CHISENHALE INTERVIEWS: YURI PATTISON

Yuri Pattison
user, space
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Emma Moore: You have just finished the Chisenhale Gallery Create Residency 2014-16, *an eighteen month project run in partnership with Create that culminates with this exhibition. The one stipulation for artists invited to participate in the residency is that they should actively engage, through their work, with communities living in East London. You identified London Hackspace and more broadly the area of east London known as Tech City, and a growing community of tech workers as a starting point for your project. Could you talk about why you identified this particular community and how your research developed?*

Yuri Pattison: The prompt for the residency was to identify a community to work within and the idea of community is interesting within that – how do you define where a community starts and ends?

I had already spent some time working from London Hackspace, mainly preparing for my show at Cell Project Space in 2014. This was through convenience but also through a frustration in my practice. I wanted to reskill myself and, not really having a studio practice, I was always working from a laptop. I found it nice to have somewhere with more resources available and to tap into a community of people who were making things and who were using the space to share knowledge on how to make things, and also sharing tools.

EM: So you were already part of this community?

YP: Yes. I also wanted to start from there because London Hackspace has a large cross-section of people. Usually it's about 5,000 people and within that they have many different communities: there are people who work in the tech industry who use it for their side-line or hobby projects; there are people who are launching start-ups; there are artists and there are fashion designers. It's a very broad, very true, representation of the creative community within London, more representative I found, than fine art studios. That's why I found it very open and interesting.

In another sense, all these spaces that have a very open-door policy, the communities are inherently wary of new members because it's emphasised that you are supposed to share knowledge but these models can leave themselves quite open to abuse. As those communities grow there is a tipping point when people no longer respect the boundaries of the community, which is also an interesting question - how do you scale up these open-access sharing models so that they still work?

EM: London Hackspace is a non-profit model, which is self-sustained, with a minimal membership fee that you pay in order to use the space?

YP: Yes, it is a donation-based system. You pay what you think you can afford. It is also non-hierarchical and it's shaped by the people who use the space. There are community rules but it's a space that is open twenty-four hours per day, seven days per week, and it's defined by its use.

I isolated that and used it as a starting point – these open-access, sharing models that were being cannibalised by the so-called sharing economy. I wanted to look a workspace that had these open access politics behind it, which also spoke of a politics of the early Internet. Now you have those systems being violently monetised by sharing economy or platform-based apps.

EM: What do you mean by the sharing economy and platform-based apps?

YP: With platforms like couch-surfing websites, people used the World Wide Web to connect with other people from around the world and to share resources. The Web is built on that premise. The foundation blocks of what we think of as the 'Internet' are free software and free code, which were given away. That is why even hypertext's protocol is so successful because Tim Berners-Lee authored it and his team gave it to the world.

What is happening now is that you have systems like couch-surfing websites influencing sites like AirBnB, whose model is purely for profit. There is someone who controls the interface and makes a lot of money from it, just by controlling the software that connects people. This is a new and important difference between the idealistic 'World Wide Web' and how the Internet is used now.

I am interested in how this is shifting, and also how it is imprinting on

physical spaces. How the earlier models of co-working, which you see in the cyber café or the hacker space, are now being formalised or monetised in a way that is very much defined by membership fees – very strict membership fees and very strict access.

EM: And therefore the community built within new co-working or co-living spaces can be somewhat designed?

YP: Yes, the communities that grow out of these new live/works spaces are often formed of people who work within a freelance economy and can therefore isolate themselves in a way. They create a physical filter bubble so that they encounter less and less people from outside of their viewpoint and from outside of their politics.

There is a dissolving of community through the use of these platforms, whether they are co-working spaces that are inherently front-ended by their web presence or platforms like AirBnB, Uber, Amazon or fresh food delivery. There is a disengagement with the fabric of the city. This results in a class of people who are privileged and are in a global set where they can move freely without thinking about wider aspects of community and the people living in their city.

