to the modern eye) displays in the late

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[47] The Art Gallery is often referred to as City Art Gallery, referred to in this thesis as BM&AG from now on, which is its most commonly used name and overarching title.

[48] See Davies, S., *By the Gains of Industry*, Hall, J. B., *A Review of The Royal Birmingham Society of Artists*, Swift, J., *Changing Fortunes*, Hartnell, Roy, *Pre-Raphaelite Birmingham*, Brewin Books, Warwickshire, 1996.

[49] St. Johnston, Alfred, 'The Progress of Art in Birmingham', *The Magazine of Art*, London, 1887, quoted in Hartnell, R., *Pre-Raphaelite Birmingham*, p.1.

[50] As seen in both contemporaneous and more recent surveys and studies of gallery interiors, which I draw on as mentioned in the Introduction.

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Figs. 24-26 and 39 respectively), to a less crowded two-level hang by the 1920s (Figs. 27 and 41) and a single line hang after the war (Figs. 28-20 and 42). In the postwar period, more 'neutral' decorative characteristics began emerging in the BM&AG's modern and contemporary displays (Figs. 33-34 and even the restoration of the Industrial Hall in Fig. 31), while more elaborate or traditional decoration was maintained for exhibitions of the museum's craft collections (Fig. 32) and historical art respectively (Figs. 35-37). On the other hand, the RBSA interiors remained relatively conventional throughout the twentieth century, with only minimal, convention-following differences discernible between the 1960s and the 1990s, in turn reflecting the Society's content attitude with its habitat and habitus (Figs. 42 and 44).

The RBSA's and BM&AG's spatial characteristics - internal, external and locational - indicate that both institutions to a certain extent aspired to the traditional functions attributed to public art museums, of repose for higher aesthetic contemplation or respite from everyday life; these both presuppose an immanent differentiation between art and everyday life. BM&AG in an architectural enclave, within a civic building and with a facade grander than other buildings in the city centre at the time, and old in relation to newer buildings of postwar redevelopment. RBSA's first space had a similarly grand portico entrance which made it stand out from its surrounding shops and therefore not spatially 'belong' to the everyday life of New Street (Fig. 38), while its later entrance visually blended in, rendering RBSA a concealed space that one needed to go upstairs to visit (Fig. 40), in its way discouraging new visitors and differentiating its function as exclusive/private from its open and public surroundings. Even the present RBSA space in the Jewellery Quarter, although bigger and friendlier inside, remains

physically removed from the locus of Birmingham's urban activity. To a certain extent this can be said of Ikon's current space at Brindleyplace, discussed further in the Conclusion.

By 1925 the state of the production and exhibition of art in Birmingham had become an issue of contention, with debate sparking in the local press about the lack of opportunity for younger and local artists against the persistence of established traditions. The art circle of the time was described in a letter written to the Editor of the Birmingham Post as 'a small group of men who have arrogated to themselves the responsibility of deciding what is and what is not art […] entirely out of sympathy with modern movements […] having stood still for at least twenty years … '.[51] A small independent gallery was opened on Edmund Street on Chamberlain Square around that time, by Mr. John Gibbins. Known as the Ruskin Galleries, it aimed to exhibit modern art in the city, with the *London Town Crier* reviewing in 1926: '...when Birmingham seemed hopeless and the modernists felt like exiles in a desert, a miracle happened […] Mr. Gibbins has almost revolutionised the artistic life of Birmingham'.[52] Yet, when the Second World War started, the gallery closed down completely, leaving no space for the exhibition of contemporary art in the city once again.[53]

In 1939 the Barber Institute of Fine Arts (BIFA) was opened on the grounds of the University of Birmingham in Edgbaston.[54] The latter was built on land donated by the Calthorpe Estate in 1900, providing a permanent spatial buffer between the upper-

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[51] Letter to the editor, Birmingham Post, 23.3.1925, quoted in Hall, J. B., *A Review of The Royal Birmingham Society of Artists,* p.2.7, see also pp. 3.1-3.4.

[52] *London Town Crier,* August 1926, quoted in Ibid., p.2.8.

[53] Ibid., p. 3.4.

[54] Verdi, R., *The Barber Institute of Fine Arts,* 1999, p. 8.

class leafy suburb of Edgbaston and the industrial working-class suburb of Selly Oak, to the south of the University.[55] The BIFA was a space intended for scholarly appreciation of art, with its own purpose-built art gallery, library and concert hall. A permanent collection was aspired to which would contend with those of the National Gallery and the Wallace Collection and by the 1960s its trust deed was still restricting it from acquiring works created before 1900.[56] Both the University and the BIFA on its grounds constitute concrete examples of the attempts at hierarchisation of the urban fabric through interdictory planning, with the spaces of knowledge and art separated as a unit from the spaces of everyday life. This attitude towards space, both private and municipal, is reminiscent of the aforementioned 'ennoblement' strategies of Chamberlain Square as well as the spatial practices of the RBSA and BM&AG, and, as is discussed below, was sustained in the planning of Birmingham's newly designated urban areas.

2.2 Birmingham's postwar art scene and the Birmingham Artists Committee

After the war, the only places that would in theory exhibit contemporary art in Birmingham were the BM&AG and the RBSA. The latter would show what was deemed contemporary art by virtue of being produced by living artist members, but its membership filtered out any modernist or avant-garde leanings in favour of its established tradition. The BM&AG continued to be dominated by its nineteenth century

[55] Cherry, G. E., *Birmingham* p. 134.

[56] Verdi, R., *The Barber Institute of Fine Arts,* 1999, pp. 9 - 10.

heritage and its function as a museum, showing contemporary art only in the form of major travelling shows from London, with no works by contemporary artists purchased for its permanent collection.[57] Even though the connections between these institutions had begun to weaken after the war,[58] the spatial and institutional framework of the exhibition of fine art in Birmingham that had been set in the nineteenth century continued in a similar manner through the first half of the twentieth century.

Resistance by artists was not only against the exhibiting institutions of Birmingham, but also the municipal art education, which was becoming increasingly centralised at the SoA on Margaret Street. Both organisational and spatial ties still perpetuated the closed circle of artistic association in Birmingham. The academic traditions of the SoA's Fine Art Department were crystallised in the exhibition establishment of Birmingham, perpetuating a self-referential system of convention and success, which mostly disregarded national and international developments in avant-garde art and contributed to Birmingham's ongoing cultural isolation. However, the ideas and practices of the contemporary avant-garde were circulated in the SoA by teachers at Pre-Diploma level, including excursions to the commercial galleries of London and visiting lecturers,[59] yet a place to pursue further study and a space to experiment with and exhibit such work was still lacking.

The SoA was still a local college, attracting local students who were looking to live and work in Birmingham, but who, upon graduation, had no means of generating

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[57] Skene, Angus, unpublished transcript of lecture on the occasion of Ikon's twenty-first anniversary exhibition,1984, Ikon Archive, see also Watkins, J., *Some of the Best Things…*, p. 15.

[58] Denning, Trevor,, unpublished account submitted for retrospective exhibition at Ikon Gallery, 2003-4, p. 1, Ikon Archive.

[59] See SoA Prospectuses from 1954-63, SoA Collection, BIAD Archive, BCU Birmingham, UK also SoA Minutes, 1954-1969, SoA Collection, BIAD archive.

income from their art. The best available option for them was therefore teaching.[60] This widened the divide between the teaching staff, which was forming at least since the implementation of Pre-Diploma studies.[61] Pre-Diploma teachers saw themselves as having a more contemporary, experimental and 'progressive' approach than the Fine Art department 'proper', where the measure of success was determined by adherence to the hitherto academic traditions and, by extension, membership in the RBSA.[62] Pre-Diploma students faced the analogous problem. Both teachers and students, as artists, were creatively removed from the artistic infrastructure of Birmingham as it stood, if they wished to pursue more contemporary or avant-garde art.

Trevor Denning, a graduate and lecturer of the SoA, made a number of comments expressing his dissatisfaction with the city's art scene, including writing to local papers.[63] Within Margaret Street, he supported the implementation of the Foundation Course, which would radically change pre-diploma art education in Britain from mainly skills-based to ideas- and content-based. [64] The blackboard behind teachers Peter Berry and Sylvani Smith (Merilion) from the 1970s, both involved in the establishment of Ikon, indicates the conceptual exposure to philosophy and critical

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[60] Denning, Trevor, unpublished account submitted for retrospective exhibition at Ikon Gallery, 2003-4, p. 3, Ikon Archive.

[61] Denning, Trevor, unpublished account submitted for retrospective exhibition at Ikon Gallery, 2003-4. The Pre-Diploma course in 1966/7 was to become the School of Foundation Studies, with the opening of an adjacent studio for experimentation, see David Prentice interview notes, March 1999, Ikon Archive and also CoA prospectus 1966-67, BIAD archive.

[62] Denning, Trevor, interview transcript with Jonathan Watkins, dated 16.04.04, Ikon Gallery Archive and Denning, Trevor, interview notes, 2000, recalling RBSA years, Ikon Archive.

[63] Denning, Trevor, interview transcript with Jonathan Watkins, dated 16.04.04, Ikon Gallery Archive, see also Hall, J. B., *A Review of The Royal Birmingham Society of Artists*, p. 4.3-4.5.

[64] Merilion, Sylvani,, handwritten account submitted for 2004 Ikon retrospective exhibition, dated 29.04.03, Ikon Archive, see also Chapman, S., 'Welcome to Ikon', in Watkins, J., *This Could Happen to You*, p. 123.

theory the Foundation Course eventually entailed; Ludwig Wittgenstein and Roland Barthes among others (Fig. 45).

Denning was also a founding member of the BAC, formed in 1947 with the aim of addressing the lack of space and exposure for local contemporary artists. Seeing the RBSA as monopolising Birmingham's only public hanging space and rendering hiring fees prohibitive for individual artists who relied on sales alone for recompense, the Committee decided to hire the gallery and invite individual artists to exhibit.[65] The first of five successive annual exhibitions was held at the hired RBSA gallery at New Street for one week in 1949. The Society insisted that it be made clear on publicity and the exhibition catalogue that it held no responsibility for the content of the exhibition beyond lending the gallery.[66]

These shows were very well attended, demonstrating that there was considerable interest for the kind of work shown.[67] Denning was eventually elected member of the RBSA, became Honorary Secretary in the mid-1950s[68] and remained dedicated to reforming the Society's attitude towards exhibiting contemporary art. During this time, two *Contemporary British Painters* exhibitions were held at the RBSA with the support of the ACGB, in which works by artists at the time widely viewed in

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[65] Letter from BAC to regional ACGB office, 1951, copy in Ikon Archive.

[66] Denning, Trevor, letter to Jonathan Watkins, dated 16.04.04, Ikon Archive and Denning, Trevor, interview in Watkins, J., *Some of the Best Things…*, p. 113.

[67] This is an observation shared by participating artists and local newspapers alike; a comprehensive account of the latter's response can be seen in Hall, J. B., *A Review of The Royal Birmingham Society of Artists 1821-1999*, 2002, pp. 3.1-4.8.

[68] Lists of members and associate members are published in RBSA annual exhibition catalogues, see exhibition catalogues for the year 1955, RBSA Archive.

commercial galleries in London[69] became available to the Birmingham public for the first time.[70]

Attendance continued to be high for these exhibitions, indicating the persistence of an interested public beyond the initial novelty of the BAC exhibitions. A further series of artist led shows, primarily held at the hired RBSA gallery, ensued in the late 1950s and early 1960s. They all included input by Foundation teaching staff as organisers and artists.[71] Colleagues and artists Jesse Bruton, Colin Finn, David and Dinah Prentice[72] organised, among other exhibitions, *Spectrum 1* and *Spectrum 2* at the RBSA, featuring work by artists recently graduated from and/or teaching at Margaret Street. For the later *Four-Letter Art* exhibition, instigated by Denning, artists exhibited pieces of rubbish which were given titles, alongside cleverly hidden 'actual' works of art for sale.[73] It was a tongue-in-cheek endeavour, aiming at an 'extra-ordinary' show, which attracted an audience that broke all previous RBSA attendance records.[74] Nevertheless, none of the artists actually sold anything, covering their costs from 10p catalogue sales alone.[75]

These artist-led exhibitions exposed a local public hitherto relatively unexposed to the surge of contemporary art engaged in institutional critique that had been widely

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[69] Robertson, B., *Private View*, also Leavitt-Bourne, Marcy, Some Aspects of Commercial Patronage 1950-1959 : Four London Galleries, MA dissertation, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, 1990.