EM: Going back to Tech City, and a global network, many of the new spaces are not just London-based, they have offices all over the world. A community of members in an office in London is selected in the same way as a community of members in New York. So there is a universal aesthetic, and community?

YP: By visiting various co-working spaces and travelling quite a bit throughout the residency, I noticed certain aesthetics in these spaces, particularly in London. I researched these aesthetics, such as the use of industrial materials, building logistics on show through exposed brickwork and communal tables, to try and identify what has influenced the specific look of these co-working spaces. There is this strange, very bland cohesion within the way many of them look. They are often repurposed industrial spaces, which maintain references to labour within them and they appear globally. You can go to a laptop café in Hong Kong and it looks the same as one in Hackney, as they employ the same austere industrial aesthetics within the space.

I'm interested in the effect of the Internet and how, instead of making the world a more interesting and vibrant place, it is currently having a flattening

effect. But it won't last forever – I think the bubble is going to burst and hopefully things will get weird in the way that the nineties promised the Internet to be. This flattening, bland, homogenising aesthetic is a strange thing.

EM: What do you feel your role is as an artist in drawing this out? Is there a way to make this flattening more visible?

YP: I'm interested in the failures of these effects - both the technologies and the utilisation of a set of aesthetics. I'm unpicking that aesthetic by interrogating it and attacking it in many ways. I'm very much aware that it is not me distancing myself, as we're all implicated in this and we're all part of this in some way. I'm interested in that implication and the willing proximity of the arts to this space, and the danger of being co-opted. I'm interested in representing this in order to draw attention to it, but representing it through my subjective feeling towards it, which is often quite an uncomfortable one of feeling somehow compromised. I think this is quite a common feeling, this powerless compromise that you have to dwell within.

EM: In terms of the aesthetic decisions you've made in the show - the materials you've chosen have a very distinct feel to them. You've used a wall of industrial warehouse racking that runs almost the length of the gallery as well as a table and panels that are constructed of a modular, industrial material.

YP: The racking is to do with my interest in global logistics, and how we are connecting more and more to that network through these platforms. In London there is a shifting in how people spend their money, which is impacting on local shops and local services because a larger sector of people now order everything online. That obviously changes and shifts how communities function. I have utilised that racking mainly because of my own proximity to a massive Amazon logistics centre in East London. I witness the flow of Amazon workers to and from that building. Obviously, I've never been able to see inside the building because of its high security nature but, having seen images, they use similar racking structures.

I'm also interested in these ideas within the digital workspace: the laptop café or the co-working space. You have these in London but it's also part of a new global aesthetic and a fetishisation of labour. Warehouse racking and very industrial materials are employed in these spaces as a reminder of a connection with work and with physical labour. It becomes a staging for the work carried

out there because digital labour is still work. It impacts us in very different ways and impacts the body in very different ways. The staging has to validate that work because it's not apparent labour. It also provides a stage for all the other labour that you have to perform in these workspaces – performing work, meeting people, networking - how these other things happen through social interaction, which is often over coffee or the weekly organised evening cocktails. Capitalising on these social aspects of work fits into a new economy known as the Experience Economy.

There are other elements in these co-working spaces too – some of them employ elements of the home. I am interested in how some employ elements of a 1960's version of a very futuristic home, where there's often very heavy mining of 60's utopian – or apparently utopian – sci-fi. There are references to Stanley Kubrick's *2001 Space Odyssey*, which itself contains some heavy critiques of technology and what technology will do to mankind.

EM: How do you feel that these aesthetics are being echoed in spaces that are emerging now?

YP: Within these new workspaces there are a range of styles utilised with varying degrees of cross over. Many spaces make reference to the post-industrial shells they exist within, emulating the loft and warehouse living idealised in the 1980s, which originated in New York and became increasingly prevalent in the Docklands area of London. There's often a mining of history, a nod to authenticity, but where this doesn't exist the approach is either to strip back the building to its inner workings - through exposed overhead cable runs or removed ceiling panels - or it is faked by incorporating concrete skims and exposed brick veneers into the fabric of the building. Also, a careful selection of props such as particular furniture or a 'curated' selection of books and objects shows the outward appearance or 'flair' of the company. The design of the co-working space is almost open plan office meets retail environment – retail spaces are where we are most familiar with this sort of temporary and trend driven stage dressing.