[70] Denning, Trevor, interview notes, 2000, recalling RBSA years, Ikon Archive, see also RBSA exhibition catalogues for *Contemporary British Painters*, 1949-1952, RBSA Archive.

[71] RBSA exhibition catalogues for *Contemporary British Painters*, 1955 and 1956, RBSA Archive.

[72] All future Ikon members.

[73] Denning, Trevor, interview transcript with Jonathan Watkins, 16.04.04, Ikon Archive.

[74] Ibid., also Hall, J. B., *A Review of The Royal Birmingham Society of Artists*, pp. 4.6-4.7.

[75] Prentice, David, unpublished notes for talk accompanying *21 for 21* exhibition, Ikon Gallery, 1984, joint talk with Angus Skene and Trevor Halliday, Ikon Archive.

available for years in Western museums and galleries. A rekindled relationship between these endeavours and the local press, continuing from the debates instigated in their pages by readers in the prewar period, was another way of connecting what was happening inside these art galleries with their potentially estranged publics.[76] The exclusivity of Birmingham's art institutions was in part based on the assumption that a new and wider local audience was unavailable and unwilling anyway. This perpetuated the attitude towards contemporary local artists, by virtue of their being ignored, that their artistic production was somehow inferior to that of the art establishment 'proper'.[77] This patronising (in its negative sense) and stifling atmosphere, both for artists and the public, was both generative of the creative acts of resistance and came to expose these assumptions more widely as arbitrary, or at least *as* assumptions.

While the early exhibitions in the hired RBSA galleries aimed at bringing the contemporary art world in fragments to an audience that was lacking access to it, the later *Four-Letter Art* was a gesture of overt institutional critique. By filling the traditional interior of the RBSA with pieces of rubbish and the occasional intentionally indistinguishable artwork, the practices of art institutions in Birmingham were brought under scrutiny and challenged - both in terms of display and exhibition content. The hitherto quiet RBSA interior was rendered necessarily visible. As previously discussed, changes in decoration and display were in accordance with evolving conventions, moving towards the 'neutral' colour schemes and sparser displays common in modern spaces, yet without espousing the white cube aesthetic as such, which was arguably still

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[76] Newspaper articles and exhibition reviews from the 1950s and 1960s, Birmingham Post and Birmingham Mail newspapers, Newspaper Collection, Birmingham City Archives, Central Reference Library, Birmingham. Copies of some of these clippings are held at Ikon Gallery Archive.

[77] See for example interviews by Trevor Denning, Dinah Prentice, David Prentice and Sylvani Merilion in Watkins, J., *Some of the Best Things*…,pp. 113, 119, 117 and 115 respectively.

radical in its extreme abstraction and definitely too entangled with contemporary debates that Birmingham's institutions were still removed from.

Four-Letter Art is reminiscent of similarly spirited gestures executed in contemporary art establishments, both public and commercial, since Marcel Duchamp.[78] Alongside institutional critique, these gestures were challenging the conception of the art market and the requirement of artists and their art to adhere to its currents. This made sense in the artistic environment of Birmingham insofar as it drew attention to the lack of a contemporary art market in the city; it was not art's commercialisation but more overt absence that was being challenged. The more immediate object of resistance was the requirement to adhere to the traditions and conventions of the educational and exhibiting institutions.

It was thus also the BM&AG that was being drawn attention to. After war damage, many of its galleries were closed and the ones retained for display of the permanent collection were refurbished to previous traditional standards designed to accommodate historical art (Figs 28, 30). The older, grander Industrial Hall (Fig. 24) was completely redesigned, including a closing off of the high vaulted ceiling in order to create an effective white cube for the exhibition of 'modern art' (Fig. 31).[79] BM&AG's other modern and contemporary galleries were decorated to a similarly 'neutral' conventional standards, to the extent that they resembled almost indistinguishably other galleries of this type. They adhered to the timeless and placeless white cube aesthetic much more than the RBSA had done with its gentle modifications towards visual 'neutrality'. Comparing the refurbished BM&AG galleries from the 1970s (Figs. 33, 34)

[78] See O'Doherty's discussion of Duchamp's work as the archetypal gestures in O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube,* pp. 66-70.

[79] Davies, S., *By the Gains of Industry,* pp. 83-91. Figures 24 and 37, about a century apart, show the space remaining mostly its original form.

with North American and European museum interiors from the 1930s (Figs. 120, 122) and even Documenta in 1955 (Fig. 123), the homogeneity of this aesthetic becomes apparent. A comparison of later Ikon spaces to such interiors illustrates the same point; for example, Swallow Street in the 1970s (Figs. 58, 59) or JBS in the 1970s and 1980s (Figs. 108, 105, 109) to the MoMA in New York in the 1930s (Fig. 122), Los Angeles in the 1960s (Fig. 127) and even Zurich in 2003 (Fig. 130).

With the Fine Art department of the SoA content in its academic approach, the Foundation Course remained alone in trying to critically engage with a more experimental approach to contemporary art. Its teaching staff continued to take on the responsibility of influencing the exhibition environment of the city by appropriating or creating space for contemporary art, with a lack of municipal support until at least the 1960s, and minimal support from the ACGB in the form of travelling exhibitions.[80] On the other hand, the influx of cutting-edge international modernist ideals into the School of Architecture in Birmingham was encouraged, giving rise to young and successful local architects responsible for some of the most interesting building the city was to see during its postwar redevelopment.[81] In cooperation with the newly formed Department of Planning at the school, students, practicing architects and planners had the city centre and its surrounds as ground for the speculative experimentation that constitutes the learning experience, a real potential for future career in the city and ultimately a space in which to showcase their ideas and work. This points to the immanent

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[80] Denning, Trevor, letter to Jonathan Watkins, dated 16.04.04, Ikon Archive. The lack of support from the local council was repeatedly mentioned throughout Ikon's correspondence with the ACGB in the 1960s and 1970s, and was one of the reasons Ikon sought to be heavily subsidised by the ACGB, Ikon correspondence, ACGB Archives, V&A Museum, Olympia, London, see also Chapters 2 and 3.

[81] See SoA prospectuses for School of Architecture, primarily between 1955-1965, BIAD Archive but also any of the images that show the city centre in spatial flux and regeneration point to this; for example Figs. 1-18 do illustrate a constellation of creative acts to an extent.

contradictions within the same municipal education institution, reflecting the process that perpetuates and augments the separation of art, everyday life and social space from each other.

2.3 Postwar redevelopment in Birmingham - abstraction, hierarchisation and systematisation

The war's significant bomb damage in Birmingham became an opportunity to implement a selection of comprehensive city centre planning proposals which had existed in various forms since the 1910s. Industrial decline followed the niche-boom of the war,[82] and Birmingham turned to business and commerce. Physically, this translated into the clearing of the city centre of its industrial and residential past and its preparation for developments facilitating trade and business in the hope of attracting investment (Figs. 4, 5-10, 11-16).[83] A similarly interdictory spatial strategy to those of Chamberlain Square or the University of Birmingham discussed earlier, yet on a much larger municipal scale, had been proposed for the city centre since the prewar period. This began with the removal of the heaviest of industry and the most unfit of slum housing to more 'suitable' sites outside a proposed Inner Ring Road (IRR), within which the city centre was newly demarcated.

Photographs and maps of the city at various stages of redevelopment reflect the scale of change and upheaval over a relatively short period (Figs. 5-10, 11-16, 19-20).[84] This led to the experience of the city centre in everyday life as one of constant

[82] Cherry, G. E., *Birmingham*, pp. 134, 155-160.

[83] Ibid., pp. 160-163.

[84] Ibid., p. 216-217.

upheaval and temporariness during from the 1950s the early 1970s, especially in the traditionally busy areas like the Bull Ring markets and shopping areas of New Street (Fig.14), High Street and Corporation Street. The space of the city centre was characterised by the physical obstacles and sensory nuisances of construction work, as well as the disorganisation of travel flows that invalidated the predictive reliability of cartography or memory.

Along with unfit housing and abandoned factories and warehouses, buildings of architectural significance were summarily taken down, demolitions which were locally contested and most plots of which remained undeveloped for long periods of time.[85] The large displaced working class population of the city centre was rehoused in large purpose built municipal estates in the former rural suburbs that had now been incorporated within city boundaries,[86] suddenly dispersing entire communities, only to reassemble them in systematised combinations of 'variety' that were spatially isolated from each other and the familiar amenities of the old city centre.[87] Heavy industry had also mostly been relocated to accordingly delineated spaces outside the area cordoned off by the IRR.[88] The newly formed residential and industrial suburbs became the loci of an abstracted and remotely designated everyday life underpinned by a spatial practice which relied heavily on travel. Poorly adapted public transportation tacitly enforced the motor car as the vehicle of 'individual liberation'.[89] With work and

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[85] Larkham, Peter J., *Replanning Birmingham: Process and Product in Post-War Reconstruction*, Faculty Working Paper Series No. 2, , Birmingham, 2007.

[86] Cherry, G. E., *Birmingham,* pp. 171-176.

[87] See discussions on housing in Birmingham in Sutcliffe, A., *Birmingham 1939-1970*, pp. 201-202, 223-226 and from a more critical perspective in Cherry, G. E., *Birmingham,* p. 234-236, p.413.

[88] Sutcliffe, A., *Birmingham 1939-1970,* pp. 406-407.

[89] See Cherry, G. E., *Birmingham,* pp.

residence taken out of the city centre, and consumption, entertainment, education and art centralised in similarly designated places, Birmingham's space, especially in the city centre, became hierarchised.

The IRR defined the confines of the city centre in a manner that debarred the encroachment of buildings whose functions were designated for the outskirts. It also impeded pedestrian flow to and from the city centre, despite the fact that it was intended to act as a drop-off point for cars and buses, with the small size of the city centre allowing pedestrians to walk everywhere on partly pedestrianised streets. In actuality, the IRR constituted the relegation of pedestrian comfort to that of the car, a common criticism by inhabitants, one that was also commonly evaded by being attributed to a resistance to change and modernisation stemming from childhood nostalgia: 'Not many experiences are necessary, at an impressionable age, to form an image which, although it may be physically inaccurate, nevertheless stamps affection on the familiar'.[90]

Without romanticising the living conditions of prewar Birmingham, it is important to note that all this reconstruction was aiming at an ennoblement of the space of the city centre for purposes 'higher' than the accommodation of residence or employment of the working classes in at least equal measure as it was to improve the conditions of life and work. These functions were thus valorised, while everydayness was vulgarised, in a process akin to the separation of art from daily life, and thus their demarcated spaces divided from each other. What was abstractly implemented in Birmingham's city centre redevelopment was the assumption that systematisation in planning would provide a solution to problems whose *lived* aspects were chronically underestimated as a source of meaning; or, that through a rationalisation of the space of

[90] Borg, N., 'Birmingham', p. 49.

the city, the outcomes of everyday experience itself would become remotely determinable.[91]

In terms of the design of its urban space, postwar Birmingham entered an era of abstraction and systematisation stemming from modernist planning paradigms. Reminiscent of Staniszewski's and Klonk's discussions of gallery displays as products/works of their architects and/or curators,[92] the impact of the planned comprehensive redevelopment of Birmingham was at the time, and subsequently, attributed to the vision and decisiveness of one man: Sir Herbert Manzoni, planner and City Engineer of Birmingham from 1935 to 1963, who received most of the contemporaneous praise[93] and also the majority of retrospective criticism.[94] This criticism hinged on the unwieldiness of the abstract and comprehensive character of the planned redevelopment, ever since 'differentiated space' entered the abstract lexicon of planning. Just like the professionalisation of the curator's and architect's duties added a layer of mediation of meaning which arose from the exhibition of art in its spatial context, so did the increasing power and specialisation of city planners. In that respect, both artist and spectator became further alienated from the determination of the meaning of exhibited art, while urban inhabitants became alienated from their homes and work places, as well as from the spatial functions of education, art, culture and so forth. To

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[91] This simultaneously dismissive and prescriptive attitude is exemplified throughout Borg, N., 'Birmingham', especially pp. 48-51.

[92] In this respect, Staniszewski's survey of MoMA interiors reads like a monograph of curators and exhibition architects (Staniszewski, M., *The Power of Display),* similarly Klonk, C., *Spaces of Experience,* especially the attribution of figures, see captions for Figs. 119-123 & 125-129 reproduced from this book.

[93] Borg, N., 'Birmingham', p. 76 and Sutcliffe, A., *Birmingham 1939-1970,* throughout.

[94] See for example debates concerning Birmingham's latest comprehensive redevelopment plans, Bayley, Stephen, 'It's all change in the second city….again', Architecture review: Birmingham City Centre, Observer Review, *The Observer,* published 29/06/08, accessed at http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2008/jun/29/architecture.regeneration on 12/02/11.

that extent it makes sense to speak of urban space as a form of curated space, thus potentially susceptible to similar and/or analogous criticisms. It is usually possible with hindsight to identify areas of inevitable shortcomings of any system, and as will be discussed below, these turned out to be many and soon arising after, and even during, the reconstruction of the city centre from the late 1950s until the early 1970s.[95]

[95] Despite ongoing criticism on more or less valid grounds, the current planning attitude of Birmingham, almost directly oppositional in rhetoric to that of the postwar period, is arguably similar to those plans; this will be further discussed below in the Conclusion. See also Cherry, G. E., *Birmingham* and Larkham, P. J., *Replanning Birmingham.*

CHAPTER 3

THE GALLERY AS ART OBJECT:

THE FOUNDING AND EARLY YEARS OF IKON

3.1 The founding of Ikon

Ikon arose as a creative response within an urban fabric that was thus being abstracted and somewhat violently reorganised. To a certain extent so was everyday life in the city, while being separated from art by virtue of the art institutions continuing to gaze at the historical past while the city was looking 'forward'. This was not only happening in terms of academic conventions, but also in lived space: the city's galleries were remaining static and intact amidst the upheaval, indicating permanence, timelessness and repose, as opposed to daily life, '[…] the Art Gallery was another world'.[96]

In one of the aforementioned artist-instigated exhibitions at the RBSA, the connection was made between Birmingham's contemporary artists and Angus and Midge Skene, a couple who had recently moved to Birmingham for Angus Skene's appointment as accountant at the University in Edgbaston. As art enthusiasts, they had often visited London exhibitions and remained unimpressed by Birmingham's art scene and its detachment from contemporary art.[97] Attending their first of these exhibitions in 1959, they met Trevor Denning and became acquainted with the work of local artist David Prentice.[98] This led to a sale for Prentice, which would spark the beginning of

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[96] Borg, N., 'Birmingham', pp. 49.

[97] Skene, Angus, quoted in Watkins, J., *Some of the Best Things…*, p.15.

[98] David Prentice had been member of the RBSA but had at this point resigned, as he puts it 'in a state of fury over its reactionary stance' (Prentice, David, letter to Jonathan Watkins, 01.06.02, Ikon Archive.)

discussions about the need for a space to promote and exhibit contemporary art locally, leading to the foundation of Ikon by 1963.[99]

A meeting at the Skene house was the first step towards this. David and wife Dinah Prentice assembled with colleagues and friends, not all of them artists; Colin Finn, Jesse and Sue Bruton, Bob and Joan Groves and Andrea Stone.[100] There were many such meetings, attended by colleagues and peers of the core group and held informally mostly in private residences. The as yet unnamed group's founding artists were recorded as being David Prentice, Colin Finn, Bob Groves and Jesse Bruton with Angus Skene acting as secretary and sole financial supporter.[101] Colin Finn left Birmingham eighteen months after the first meeting,[102] at which point Sylvani Merilion was co-opted as director;[103] she in turn resigned in 1967[104] when she had a change of career and family demands.[105]

Given the lack of official documentation for these early meetings, personal accounts give insight into the informal and enthusiastic atmosphere surrounding the early years of Ikon. In a meeting specifically called for the purpose, the gallery's name

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[99] Ibid., pp. 16-17.

[100] Prentice, David, interview notes, March 1999, Ikon Archive. For biographical information on all artists exhibited or related to Ikon and mentioned throughout this thesis, see Watkins, J., *Some of the Best Things…*, pp. 122-128 and Watkins, J., *This Could Happen to You,* pp. 148-170.

[101] The small number of named founders was a result of Angus Skene insisting that only one spouse be a director and a requirement of registering as a charity, a process projected to take place down the line. (Prentice, David, letter to Arthur Lockwood of RBSA, dated 08.10.02, in response to typescript preparation for Hall, J. B., *A Review of The Royal Birmingham Society of Artists*). Both Skenes contributed significantly to Ikon's upstart and running for its first few years, and they remained anonymous benefactors until after Angus Skene resigned his official involvement with Ikon in the 1970s.

[102] Finn, Colin, unpublished account of early Ikon submitted for 2004 retrospective Ikon exhibition, included in letter to Diana Stevenson, undated but stamped received 09.09.2003, Ikon Archive.

[103] Merilion, Sylvani, handwritten account submitted for 2004 Ikon retrospective exhibition, dated 29.04.03, Ikon Archive, see also Watkins, J., *Some of the Best Things…*, p. 117.

[104] Ikon Council of Management Minutes, 10.11.67, Ikon Archive.

[105] Merilion, Sylvani, interview notes, dated 27.02.02, Ikon Archive.

was decided upon. Names like 'New Birmingham Gallery' and 'Image' were suggested, but it was Bob Groves who suggested the name Ikon. The word reflected his artistic preoccupations at the time and Groves, who was to design the first Ikon logo (Fig. 46), liked the word especially because it was 'a four-letter word that divide[d] beautifully geometrically'.[106]

Groves' inspiration from icons echoed the initial idea of Ikon, as a nomadic gallery 'aspiring' to find a fixed abode, like a temple.[107] Ikon responded to Birmingham's art establishment with an attempt at the opposite of static and timeless; a mobile space that would situate itself in the spaces of everyday life in the city. The plan was to organise and promote travelling exhibitions of local artists, going to public places like schools, churches, office foyers, cinemas, post offices, showrooms and shops. The Skenes agreed to provide financially for a set of collapsible portable screens on which works would be hung, along with mountable spotlights. Promotional material was printed, describing Ikon's mission and physical structure (Fig. 47). Ikon's first leaflet read:

> Ikon is an organisation centred in Birmingham formed with the intention of promoting the visual arts.
>
> There are no premises in the city which exist solely for the continuous presentation of contemporary art of a high standard.
>
> Ikon is an embryo gallery. Premises will eventually be acquired to act as a shop window for contemporary art and will include travelling and loan exhibitions.

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[106] Groves, Bob, interview transcript with Jonathan Watkins, dated 16.02.04, Ikon Archive. There is agreement between accounts that initially the group was generally against the name but as the meeting progressed and no better suggestions were brought to the table, it persisted as an idea and was finally decided upon.

[107] Ibid.

> Ikon has been formed because of the need for an accessible place where the exchange of visual ideas can become a familiar activity.[108]

The idea was one of democratisation, where art travelled to its audience rather than the traditionally inverse, making it available to parts of the city where people would not ordinarily seek it out. The attempt to posit this 'virtual gallery' within the existent spaces of everyday life was one that furthermore denotes the engagement of this creative act with the contradictions accompanying the removal of 'fine' art and its institutions from everyday life. Art was being treated as a 'familiar activity' instead of a formal one, or a commodity or special event.

The conventional separation of art from life was amplified by the everyday upheaval and uncertainty generated by Birmingham's redevelopment, insofar as this perpetuated repose and constancy as desired alternatives, traditionally to be found in public art museums.[109] Still tucked away in a civic building within a square of architectural preservation, the BM&AG's refurbished interiors provided a sense of permanence and stillness. These spatial aspects provided a buffer from the lived disruption of the surrounding/containing city-space. Whether in the more traditionally decorated galleries (Figs. 29-30) or the later more modern/neutral incarnations (Figs. 31-34), the relationship between art and everyday life emerged as oppositional, counteracting upheaval and temporariness with serenity and timelessness. On the other hand, Ikon's creative response was acknowledging this temporariness and purposely working within it. Its founding members, by pursuing the idea of a mobile gallery,

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[108] First *Ikon Prospectus,* 1963, Ikon Archive, pp. 1-3, see also cover page and pp. 4-5 in Figs. 46 and 47.

[109] For an insightful discussion of the museum's aspirations of repose see McClellan, A., *The Art Museum from Boullée to Bilbao,* pp. 32-40, 162-167.

decided to *create* space rather than try to appropriate or subvert space that was provided by someone else, as had happened with the exhibitions at the RBSA.

The purpose for Ikon was unlike the museum's - not to collect but to disseminate. This made the need for storage space and ultimately a permanent building entirely irrelevant, allowing for a more penetrative and dynamic mode of communication and distribution. In its earliest incarnation, Ikon's function as a gallery became partially spontaneous. The form of spatial resistance is here almost immediately discernible, with everyday spaces usually designated as non-art temporarily assimilated into Ikon's exhibitions. Instead of waiting for the audience to cross the threshold of the designated gallery space, art travelled towards its (un)intended audience. The collapsible screens were temporary yet temporally transcendent insofar as they were not *contingent* on the *permanence* of a particular architectural structure; Ikon could relocate at will. Ikon's route could be a carefully planned one or it could take the form of a Situationist dérive. This initial idea constituted a pivotal example of the (almost) reversal of the art gallery as a space of repose for higher aesthetic contemplation. Visiting Ikon's exhibitions at this stage entailed an engagement with the contradiction between art and everyday life in a potentially sublatory way, stemming from the experience of the lived space of everyday life.

The collapsible screens transformed the spaces they were placed in. Unlike public sculptures which, when erected, become part of the constant architectural fabric of social space, Ikon's screens challenged the need for permanence by drawing attention to their temporariness while producing a differential space. Ikon's mobile gallery was both an art installation in itself and the production of a total exhibition environment reminiscent of earlier Surrealist and Dada exhibitions, that included the physical

structure housing the gallery/exhibition environment.[110] It is also to an extent reminiscent of the first *Documenta* exhibition in Kassel in 1955, where the art and the fact of its exhibition were more important than the availability of a housing institution.[111] The claim, by both *Documenta* and Ikon, of any space available so long as the exhibition went ahead, imbued the exhibition of art with an ideological urgency to command self-produced space - this arguable constitutes a creative act.[112] For both, resistance to a spatially inhibiting situation involved circumventing 'normal' channels of the production of exhibition space. In the case of Ikon, the situation engaged in was the abstract reorganisation of physical space rather than its destruction, as was the case in Kassel. Locational impermanence was accepted and even pursued insofar as a physically nomadic existence retained a sense of institutional independence and adaptability of ideological resistance.[113] This points to a move towards the content becoming more important than the *form* of the context, yet either equal or subordinate to the *fact* of it.[114] This concern prevailed in Ikon's mobile phase as well as its first fixed gallery space discussed below.

Around the time of Ikon's inception there was a significant development for the arts in Birmingham. In 1962 the Midlands Arts Centre (MAC) was established, its

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[110] See for example discussions Staniszewski, M., *The Power of Display*, pp.22-25 & Klonk, C., *Spaces of Experience*, pp.128-129.

[111] Klonk, C., *Spaces of Experience*, pp.174-189.

[112] Ideological kinship between those two spaces ends there (at least for now), for the global political ramifications of the Documenta exhibition would not, at least immediately, have been shared by the more local endeavour of Ikon, although the 'net' production of space can be seen analogically.

[113] These were, interestingly, also aspirations of the 'white cube' since its emergence and definitely by its establishment as tradition in major institutions by the 1960s.