I'm interested in how, for instance, the designs of Charles & Ray Eames are frequently used as they conjure certain connotations for the visitor and observer of a workspace. They check certain boxes of good taste, 'democratic' or even soft 'socialist' design ideals, along with being both forward looking and futuristic, whilst also classic. For me they exist as a spectre within these spaces representative of the ideologically bankrupt '60s and '70s Silicon

Valley culture we're now seeing permeate on a global level.

EM: And you've referenced this interest in design history, and choice of furnishings within many co-working spaces, with the chairs you've chosen for the exhibition. Could you speak a little about the chairs and why some are still covered in plastic?

YP: I'm interested in the history of the Eames DSW chair as a design object. This particular Eames' design has a very generous, almost socialist strategy behind it, which meant for it to be utilised by the masses. We are at a point now, through the abundance of Chinese replicas of 'design classics' that this begins to happen. But the allure is that these objects are markers of good taste, they are elitist objects whether they're copies or originals. Some of the co-working spaces I visited either had copies or very expensive originals, or original copies. I was interested in these layers and how they were throwing up the marker of their good taste. These spaces reference design ideals of the 1950s and 1960s such as Bürolandschaft, which originated in Germany in the 1950s and focused on open-plan office design to encourage collaborative and non-hierarchical working. However these ideals are referenced without really engaging with them.

And now these chairs have reached a tipping point, the market has been flooded with so many copies, ahead of the copyright law changing, that I think it's at a point where the elevated cultural status of these objects is going to flip around. Spaces that have invested a lot of money in the chairs will end up throwing them away because they've gone out of fashion, and they'll find the next thing. For me it's very current but it's also a marker in this tide change. It's a signifier of how these things are trappings, without a deeper engagement with them. So that's why the chairs in the exhibition are not fully unwrapped.

EM: The idea of impermanence is also something that relates to the Hexayurt *structure you've constructed within the space, could you speak a little bit about the* Hexayurt *and your interest in it?*

YP: I noticed a lot of temporary materials or industrial materials being utilised in new co-working spaces and also references to strategies that were pioneered for disaster relief. Freight containers were originally used or adapted to house people. This strategy has now been co-opted and become a model of 'pop-up culture' – often involving luxury brands. People fit out freight containers to live in all over London now, it's a way to quickly make wasteland profitable

through charging high rents – rather than being deployed as an actual solution. Above all it's become an idealised thing.

I was interested in the *Hexayurt* because it's a disaster relief design. Vinay Gupta, who invented it, genuinely believes that we are most at risk now because we don't retain information anymore. If the information infrastructure gets cut off in a disaster situation no one will know what to do. So the *Hexayurt* was invented for instances of a ten-fold Hurricane Katrina event happening. He then started to seed it into popular culture through teaching people to use it at Burning Man Festival. So I was interested in structures like the *Hexayurt* emerging within new working spaces. The *Hexayurt* felt like a more extreme iteration of using these structures in workspaces – but it could also have potentially been an Ikea Foundation *Better Shelter*.

Second Home, a workhub for creative companies, has a 'no tech zone' with books and plants. It's designed as a space to go and not use your phone. Having spent time there though, it also feels like a space to go when something terrible has happened. It's meant to be a utopian gesture but it's potentially quite grim. I've seen people turn up late for training meetings, fail to get into the meeting and are sent to wait in this strange apparently utopian space.

Overall I'm interested in this prescriptive idea of design, how a workspace can reinforce and shape how we're meant to work and also lecture us on how we're supposed to stay productive by perhaps spending some time in these other 'tech-free zones'. It's the embodiment of the Work / Leisure / Experience economy we're seeing which presents itself as liberating but has very nuanced rules and codes of conduct placed within it.

EM: Could you talk about the specific plants you have chosen?