[114] O'Doherty discusses the growing importance of the gallery space as ideological context throughout in O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, see also Buskirk, Martha, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2005 and Lippard, Lucy R., *Six Years: The Dematerialisation of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1997, among others.

programme showing a commitment to access and education, especially for young people, with a view to democratise a crossover between theatre, music and visual arts. Ikon members were involved in organising many events at the MAC throughout Ikon's first two decades, with Bob Groves and Dinah Prentice serving successive terms as exhibition coordinators. MAC events involved artists of both national and international calibre, taking steps towards bringing awareness of developments in contemporary art to Birmingham, as well as promoting the city as an emerging space for contemporary art to London and beyond. This international approach primed the way for a project like Ikon, by accentuating the need for a more locally focused contemporary exhibition space.[115] In opposition to what was thought of as the exclusivity of the MAC, the Birmingham Arts Lab was formed as an alternative arts centre.[116] This endeavour, though, was less concerned with the visual arts than it was with cinema. Birmingham's art scene was thus needing a further alternative to both these new spaces, one which Ikon aspired to fill with a fixed gallery.[117]

This, along with the idea of the mobile gallery quickly revealing itself as impractical, led to the search for a fixed home for Ikon, which began later in 1963. Ikon looked for an apt space which, due to monetary limitations it could not build for itself and thus had to assimilate, however temporarily, via appropriation. It was no longer

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[115] See Dean, J., Birmingham Arts Laboratory 1968-1982, p. 9, also Chapman, S., 'Welcome to Ikon', pp. 125-126.

[116] The Birmingham Arts Lab opened in abandoned premises on Temple Street and continued to move around the city in search for hospitable premises, residing in Hockley and then moving to the University of Aston campus, where it was eventually consolidated with Aston University's Triangle Arts Centre in 1983, effectively shutting the Arts Lab down. (Dean, J., Birmingham Arts Laboratory 1968-1982, pp.7-8.) Like Ikon, the Arts Lab struggled for the majority of its early existence despite widespread support from local press and the same group of people in the ACGB and other art institutions in Birmingham and nationally that also showed support for Ikon over the years. See *Birmingham Arts Lab: the Phantom of Liberty*, 1998, pp. 21-23.

[117] Chapman, S., 'Welcome to Ikon', p. 126.

about the negation of the timeless permanent gallery but a shift from a mobile to a fixed space which could adapt the gesture of Ikon's screens into its own space. This entailed a shift of Ikon's hitherto almost reversed art/spectator relationship, towards a more conventional structure of a gallery visit; the audience now came to the gallery. Ikon's space thus had to somehow be simultaneously efferent and afferent to art and spectators, in keeping with its founding aspirations of democratic dissemination and familiarity with everyday life.

The first few attempts before the eventual opening of the gallery in the Bull Ring kiosk did not come to fruition but indicate the desire to stay well within the confines of the freshly redefined city centre in spaces left over by the reconstruction. Most spaces considered were originally built for commercial use. One idea was to squat, with the collapsible screens already built, in abandoned and empty shops and showrooms and create a new nomadic virtual gallery in previously unoccupied spaces.[118] This would remove the need for permission to exhibit in public spaces that were already in use, but maintained Ikon's early mobile aspirations.

Another was to rent an abandoned warehouse or factory building; such spaces were many and cheap due to postwar industrial decline and pending redevelopment. Dinah Prentice had already envisaged opening a gallery in one of the arches beneath the Snow Hill station viaduct.[119] These viaducts, then in disuse, already constituted a negative space in terms of their intended function. A space left over from the supportive function of the bridge to the railway tracks above, which in turn constituted the

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[118] Prentice, Dinah, unpublished account of the founding of Ikon submitted for 2004 Ikon retrospective exhibition, first draft, attached to letter dated 27.01.03, Ikon Archive.

[119] A meeting with Professor Pickvance from ACGB was arranged, which ended with the premises unseen due to a misunderstanding with the key holders and no money forthcoming, with the accompanying disbelief at the fact that anyone was trying to open a gallery in 'moribund' Birmingham. (Prentice, Dinah, unpublished account, first draft, dated 27.01.03, Ikon Archive.)

supportive spaces for the 'negative' functions of industry and consumption, like storage of products and equipment. In this respect, the viaduct was a far removal from everyday life in terms of physical access within the familiar structure of the city. Angus Skene noted that he wanted to avoid the endeavour being rendered merely self-congratulatory in nature, and as the sole financial benefactor at this point voiced his skepticism.[120] Though inexpensive, the idea was finally abandoned because the spaces required too much conversion work to be made weather and sound proof from the main train line passing overhead.[121] What was needed on top of an affordable and capacious space was one that was fit for the comfortable occupation of thinking, acting and experiencing people, both as keepers and spectators, as well as art objects.

The next endeavours returned to the acquisition of the abandoned retail spaces Ikon had previously considered squatting. This took advantage of spaces which had not yet been demolished after being compulsory purchased for construction of the IRR. Such spaces were temporary due to imminent demolition, yet insofar as they remained indefinitely standing or vacant, they constituted wasted space in the eyes of an endeavour like Ikon. They were characterised by city centre locations, they were already intended for the passing public and thus also internally comfortable and fitted for the exposition of goods. Expecting to house only temporary exhibitions of a few weeks, the lack of future security was irrelevant for Ikon in the face of an already transient city structure.

Where squatting was not necessary because the space could still be let, renting was an obvious solution. When Angus Skene took out a lease on a retail space in 1964,

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[120] Skene, Angus, unpublished transcript of lecture on the occasion of Ikon's twenty-first anniversary exhibition,1984, appended to letter from Angus Skene to Jonathan Watkins dated 19.09.99, Ikon Archive, p. 2.

[121] Ibid.

his decision moved the gallery away from the liminal spaces of still-undeveloped areas and into the heart of the redevelopment itself; the newly built Bull Ring shopping centre which had recently been opened as the largest purpose built indoor shopping centre in Britain (Figs. 11-13), 'a wild and romantic place'.[122]

3.2 Ikon at the Bull Ring 1965-1968

Opened in 1964, the Bull Ring accommodated a vast number of consumer activities and was ultimately an 'exciting place', as Angus Skene had put it.[123] In a complex structure straddling sections of the new IRR, with many levels and walkways (Figs. 13, 49), Ikon members felt the need to help their audience navigate (Fig. 48):

> Birmingham's Bull Ring is now so extensive that strangers might have difficulty in finding the gallery. It is in the pedestrian precinct to St. Martin's House, and the view illustrated above is from the multi-storey car-park adjoining St. Martin's House.[124] Approached from the Rotunda, St. Martin's House is easily identified as the large block with the illuminated "S for Schweppes" sign on its end wall.[125]

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[122] Borg, N., 'Birmingham', p. 49.

[123] Skene, Angus, notes for talk accompanying *21 for 21* exhibition, Ikon Gallery, 1984, Ikon Archive.

[124] See Figs. 48 and 49. The 'S' of the mentioned advertisement can be seen on the top left of Fig. 12 (bottom).

[125] Ikon prospectus, 1955/56, back cover, Ikon Archive, see also Fig. 48.

The Skenes provided the funds to lease the empty one of three octagonal glass kiosks across an underpass from the open-air market, for three years (Figs. 49, 55).[126] Unconventional for an art gallery, in many ways this space was ideal for what Ikon stood for. The kiosk was situated in a place designed to attract a large number of passersby not ordinarily finding themselves intentionally in the vicinity of a contemporary art gallery. It also provided an exhibition space which in many ways was the antithesis of a white cube. Its glass walls made exhibitions visible from the outside (Figs. 51-54), almost inverting the traditionally interior-oriented gaze of an art gallery. In a single unit of space (Fig. 55), cleaning and installation equipment and any activities had to be housed alongside the artworks. That included the display and sale of prints, postcards, pamphlets and the gallery's own printed promotional material.[127] The functions and workings of the gallery were not sealed away in an office in the back of the building as, for example, in Ikon's third home at Birmingham Shopping Centre (Fig. 92). This was not solely due to the kiosk's design but because such a separation was specifically being contested and the integration of functions was inherent in the very organisational structure of Ikon's members at that point.

Being the only such endeavour in Birmingham, variety was to be maintained by not focusing on one aspect of contemporary art and making potentially controversial work available for viewing and sale.[128] It was decided that directors of the gallery would always be practising artists, each one of which would be entitled to one show of their own work a year. A recommendation from one of the four directors for an exhibition

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[126] Watkins, J., *Some of the Best Things…*, pp. 20-21.

[127] See informal meeting notes, mostly undated but from c. 1963-1966, Ikon Archive.

[128] Skene, Angus, unpublished transcript of lecture on the occasion of Ikon's twenty-first anniversary exhibition,1984, appended to letter from Angus Skene to Jonathan Watkins dated 19.09.99, p. 2, Ikon Archive.

would be enough to get it passed, maintaining variety through the members' divergent artistic approaches.[129] Exhibitions would last three weeks, without incurring rental fees for exhibiting artists, while sales commission would remain low. Entrance to the gallery and the general run of the catalogue would be free to the public and information about forthcoming exhibitions would be sent out to interested individuals, schools and colleges.[130]

The exhibition and promotional policy reflected aspirations towards the democratisation of art accompanied by socialist political beliefs on behalf of at least some of its members.[131] The aim was to create a space where a link could be established between the artists and people of Birmingham; a space where art could be 'lived' simultaneously by artists/curators and spectators, disordering the mediatory boundaries between these functions. The kiosk was intended as a friendly place where the audience would have the opportunity to look at art for long periods of time and not feel pressured by sales talk.[132]

There were no specified curators with the authority to choose exhibitions and their display, but rather a group of artists proceeding through mutual consensus to select work in an essentially peer-reviewed manner. The exhibiting artists were personally involved in all aspects of their exhibition. Much like the blurring of responsibilities between the specifically curatorial professions and those of the artist in contemporary art circles of Europe and North America in the 1960s and 1970s,[133] Ikon artists curated,

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[129] Ibid.

[130] Ibid., p. 4.

[131] Watkins, J., *Some of the Best Things…*, pp. 18, 117.

[132] See informal meeting notes, mostly undated but from c. 1963-1966, Ikon Archive.

[133] Staniszewski, M., *The Power of Display*, especially pp. 269-271, see also Deroo, R. J., *The Museum Establishment and Contemporary Art*, pp. 2-11.

exhibited, negotiated sales, designed and printed publicity and catalogues, organised competitions, liaised with funding bodies and the media and spoke with their public about their own and others' work and the gallery. At the same time they were responsible for all the 'mundane' everyday activities of running a gallery, from exhibition installation and lighting to invigilation, cleaning, security and secretarial work. At this stage all the work was done on a voluntary basis by mostly the founders, their friends and exhibiting artists. The help of Angus Skene in his capacity as registered accountant was perhaps the only outsourced responsibility, keeping in mind that the majority of what needed doing regarding finances was done jointly with the members in relatively informal meetings.[134]

The core group initially comprised of approximately ten people at most, who also had regular jobs and families, meaning that Ikon's opening hours were quite limited.[135] The local press showed interest from the beginning, mostly because of the unconventional location of the gallery, but continuing with reviews of the exhibitions themselves.[136] Gradually, awareness of the gallery and visitor numbers grew, some

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[134] It should be noted here that the Skenes' financial assistance was maintained in anonymity until after they ceased their official involvement with the gallery in the 1970s, and they were never given any capacity in curatorship and no such influence is traceable from accounts of either the Skenes or founding members. They were benefactors in a way that seems to not have interfered with or directly influenced the artistic running of the gallery. The fact that Angus and Midge Skene chose the kiosk and Swallow Street premises respectively seems to have had more to do with their personal enthusiasm to expedite the process than a desire to enforce decisions.

[135] Prentice, Dinah, unpublished account, second draft, 15.05.04, p. 1, Ikon Archive.

[136] According to David Prentice, there was no serious art criticism going on at all in Birmingham before Ikon and since the BAC exhibitions Peter Cox of the Birmingham Mail and Post newspapers had been covering the new developments. He was later to become features editor and offer considerable support for the gallery through the press. (Prentice, David,, unpublished notes for talk accompanying *21 for 21* exhibition, Ikon Gallery, 1984, p. 3, Ikon Archive.)

volunteering help with the operational workload.[137] Funding from the ACGB was continually sought after and the regional art director Andrew Dempsey followed the efforts with considerable interest from the initial approach about the railway arch idea.[138] A regular subsidy could not be guaranteed, nevertheless, until the gallery underwent the lengthy and costly procedure of becoming a limited company with charitable status,[139] which was achieved in April of 1967.[140]

Ikon's kiosk constituted a challenge to the institutional exhibition of contemporary art as it was practised until then in Birmingham, both in terms of its location and architecture and the internal display and artistic curatorial experimentation it both necessitated and enabled. The transparent walls allowed the sensory influx of the outside world on a constant basis (Fig. 54). In Ikon's kiosk works were hung in front of a backdrop of everyday life, substituting the bustling activity of the shopping centre for the bare white wall of the white cube. Light was not the only penetrating factor from the world outside the gallery. The sound of the crowd and traffic along with the smells associated with them - cars and buses on the IRR, the other two kiosks being a bakery and a florist - would flood in from a door that was often left open, much like a shop, leading directly into the main and only exhibition space, without the existence of a vestibule of preparatory separation.

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[137] One letter surviving in the archives came from 'Derek of Deritend' in 1965, indicating frustration at the state of art in Birmingham and praise for the attempts of Ikon and the support it ought to receive, offering services as invigilator or printer/copier and ending the letter with 'Sorry I cannot send any money; if I could I would. But am [sic] 16 and live in a state of gross poverty, to say the least!'. Typewritten letter to Sylvani Merillion, signed 'Derek of Deritend', dated 10.05.65, p.2, Ikon Archive.

[138] ACGB internal correspondence, from Andrew Dempsey to Gabriel White, dated 24.06.66, ACGB Archive.

[139] Ibid.

[140] Skene, Angus, letter to Miss Kirk of ACGB, dated 09.08.67, copy in Ikon Archive.

At the same time, hat was happening in the gallery became a self contained 'other' world that could be observed from any physical angle - even from above if one were to stand on the traffic overpass. One of the early reviews of Ikon in the kiosk refers to being a spectator at one of its exhibitions as being inside a fishbowl.[141] The artists/ curators acknowledged and utilised this in different ways. Firstly, it was an opportunity to multiply the available hanging space by exhibiting works facing out as well as in (Figs. 51, 53). Gallery visitors would have to actively seek the parts of the exhibition that were facing outward given they wanted to 'complete' their visit. This also constituted a form of advertising. Passersby not already aware of the existence of a gallery there would almost unwittingly see part of the exhibition, some of them drawn inside to see the rest, similarly to a shop window display. Bearing in mind that the goal of the gallery was both to sell and exhibit, both intentions were almost perfectly aided by the kiosk's structure.

The upfront treatment of its commercial aspect by the gallery, reinforced by the sensory reminders of the kiosk's busy location, further shattered the isolation of the artwork from the modern world and society in time, again challenging the institutional 'neutral' aesthetic of repose and its attendant sanctification of the work of art. When volunteering schedules allowed it, Ikon aimed to remain open until eight in the evening to cater for people leaving work and visiting past normal shopping hours. The lights were also left on inside the kiosk until one in the morning.[142] I would argue this created a new aspect to the space, if a different space altogether, which was perhaps the closest the kiosk came to fulfilling the white cube installation shot. The whole exhibition could be viewed without the presence of anyone inside the gallery and potentially in total

[141] Unpublished Angus and Midge Skene account appended to letter from Midge Skene to Jonathan Watkins dated 04.12.02, p.3, see also 'For Modern Art Turn at the Kiosk', *The Times*, 12.04.65, newspaper cutting, copy at Ikon Archive.

[142] Informal Ikon meeting notes, dated 1965, Ikon Archive.

isolation from any passersby. However it could never be a timeless or placeless installation shot, like the ones aspired to by a 'high' white cube aesthetic, but one that was necessarily visually representative of its spatiotemporal situation through the inclusion of surrounding architecture and external space.

In the upheaval of reconstruction, building work and temporariness, one way to situate oneself in a centre of comfort is to turn to the space that represents permanence amidst transience through the fact that it is a completed whole. In its way Ikon existed within and offered a different kind of repose. The completed and functioning Bull Ring represented one of the first fruits of massive reconstruction, with its new and exciting architecture, landscaped grounds and places to engage in the familiar actions of shopping, eating, rest and interaction with others in a geographical and social centre of a city characterised by recently displaced community.

Ikon at this stage, by virtue of the fact that it was still creating its own space, was reminiscent of examples of agitprop performances like the ones taking place in and around the MoMA in New York around 1969,[143] reorganisation of a collection display as artwork like that of Fred Wilson,[144] or the publication of criticism as art like that of *Art & Language*. If these all constitute an engagement with, and critique of, the scholarly, political, discursive, professional and institutional apparatuses that inform and determine the curated space of the gallery they are engaging with, then the production of a non-institutional gallery space by artists constituted the artwork engaging with and in the curated space of the city.

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[143] See Staniszewski, M., *The Power of Display,* pp. 263-271.

[144] See for example discussion in McClellan, A., *The Art Museum from Boullée to Bilbao,* pp. 108-109.

Curatorship is not only in the purview of the professional museum and gallery keepers, connoisseurs and installation designers, but is more generally the process by which authority is accumulated to similarly preserve, reorder, plan and physically produce all facets of physical and discursive space in (hyper)modernity and potentially, ultimately, everyday life. To a great extent 'discipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space';[145] the same could be argued of artworks and their spectators. The culturally driven urban unrests in response to political issues that occurred in the late 1960s can be seen as a critique of and attempts at resistance to the systematically curated space of Western postwar cities. The protests and strikes of 1968 in France are a case in point, where the continued separation of art from life was specifically contested.[146]

The institutional response to this in Paris was the building of the Pompidou Centre for contemporary art. Apart from scale, the similarity in description of the building with Ikon's kiosk and its interjection between the art/life divide in its intentions is uncanny, not least because of the glass walls; only in the Pompidou Centre it was designed in this way from the outset.[147] This illustrates the assimilation of concerns stemming from the separation of art and everyday life by institutional and commercial powers within an urban context. The Pompidou Centre also had an effect on the surrounding urban area and was to an extend instrumental in its regeneration. The space of the commercial gallery situated within everyday life became a commodity in itself, a cultural trend that only three years after the opening of Ikon's kiosk, when the

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[145] Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Penguin, London, 1991, p. 141.

[146] For a detailed discussion of this see Deroo, R., *The Museum Establishment and Contemporary Art.*

[147] Ibid., pp.167-170. See also Baudrillard, Jean, 'The Beaubourg-effect: implosion and deterrence', *October*, No. 20, Spring 1982, pp. 3-13.

gallery had re-situated itself to its second home, would prompt the opening of a commercial gallery in the new Edgbaston shopping centre development.[148] This was also a logic implemented by later Ikon director Simon Chapman when negotiating the lease to West Court at Birmingham Shopping Centre in 1972;[149] the inclusion of art in a commercial development was seen as adding sophistication and a kind of authenticity.[150] As will be discussed below, while situating Ikon within everyday life, this latter capacity also arose from the separation itself between art and life itself.

The vast and complicated architectural characteristics and celebrations of function, along with its legacy and subsequent infamy, situate the Bull Ring as a modernist capitalist monument in Birmingham. In accordance with leitmotifs of forward looking progress that have been present in the civic history of the city since at least the eighteenth century, the Bull Ring was thus to a certain extent analogous to Victorian monumental civic buildings already existent in the city, or even the architectural experiments of museums today. Ikon's kiosk partook of the Bull Ring's monumentality. Its interior, however, was not in denial of its external architectural grandeur; unlike the impressive architectural experiments of museums today with the 'faceless' white cube interiors they are often criticised for having.[151]

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[148] Everitt, Anthony, 'What is Avant-garde Today is Established Taste Tomorrow', *Birmingham Post*, 10.09.67, newspaper cutting, copy in Ikon Archive.

[149] Discussed further in Chapter 4.

[150] For a discussion of art galleries and museums as bearers of authenticity in commercialised settings as a strategy of current contemporary art spaces, see McClellan, A., *The Art Museum from Boullée to Bilbao*, 'Introduction'.

[151] See for discussion discussion of the Guggenheim in Bilbao in McClellan, A., *The Art Museum from Boullée to Bilbao*, and various newspaper articles quoted therein, pp. 93-99, also discussions of the Pompidou Centre interiors, as well as those of its surrounding commercial galleries, in Deroo, R. J., *The Museum Establishment and Contemporary Art.*

Eventually, the architecture of the Bull Ring itself came to be deemed faceless following the swift backlash of postwar redevelopment plans in British urban planning.[152] Its structures aged and its walkways and underpasses became dangerous, rendering the IRR a definitive stranglehold for Birmingham's pedestrians, who had by now definitely been relegated in importance to motor traffic.[153] Ikon had moved on by then but its engagement with the effects of this ring road and surrounding planning developments was to continue to varying extents up to and including its present home.

The lease on the kiosk was approaching its end in March 1968 and the strain on artist and volunteer relationships indicated that if Ikon was to continue, there was a need for paid staff to accommodate more regular opening hours and to relieve the load from a small number of overworked volunteers.[154] The decision to move was further informed by a desire and need for a larger space to accommodate more works per show and perhaps even hold two simultaneous exhibitions.[155]

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[152] Cherry, G. E., *Birmingham,* pp. 224-229.

[153] Ibid., p. 235, see also Bayley, Stephen, 'It's all change in the second city….again'.

[154] Skene, Angus, unpublished transcript of lecture on the occasion of Ikon's twenty-first anniversary exhibition,1984, appended to letter from Angus Skene to Jonathan Watkins dated 19.09.99, Ikon Archive, p. 4.

[155] By the end of the Bull Ring gallery, Ikon had held 36 exhibitions and 2 touring shows held, as well as a national competition of prints and drawings, with prize money from the ACGB. (*Ikon Through the Looking Glass,* exhibition catalogue, p. 5, Ikon Archive). For a list of Ikon exhibitions for the years 1965-1972, see Watkins, J., *Some of the Best Things…,* pp. 120-121.

CHAPTER 4

TOWARDS INSTITUTIONALISATION: THE SPACE(S) OF IKON 1968-1978

In this chapter I will examine the organisational changes of Ikon and how these affected the selection of spaces chosen for the gallery after the Bull Ring years. Although the placing of the gallery each time showed a commitment to maintaining a connection with the everyday life of its public within the practical limitations of the city and the gallery's capacities, a definite shift towards white cube interiors can be traced. As Ikon became organisationally larger and more hierarchical, the links with other non-institutional art spaces as well as the existent art institutions of Birmingham were strengthened, while they all continued to struggle within the continually abstracted and experimentally curated urban space of the ongoing redevelopment.

The spaces subsequent to the Bull Ring kiosk all have something that differentiates them from their predecessor and also from the current Ikon Gallery, in that they constitute a gradual process of departure from Ikon as gesture of spatial resistance. Yet they also demonstrate a tendency towards spatial considerations that have much in common with Ikon's inception and less so with the current Ikon location, building and interior.[156]

4.1 Ikon at Swallow Street 1968-1972

The search for new premises, after the Bull Ring lease came to an end was disheartening for Ikon's members, due mostly to a lack of funds and appropriate spaces. Eventually

[156] This will be further discussed in the Conclusion.

Midge Skene came across the abandoned mortuary of the medical school of Queen's College Chambers at Swallow Street (Fig. 57). Queen's College Chambers was located on Paradise Street, opposite the entrance to the Town Hall and facing away from Chamberlain Square. Figures 12 and 20 show its location in relation to the new IRR. It was a large Victorian building designed to house lectures and living quarters, backing onto Swallow Street which is where the entrance to Ikon was.[157]

Unlike the kiosk, this was an old space, not built for public dwelling, with the basement Ikon was to occupy showing clear signs of abandonment and requiring major refit before it could be used for exhibitions. In January 1969 the new gallery was opened, with the founding exhibition selection policies intact and the focus now on solo shows by living artists.[158] The new space allowed for two exhibitions to be held simultaneously. It also provided space for a collection of prints, multiples and a small number of paintings retained permanently for sale, alongside related pamphlets and books.[159] Although the new premises provided a much larger space the gallery suffered from a low number of visitors due to its location. Nevertheless, the gallery continued there until the building was ordered to be demolished in July 1972 (Figs. 68, 69), ending with a retrospective exhibition, *Through the Looking Glass, Ikon 1965-1972.*[160]

The move to Swallow Street was informed by a need for a more suitable exhibition space with respect to a variety of factors. Remaining in the Bull Ring was not financially viable and was a concern that later informed Ikon's third move, that from the

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[157] See location of Swallow Street in relation to Chamberlain Square in Fig. 20.

[158] A point often repeated throughout minutes and official correspondence and publicity of the time, found in Ikon Archive.

[159] Skene, Angus, letter to Anthony Field of ACGB, dated 28.03.69, Ikon Archive.

[160] By this point, there had been 93 single artist shows and 40 group and touring shows during Ikon's seven years. (*Ikon Through the Looking Glass,* exhibition catalogue, p. 6, Ikon Archive)

then new Birmingham Shopping Centre to JBS in 1978. The need to move towards a better or more 'suitable' exhibition space holds especial interest for it constituted in some respects a move towards a more *traditional* receptacle for contemporary art, akin to a 'white cube', not only in terms of the internal decoration and display but also the gallery's relation to its ideological roots and intended audience.

The conversion of the basement into a gallery was entirely carried out on a volunteer basis by the core group and friends.[161] A new roof was fitted along with new cantilevered concrete steps to accommodate the fact that the gallery was below street level (Figs. 57, 60, 65).[162] The floor was left bare brick and the walls were painted white with their texture showing through (Figs. 64, 65). Works were hung directly onto walls or exhibited directly onto the floor or on pedestals and cabinets which were purpose built and usually painted white (Figs. 58, 59, 61). A partition wall provided the capacity for two exhibitions running simultaneously and the possibility to permanently display prints and literature for sale, fulfilling admittedly more efficiently than the kiosk the need to exhibit as *much* material as possible (Fig. 58).

Yet the potentially available spectatorship dwindled due to Ikon's new location. It was tucked away in a side street where, despite being only a short walk from New Street, Chamberlain Square and the train station, it did not have the passing traffic to rely on, like the kiosk previously (see Fig. 70).[163] Being situated on a back street facing away from commercial, civic and commuter thoroughfares, in a space built for private study, lowered its exposure to new visitors. The gallery suffered the effects of relative

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[161] Unpublished Angus and Midge Skene account appended to letter from Midge Skene to Jonathan Watkins dated 04.12.02, p.4.

[162] Ibid.

[163] Chapman, S., 'Welcome to Ikon', p. 123.

insulation from new audiences which led to an overall decrease in visitors and sales for the artists, despite the greater suitability of the internal space.[164]

At the same time, proximity to Chamberlain Square - and thus the BM&AG and the RBSA - meant Ikon could share in established art audiences of the city's art institutions with shared publicity. Visitors already in the area in search of art and people otherwise already in the know and likely to visit these galleries constituted spectators potentially very different in character to the ones aimed at with Ikon's kiosk. Both for seasoned art audiences and those situating themselves outside that demographic either by choice or assumption, expectations of what was to be seen at Ikon would be affected. The extrovert character of Ikon's collapsible screens and kiosk and the gallery's preoccupations with everyday life and new audiences had now shifted towards a closer spatial affinity to not only the local art establishment but also wider Western display conventions of containment and 'interiority'.[165] In an almost reversal to Ikon's mobile and kiosk galleries, the *form* of the space as art receptacle came to supersede the *fact* of it at Swallow Street. Art was separated from everyday life in terms of location and interior and the now contained artwork came to approach ideologically its institutional significations.

When the Council of Management (CoM) was established in 1967 as part of the procedure of becoming a charity, Ikon meetings began to be officially minuted and annual general meetings were held. More people were invited to join the Council, including figures prominent in the City Council and industry, education and art

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[164] Chapman, S., 'Welcome to Ikon', p. 123.

[165] On containment of the artwork see O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube,* on a discussion of interiority see Klonk, C., *Spaces of Experience.*

institutions of the Midlands.[166] Submitted accounts for these years show ACGB funding slowly increasing and covering the also slowly increasing deficit of the gallery each year with grants in the form of guarantee.[167] Yet caution on the part of both parties is discernible, as Ikon was consistently trying to be frugal and the ACGB was still not committing to any regular support.[168] The Skenes had entirely sustained Ikon financially up to this point and, although their responsibilities could subside, they continued to offer support. During the first three years of Ikon's four-year stay at Swallow Street, the gallery was still run by artists and volunteers, with the first member of paid staff employed only in 1971, when the ACGB provided enough funds to cover the cost of one full-time manager, Jeanette Koch (Fig. 65).[169]

Swallow Street marked the beginning and maturing of a different kind of organisation that led to the eventual resignation of two founding members. Bob Groves was no longer able to commit the same amount of time to the gallery but also expressed the sentiment that his participation in Ikon was no longer in accordance with his aspirations for the gallery, since the establishment of the CoM. This feeling was apparently prevailing among other the founding members around that time.[170] David Prentice, in his letter of resignation from Ikon in 1971, described his involvement as increasingly frustrating and indecisive. He located the problem as stemming from the CoM dissipating the driving single-mindedness and total control of an idea and its

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[166] Ikon Memoranda and Articles of Association, 1963, Ikon Archive.

[167] Annual Accounts, Balance Sheets and Income and Expenditure Accounts, submitted to Financial Services Authority between 31.03.68 - 31.03.72, copies in Ikon Archive.

[168] Correspondence between Ikon and ACGB, various dates during the period 1968-1972, ACGB Archive.

[169] Unpublished Angus and Midge Skene account appended to letter from Midge Skene to Jonathan Watkins dated 04.12.02, p. 4.

[170] Groves, Bob, interview transcript with Jonathan Watkins, dated 16.02.04, Ikon Archive.

execution that the previous artists/directors enjoyed and asked to be given one such clear area of responsibility with at least one exhibition a year to organise on his own.[171] He received no response to his letter[172] and he and his wife Dinah finally left Ikon altogether very shortly after its next move.[173] This estrangement of the founding members is indicative of how interlinked the day to day running of the gallery was to its ideological and creative constitution. A more conventional, delegated structure very soon frustrated the Ikon's founding artists, who no longer saw themselves as enjoying the creative input to the inception and design of exhibitions that used to be the norm in the initial Ikon incarnation. On the one hand, this was a shift of executive powers between individuals, understandably giving rise to personal issues of discontent. Yet it was also a shift away from the combined functions of early Ikon, where the exhibition organisers and curators were also active in the production and education of art in the city, operating by mutual consensus. From here on Ikon's functions became more open to professionalised specialisation.

Alongside the organisational and funding factors that inevitably affected the ideological stance of the gallery and thus its everyday running (and vice versa), were the spatial considerations which were simultaneously a product of and *productive* of space. Ikon's ongoing engagement with everyday life at this point was not one of bivalent structure, between absolute success or failure, nor can it be subcategorised into finite or exhaustible facets. Rather, it indicates an engagement with the necessarily constantly

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[171] Prentice, David, letter to Ikon Gallery Director, dated 25.03 71, letter reproduced and attached to letter to Jonathan Watkins, dated 03.06.04, Ikon Gallery Archive, with handwritten note to Jonathan Watkins: 'Surprisingly I did not get any response to it.' His resignation was acknowledged in the summary letter accompanying the accounts of year ending 31.03.71, dated 12.07.71, Ikon Archive.

[172] Ibid.

[173] Prentice, David, unpublished account submitted for retrospective exhibition at Ikon Gallery, undated but probably 2003, p. 2, Ikon Archive.

renewable and developing web of historical, ideological, political, commercial, personal and cultural relationships in space, which in turn constitute the concrete abstraction that the term 'everyday life' serves as the approximation for, which cannot necessarily be reduced to a system. In more particular terms, Ikon's engagement with its aspiration to spatial production was echoed in its concerns when faced with moving from the Swallow Street gallery.

4.2 Ikon at West Court, Birmingham Shopping Centre 1972-1978

The demolition of Queen's College Chambers seemed to herald the end for Ikon, yet the decision by the CoM to appoint a director of the Gallery for the first time may have have rekindled the single-mindedness David Prentice had identified as lacking, albeit centralised in the hands of an overarching executive individual. Emerging from the CoM and having previously worked in an administrative position with the Birmingham Arts Lab, new director Simon Chapman (Fig. 81) aimed to re-situate Ikon in a busy area to boost visitor numbers and was highly proactive in his endeavour.[174] One idea was to rent a large retail space on the corner of New Street and Victoria Square, which would have put Ikon in a prime shopping location and near the BM&AG, Central Library and across the street from the RBSA. The high rent on this space could not be negotiated down and this option was abandoned.

Rents were prohibitive for most commercial properties, including another new shopping centre development above the refurbished New Street Railway Station, the Birmingham Shopping Centre (Fig. 71). Nevertheless, Chapman managed to negotiate a

[174] Ikon CoM Minutes, 30.09.73, Ikon Archive.

favourable rent on Unit 45 of the West Court of the shopping centre, suggesting to the manager of the development that a modern art gallery would reinforce the upscale image advertised.[175] The lease was negotiated for seven years, with the rent remaining well below its commercial value and slowly increasing towards that sum, allowing the gallery time to procure more secure funding while remaining operational.[176]

Outlined in the pamphlet accompanying the retrospective exhibition *Through the Looking Glass* of 1972, the final exhibition at Swallow Street, was an ambitious programme of activities geared to accompany the further expansion of the gallery in its upcoming move.[177] An even larger and more versatile exhibition space, with an area for the display and sale of prints and other works permanently on hold by Ikon, were two aims that the new space could satisfy immediately. The shape of the gallery was long and narrow, making it relatively inflexible in comparison to Swallow Street, but it offered the advantage of having two separate exhibition spaces on two levels; Ikon's exhibitions posters in Figures 73 and 74 provide a cross-section and floor plan of the gallery. Connected by internal stairs, the two floors of similar size could accommodate separate shows or one large one could be partitioned by the stairs (Figs. 82-84). A shop for prints and books as well as a small office/display space were built in (Figs. 86, 92).

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[175] Chapman, S., 'Welcome to Ikon', pp. 125-126.

[176] Ikon Council of Management Minutes, 18.07.72, Ikon Archive. Continued support from the ACGB meant the possibility of two paid staff, which in turn meant less erratic opening hours, but there was still no definite regular support and Ikon had previously asked the ACGB to consider funding the gallery as 'heavily subsidised', acknowledging the radical change that would entail for the gallery's policies. (Skene, Angus, letter to Anthony Field of ACGB, accompanying a re-application for ACGB grant, dated 28.03.69, Ikon Archive.) There was no direct response made to that request and the gallery continued to be funded as was for the time being.

[177] *Ikon Through the Looking Glass,* exhibition catalogue, p. 4, Ikon Archive.

At West Court, for the first time, conversion of the interior was professionally designed and managed.[178] Floors on the lower gallery were brick tile while the upper gallery had concrete flooring (Figs. 87, 90). Walls were once again painted white, with the only source of natural daylight being the entrance facade on the narrow end of the lower gallery initially (Fig. 77), which was removed soon after to leave the unframed tinted glass facade bare (Fig. 78). A grid spanned the ceilings to facilitate the overhead spotlights and floodlights and upward facing lights were embedded in the groove along the edges of the floor in the lower gallery (Figs. 84, 87). The galleries were long and narrow in shape and for some exhibitions various partitions were employed to maximise hanging space (Figs. 88-91).

The shape of the galleries was perhaps ideal for the hanging of paintings up to a certain size or ones requiring intimate display. Images of Ikon full of people show just how narrow the galleries were, thus perhaps not allowing larger paintings the 'breathing space' it had become curatorially customary for them to require (Figs. 93, 96, 97).[179] In fact, looking at the various exhibition layouts, it seems the importance of showing more works superseded the need for sparse display. Large pieces were hung almost adjacent to each other (Figs. 77, 82, 84), partition walls made the 'breathing space' even narrower (Figs. 88, 89, 93) and the single-line hang (Figs. 87, 90, 91) sometimes abandoned for a more 'crowded' display (Figs. 88, 89). Although in terms of its increased inward gaze and 'neutral' decoration Ikon resembled even more than before a 'white cube', the actual

[178] Chapman, S., 'Welcome to Ikon', p.128.

[179] See for example the discussions on the emergence of sparse exhibition layouts in discussion of Alfred Barr's installation techniques at MoMA in New York in Staniszewski, M., *The Power of Display*, pp.61-67, also Klonk, C., *Spaces of Experience*, pp.138-44 as well as O'Doherty, B., *Inside the White Cube*, especially pp. 13-34.

display of works seemed still predominantly geared towards maximum dissemination rather than the valorisation of the artwork in a sparse hanging arrangement.

The move to West Court, while placing Ikon in a newer and visually more pristine 'white cube' interior, also situated it in a location echoing that of its Bull Ring kiosk. The gallery was once again in the midst of the new and exciting developments of the city, in the newest shopping centre, while the Bull Ring was losing its lustre. Moving within three minutes walking distance from its Swallow Street gallery made all the difference to many of the problems that had arisen from its location; once again passersby could be accosted with an art gallery where they would not ordinarily expect to find one. This brought Ikon closer to its founding ideas and aims of access and dissemination and re-rooted the gallery in the locus of the 'general population' and the spaces of everyday life - even if many visitors walked in and then straight out, bemused with the unexpected nature of the shop.[180]

The new gallery was situated on the less commercially competitive side of the development, with its entrance opening onto the external concourse before the doors leading into the shopping centre 'proper', adjacent to an Army Office and the homewares store Habitat (Fig. 72, 79).[181] Although this meant that Ikon was cut off from the main foot traffic of the centre's concourse, being located in one of its entry points had the desired effect of attracting more passersby as audience and potential buyers, with sales increasing somewhat. It also allowed for functions to be held outside of

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[180] Chapman, S., 'Welcome to Ikon', p. 136.

[181] Ibid. Although one of the design principles of Birmingham Shopping Centre had been to remain an open thoroughfare, soon after it opened doors were erected across the entrance concourse, one coming between Ikon and Habitat and thus situating Ikon on the outside. (Chapman, S., 'Welcome to Ikon', p. 131)

normal shopping times, while also keeping the gallery visible around the clock, like the kiosk previously.

Once this third gallery was firmly established, these developments gave the remaining founding members the opportunity to decrease their involvement with the everyday running of the gallery. Jesse Bruton left in 1976[182] while the Skenes retreated to the sidelines of the endeavour, with Angus Skene resigning his official involvement with the CoM.[183] With the surviving minutes having become much more formal and widely distributed by this point, it is difficult to ascertain whether the sentiment of these departures was in any way similar to those of Bob Groves and David Prentice from Swallow Street.

By 1976, Ikon had begun considering expansion because the space was proving increasingly unsuitable for the exhibitions the gallery was wanting to organise. Installation, performance and video art had become staples of the contemporary art world and were challenging the display techniques and the very spaces that art institutions were setting aside for contemporary art. As artworks became increasingly less saleable due to size, assembly structure, medium, site specificity or ephemerality, Ikon's space, in being designed to accommodate the sale of everyday goods, was progressively being rendered unfit to display them. Its shape, as well as the size of the gallery's entry points and internal staircase, limited the options for the display of sculpture and installations, while a lack of ventilation facilities made the prolonged execution and spectatorship of performances unpleasant.

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[182] Bruton, Jesse, interview in Watkins, J., *Some of the Best Things…*, p. 112.

[183] Ikon Council of Management Minutes, 14.04.76, Ikon Archive.

By that same year the terms of the lease at West Court meant that the increasing rent was becoming unmanageable, especially since regular, guaranteed support from national or regional funding bodies was still unforthcoming. [184] It was believed by committee members, who were considering the various moving options, that a more 'suitable' exhibition space would in turn be likely to attract much needed funding on the promise of a more varied and progressive exhibition programme.

In fulfilling its aim to exhibit international contemporary and avant-garde artists, as well as local painters and sculptors, meant Ikon had to commit to providing a space fit to accommodate increasingly spatially demanding works of art. In order to display such art, Ikon would have to adapt by becoming physically (and perhaps ideologically?) accommodating in a space flexible enough to keep up. It seems fitting that what was chosen for Ikon's next move was a space previously used as a furniture showroom, where more cumbersome consumer goods could be displayed for sale, in analogy to the more unwieldy art objects, new media and performances Ikon was hoping to accommodate.

4.3 Ikon's move to John Bright Street, 1978

A number of moving proposals were put forth, with the help of a specially formed Policy and Premises Study Group which undertook a survey of other similarly aimed galleries both in the region and nationally.[185] One proposition was to expand on the current premises by renting another shop unit on the other side of the shopping centre

[184] Policy and Premises Study Group, Premises Analysis report for move from Birmingham Shopping Centre, Ikon Council of Management Minutes, 14.04.76, Ikon Archive, unpaginated.

[185] Policy and Premises Study Group, Premises Analysis report for move from West Court, Birmingham Shopping Centre, Ikon Council of Management Minutes, 14.04.76, Ikon Archive, unpaginated.

doors. This provided a marginally larger space and much heavier foot traffic by being located inside the shopping centre rather than opening onto the street, but was prohibitively expensive for this reason, as the already higher commercial value of the property was unlikely to be easily negotiated down.[186] Another suggestion was to move to also marginally larger premises on Smith Street in Hockley. Rent there was cheap and the gallery would be close to the Birmingham Arts Lab, an non-institutional organisation that Ikon had many connections with and whose established audience it could share. This would mean a complete move from the city core as Ikon had been used to it, with a very low pedestrian flow. It would also entail converting a property that needed much work and had little possibility of further expansion; these were concerns similar to what had made Swallow Street a difficult space.

Finally, the proposal decided upon was 52-78 John Bright Street (JBS), an old furniture show room comprising the ground floor and basement of the victorian office block Borough Buildings (Figs. 98, 99). The street had been losing its previous commercial viability during postwar redevelopment and pedestrian flow was relatively low in comparison to what Ikon was used to.[187] Nevertheless, the space was still situated within minutes' walk from the train station and the rest of the city centre and amid a hub of nighttime entertainment with increased evening traffic. Ikon was adjacent to the Alexandra Theatre and the Futurist Cinema on either side, with a cluster of public houses and another cinema nearby.[188]

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[186] Ibid.

[187] Cherry, G. E., *Birmingham*, p. 85.

[188] See Chapman, S., 'Welcome to Ikon', p. 142. The elements of evening entertainment remain today on John Bright Street, apart from the Futurist Cinema and Ikon, whose buildings have been converted to offices.

The space itself had the advantage of being substantially larger for a marginally lower rent than West Court, with the possibility of an immediate start on one floor, provided funding was secured to undertake the few initial changes required to make it viable.[189] It also offered the possibility of expanding into the basement (Fig. 101) in the future if additional funding was secured, allowing Ikon to double its already large display area without the whole gallery needing to re-situate itself yet again.[190] The move and redevelopment took place over the summer of 1978, with the first exhibition opening that November. A programme more ambitious in scale could be pursued in this gallery, impetus stemming from growing confidence about the firmer establishment of Ikon and the many new possibilities of the new space, which in turn were expected to attract more regular funding.

The interior that emerged from the refit of JBS was the one that most came to adhere to that of a white cube in terms of display techniques, especially after the annex of the basement galleries in the 1980s, which eradicated natural light (Figs. 108, 109). The ground floor gallery had a transparent roof and large glass facade that let daylight in (Fig. 110). Most windows in the back of the building were filled with brick to create more wall space,[191] while the floor remained uncarpeted. Modular walls, painted white, were used to partition the large floor area (Figs. 103-106), further maximising hanging space and giving the capacity to create almost self contained exhibition rooms within thematically or otherwise organised group exhibitions (Fig. 104) or suggest a route to

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[189] The help of the Birmingham architectural company John Madin Group was sought out for the refit of the interior, the partnership floundering because of issues concerning the still very tight budgetary constraints the gallery was under, CoM minutes, date, Ikon Archive, page/item number.

[190] Policy and Premises Study Group, Premises Analysis for move from Birmingham Shopping Centre, Ikon Council of Management Minutes, 14.04.76, Ikon Archive.

[191] Ibid.

navigate such an exhibition by creating a path flow (Figs. 106, 109). Like in Swallow Street, flat works were displayed directly onto walls while sculptures, were placed on plinths or directly on the floor (Figs. 108, 109). Unlike all previous Ikon spaces, the display was allowed to be sparse if needed be, while still allowing a large number of works to be exhibited without the display becoming crowded (Fig. 109, bottom). At the same time, the versatility of the space allowed for the exhibition of work previously prohibited by the space constraints of previous galleries; space demanding installations (Fig. 112), performances (Fig. 111) and multimedia displays (Fig. 108) could comfortably be accommodated, and with ample space and large windows, ventilation proved less of a problem.

Ikon interiors from this period are arguably virtually indistinguishable from other spaces of contemporary art, with white walls, changeable display arrangements, undecorated floors and ceilings and, in the basement, no natural light. I argue JBS constitutes the turning point at which Ikon became a definitive contemporary art institution, despite the financial trouble remaining during the first few years of its stay there, which was the longest stay the gallery has had in one space thus far.[192] Both the physical space and its use indicate this move towards institutionalisation, which was at least partially intended to allow the exhibition of works that in turn were themselves responding to and criticising display and containment conventions, by demanding increasingly more of the gallery space. Yet, within Birmingham, as a gallery that would exhibit such art regularly as part of its programme, Ikon remained unique. In fulfilling that role, Ikon reached its limit and point of final departure from the gallery that was aimed at promoting the work of local artists, to one whose purpose was to use its new

[192] Payne, A,, *21 for 21,* exhibition catalogue, Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 1984, p. 3.

space and disseminate contemporary and avant-garde works by living artists of international calibre. Through the new possibilities of the JBS galleries, Birmingham was thus 'put on the map' as a city that had an adequate space to exhibit such work.[193]

4.5 Ikon's perceived, conceived and lived space

As the objectives and capacities of Ikon as a gallery shifted, along with its organisational makeup, so did the choices and use of space. Having used photographs to reconstruct the history of spaces that no longer exist, the focus has remained predominantly visual. The case of the Bull Ring kiosk, with its unconventional and creative use of a small space, has already lent itself to discussion of the sounds and smells of the surrounding city penetrating a space that, conventionally, would call for silence and a sense of sterility.[194] It is in the visual that the comparisons to other spaces allow tracing of potential developments, aesthetically and ideologically shifting towards or against other spaces of contemporary art from other periods or concurrent ones in Birmingham. A discussion of other senses, if one were categorising in this way, make a point to partially differentiate Ikon spaces up to and including JBS (at least initially) from conventional contemporary art institution interiors.

Many of these fall under conservational considerations. The need for light, temperature and humidity control was heeded to a basic extent in most spaces from Swallow Street to JBS, yet the Bull Ring kiosk can seem positively reckless in that respect. Hanging against glass walls meant exposure of artworks to constant daylight

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[193] Ibid.

[194] For an interesting discussion on non-visual factors in the production of social space in the art museum, see Prior, N., *Museums and Modernity,* pp. 203-204.

and compounding temperatures on sunny days for the duration of exhibitions, which was short only to accommodate more shows. The fragility of the kiosk structure did not prove much less than that of the naked collapsible screens of Ikon mobile gallery era, with the overhanging flyover perilously posing a constant threat. The night before the first exhibition opening, a lorry came off the overhead fly-over of the new ring road, landing a large piece of railing on the roof of the gallery, with no hurt or damage done (Fig. 50).[195] The summer of 1965 marked the second such occasion, this time the glass structure being the reason an entire exhibition of paintings was riddled with holes and effectively destroyed. [196] Later at West Court, the glass facade of the gallery was shattered when the adjacent Army Office was bombed (Figs. 94-95). Although perilous and unsought, these events demonstrate how the possibility of repose offered by large museums was almost necessarily an impossibility in the kind of spaces that Ikon chose, insofar as these were more susceptible to the spontaneities of everyday life extraneous to the gallery, something that more conventionally located galleries (including the RBSA and BM&AG as discussed earlier, as well as Ikon's own current space in Brindleyplace) protect/remove themselves from, through physical isolation and surrounding spatial associations.

While Ikon moved towards a more visually conventional exhibition space, the conservational issues became more conventional as well. These were not usually explicitly identified as issues of conservation but rather as issues of display. While in the

[195] Unpublished David Prentice notes for talk accompanying *21 for 21* exhibition, Ikon Gallery, 1984, Ikon Archive.

[196] Unpublished Colin Finn account for submitted for retrospective Ikon exhibition, dated 2003, Ikon Archive. No images or installation shots survive in Ikon Archive from this temporary stay.

conversion of each space the concerns about damp were seriously dealt with,[197] the matter of keeping window space to a minimum and blocking windows where possible had more to do with the maximisation of hanging space than the protection of artworks from light. It is interesting to note that much unlike the kiosk, in all subsequent spaces the assumption seems to have been that a window to the outside world does not constitute space which is viable as a backdrop for works of art. The extra window space was not needed for hanging, for there was enough walled area; at West Court the glass facade was used as an advertising space and a 'shop window' to the exhibition (Figs. 77-78). As for the need for silence, it seems to have been entirely subordinate to the need for a passing public, so was not explicitly part of any consideration in moving or refitting spaces, but a byproduct of each chosen building. However close to the 'white cube' aesthetic Ikon spaces came visually, the intent was not one of suggested repose but of real-life engagement. Even the quieter Swallow Street gallery was only so owing to its isolated location.

This is all considering the spaces as emptied of their audience, observed by the disembodied Eye assumed by the 'white cube' aesthetic.[198] The number of photographs taken at JBS grew exponentially in comparison to surviving documentation of earlier exhibitions, and these were often taken by professional photographers. The relatively few surviving photographs of the Swallow Street gallery seem to concentrate more on capturing the actual works on display rather than the display space itself, as is the case with many JBS pictures. The latter are mostly installation shots almost completely devoid of human form, other than in the act of performance, where the human form is

[197] See, for example, Policy and Premises Study Group, Premises Analysis report for move from Birmingham Shopping Centre, Ikon Council of Management Minutes, 14.04.76, Ikon Archive, unpaginated.

[198] See for example the discussion on the disenbodied Eye in O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube,* pp. 35-64.

permissible as part of the art event. This starkly contrasts with kiosk photographs that seem to deliberately include human form to illustrate the gallery's friendliness or the everydayness of Ikon's surrounds there (Figs. 51 - 54). Photographs from a private view at West Court give a feel of a lively and loud congregation of people, with adults and children coexisting alongside the consumption of drink, food and cigarettes around the artworks (Figs. 65, 86, 96, 97). In a space that whose reported inadequate ventilation system for longer performances posed a reason to seek new premises,[199] it seems equally reckless as constant daylight from the point of view of conservation by modern standards and, perhaps most importantly, a practice that would not have occurred in large art institutions then or now. Smoking in the gallery does not seem to have been at all a conservational concern; see for example the director Jeanette Koch posing in front of a painting with cigarette in hand at Swallow Street (Fig. 65). Its prohibition only entered Ikon's minutes when the new premises at JBS were set up, discussions whose bearing on the refurbishment extended to the decision to not have carpeted galleries, as they would absorb the smoke causing need for further renovation.[200]

It is refreshing therefore to observe, through research reconstruction, a process of spatial production for the exhibition of contemporary art that did not only take into consideration the existence of the artwork as a valorised object, the curator as a specialist professional and the spectator as a member of the disembodied laity. Rather, in its spatially productive capacity, Ikon responded to the physical space as one which was to accommodate human beings with bodies in the act of congregating and engaging

[199] Ibid.

[200] Ibid.

with works of art and each other around these works of art, as an aspect of their everyday life and not purposely divided from it.

After JBS and the first appointment of a gallery director, Ikon's history lends itself to being expounded in terms of the succession of its directorial staff and the importance of its exhibitions, much like the surveys of conventionally curated institutional art spaces or, as aforementioned, the architecture and planning of urban redevelopment. Though this is not the only way to approach the later period, the capacity to do so illustrates the argument made about Ikon's organisational and ideological shift, traced in its spatial production. Simon Chapman left Ikon soon after the move to JBS, to be replaced by Hugh Stoddart. The latter was followed by Antonia Payne as Director and Vivien Lovell as Deputy Director. Ikon remained in these premises for two decades, taking full advantage of both floors of exhibition space, while moving further in the direction of a publicly funded institution. During this time Ikon became firmer in its grounding and its funding, allowing it to make more long term plans as well as engage in experimental exhibitions and bring the world of the avant-garde to the city that was sorely lacking it before Ikon came along. It stayed at that location for twenty years building a reputation for itself which in turn allowed it to accrue the confidence and funding for its next, and most substantial in terms of institutional significance, move, to its current location.

CONCLUSION

'Gestures are a form of invention. They can only be done once, unless everyone agrees to forget them. The best way to forget something is to assume it […]'.[201]

In 1998 Ikon took residence in a large Victorian school building that was entirely refurbished by professional architects with the distinct purpose of housing the gallery, a bold move that indicates a view to a permanent fixture.[202] The differences become clear but looking at the institution that Ikon is today, some similarities are striking. The obvious/coincidental/fateful one is the fact that both Oozells School and the Margaret Street branch of the SoA were designed by the same architect, for an educational purpose, within twenty years of each other; the facades (Figs. 21, 115) and interiors (Figs. 76, 118) illustrate that admirably. The location of the new gallery within the new and prestigious development of Brindleyplace is reminiscent of previous attachments to major architectural changes in the city, like that of the Bull Ring and Birmingham Shopping Centre before; it is perhaps not tenuous to see a commitment to maintaining the gallery in the everyday life of the city, especially when the BM&AG has remained put and the RBSA has since moved further out to the Jewellery Quarter of the city and maintaining in this way its private and comfortable operation.

At the same time, the development of Brindleyplace itself has seen a change in Birmingham, where the stranglehold of the IRR has been broken up with part pedestrianisation and expansion of the development well outside of it. This

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[201] O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, p. 69.

[202] For details of the design and execution of the refit, as well as of the entire development of Brindleyplace that Ikon's building is a part of, see Latham, Ian and Swenarton, Mark, *Brindleyplace: a Model for Urban Regeneration,* Right Angle Publishing, London, 1999, 86-89.

redevelopment is seen as undoing the mistakes of the postwar redevelopment but is in many respects similar to it, in that it abstractly plans the spontaneity of the city's space, adhering to new systems of thinking about urban everyday life which are nonetheless aimed at systematisation and cohesion. The result is widespread gentrification following the hierarchised planning and a myopic regard for the city's architectural heritage which echoes the postwar planning of Sir Herbert Manzoni, although outwardly more self-aware in its use of ;interdisciplinary theories'. So, much-praised buildings pertaining to Birmingham's nineteenth century municipal heritage have been protected, while architecture appended to the now deemed 'failed' postwar era is being demolished, against varying degrees of protest, to be replaced by undeveloped plots or fashionable large-scale endeavours. In that respect Ikon at Brindleyplace is once again spatially following the city's redevelopment, having situated itself in another 'new' space, albeit an old building.

Yet the impressive scale of the school's architectural remodelling, alnogside its protected listed status, indicate a move for Ikon to a self-consciously permanent location and space which will now be the singular spatial signifier of the gallery for the foreseeable future. With the close and fruitful ties that Ikon has nurtured with the ever growing BIAD, as well as the BM&AG and MAC, and the curatorial endeavours of other cities nationally and worldwide, it has contributed to a city that is now increasingly capable of generative art spaces. With its own off-site projects like Eastside,[203] Ikon is spearheading alongside a multitude of independent artistic and community spaces the retainment and creative use of the area of Digbeth,[204] one of the remains of industrial

[203] See Ikon's website at www.ikon-gallery.co.uk/.

[204] See also www.eastsideprojects.org/, website of artist-run space Eastside Projects, Birmingham, and http://www.weareeastside.com/ , website dedicated to information about and promotion of the Eastside area of Birmingham.

abandonment in Birmingham yet a topic of debate about its development. The development and planning of Birmingham seems to have been taken up by the creative community of the city and the possible reasons and results for this constitute an opening for scholarship of their own, one of the breadth to accommodate the additional facets of internal immigration, racial tensions and political and economic struggles that have been a part of the city of Birmingham since the Industrial Revolution. This thesis hopefully acts as a springboard for the possibilities for art historical scholarship that Birmingham can offer beyond its grand nineteenth century past.

The aim of this thesis has been to approach historical research into the origins and foundation of an artist-run space that in time became the largest exhibiting institution of contemporary art in the city of Birmingham, and one that is internationally recognised in its current incarnation. Research and writing were approached throughout with the writings of philosopher Henri Lefebvre in mind, concerning the social production of space and its relationship to the creative act as form of resistance in space, time and art. In doing so, I have tried to examine the multi-faceted aspects of the production of space involved in the founding, opening and running of a non-institutional art space for contemporary art, trying to constantly keep in mind the dialectical relationships inherent in the production of space. What constitutes the production of a gallery's space is not limited to artistic and attendant theoretical discourses, because the gallery space is not separated from the social space it both produces and is the product of.

Working with Ikon Gallery as an idea and creative act productive of space, a history of the various incarnations of the gallery over its first two decades of existence was reconstructed, constituting the historical scope of this thesis. These spaces were

subsequently analysed and compared in terms both of their interiors and locations, with each other and other spaces in the city of Birmingham, in the face of exhibition discourses of contemporary art and institutional critique of the 1960s and 1970s. I posited Ikon upon inception as an artwork and gesture responding in similar ways to its contemporary Conceptual Art to the curated space of the city as well as that of the contemporary exhibition space abstracted.

Ikon's character shifted towards conventional spaces and displays as it progressively became larger and more secure in its funding and reputation, yielding spaces that by its final incarnation of my scope strongly resembled an aesthetic that had become traditional for the exhibition of contemporary and avant-garde art, that of the 'white cube', or the aesthetic of neutrality in display. Despite the ideological implications concealed in the claim for neutrality and the separation from the spaces and practices of everyday life that this aesthetic had come to represent, I argue that Ikon Gallery retained a strong attachment to a more engaged rapprochement of contemporary and avant-garde art and everyday urban life on a spatial level, despite/simultaneously with the visual espousal of this said aesthetic.

Not assuming a necessary contradiction in this, I have attempted in this thesis to engage with the peculiarities that arise from the case of Ikon in the hope that it will further elucidate the way in which art institutional histories can be researched and altogether approached, especially pertaining to artist-led spaces and the dynamics of resistance, appropriation and reconciliation that come into play when museum and gallery interiors and architecture are discussed, concomitantly with their location and use within and outside the confines of their purpose as receptacles of artworks. This in turn should hopefully aid as an indicator for an opening in institutional art history

generally, and that of the city of Birmingham and Ikon Gallery in their current incarnations more specifically.

The study of Ikon spaces reveals a production of space which turns the orientation of investigation away from the mystified artwork or abstractly curated space and its conferring representations of space, towards the embodied experience of everyday life in the modern world. Resistance is not necessarily invalidated by the institutional assimilation of oppositional discourse, but is contained in the creative potential of this same contradiction. The failure of Ikons subsequent (and also current) concrete execution to fully live up to the promise of the rhetoric it sprang out of is not indicative of absolute failure of either the rhetoric itself or its concrete execution. Rather, it is indicative of the residue, the other, that makes both partially a failure and therefore bearing the seeds of their own unmaking. They are the seeds for the next attempt at a creative act.

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