YP: All the plants are selected from a NASA study of fifty common plants that clean the air. NASA published this list in 1989 (*A study of interior landscape plants for indoor air pollution abatement*) when they were doing a lot of off-world research but they were also looking at how this research could be applicable to extremely polluted cities and how it might contribute to the survival of humans on the planet. I've been looking at how this research is fetishised or co-opted and used within these new workspaces. There are a few other examples of solutions for the extremes of the urban environment – such as the USB ultrasonic water vaporisers marketed in Asian megalopolises to

soften the harsh air.

EM: You've visited quite a few co-working spaces over the course of the residency including Second Home; Campus London, 'a Google space for London's start up community; and Republic, a new development and co-working space at East India Dock. In the exhibition you see glimpses of these environments in the moving image works.

YP: Yes, most of the footage is drawn from focusing on the interiors of each of the spaces; there are various degrees of live action Steadicam footage. There is one CGI render which is built from an architectural model of Second Home, which I had turned into a video space that I could explore. Although, it looks strangely like the actual space and I'm interested that there's a flipping between the real and the fantasy space. There are also cameras positioned within the exhibition and some monitors mix pre-recorded video with live footage.

There is also footage of an Amazon logistics warehouse that has both human pickers and mechanised pickers - robots. Spending more time in the exhibition space at Chisenhale, I've been thinking about how the show is mechanised. While I'm the one who figures out how to maintain it and use it, ultimately it's running itself. Within contemporary discourse around work, there's a lot of discussion around replacement of work and automation but then many people in the creative industries feel excluded from that. They feel like they're in a special place but in reality we're all still very co-dependent and intertwined and will ultimately be deeply affected by the social changes caused by automation.

EM: You've chosen to make all the technology in the exhibition visible. Many of the machines are stripped of their protective covering and appear to be presented almost inside out so that you see more of how the technology is working.

YP: There are a number of schools of thought that are competing over how to present and deal with design, a sort of incoherence between long-term legacies and upgrade culture. For instance, Apple's design hints at a very retro, glossy hiding of the technology – black-boxing what's inside and making it inaccessible to the user by putting it in a very nice package.

Inversely, many of these co-working spaces re-emphasise their mechanisms.

They showcase how they work and the idea of transparency by forefronting all of their wiring or removing practical ceiling panels so you can see the cabling. You can see the mechanisms of how the building works, which emphasises how it connects to a global trend in architectural design. Some of this comes from trying to embody transparency, something we get from open source philosophies, and some of it is practical. Certain companies, like Google, employ very fancy cable runs to emphasise how connected they are with the world – or how they now actually connect the world.

EM: Different coloured cables?

YP: Yes, multi-coloured cable runs! I'm interested in the idea of forefronting infrastructure in order to explain what happens. I have played with that and used that in my work by self-hosting websites. It's a mixture of revisiting the earlier structures of the Internet and also more radical structures of the Internet where you regain control over your information by self-hosting, but also playing with the aesthetics of forefronting them and putting them on show. Often the way I do it in my work isn't in this very glossy, designed way. It isn't the crystal clean data centre stack in the middle of the office. It's dust and dirt and cable runs that are very messy. I use alot of improvised materials too.

EM: Are you're interested in what will happen over the course of the exhibition? Many of the materials that you've used are transparent, like Perspex, even the chairs are transparent or semi-transparent. Are you interested in how the material will display its wear and accumulate dust and bits of detritus?

YP: I am interested in confronting how these technologies are actually used and how the people who engage with them imprint themselves onto these technologies. Some of that involves working with second-hand or used computers or servers and opening them up to see their connection with the physical world as they're also impacting on it. There is an imprint inside of all the spaces that the servers, for example, have been in and people that have used them. There's dust and also more abject elements, like skin particles and the things that make up dust, within the laptop fans and within the server fans. It's a representation of how we engage with the digital and how we leave traces on the digital through everything that we touch in online spaces as well.

EM: Trying to see material traces of our immaterial labour, to connect in a tangible way with the technologies that we're using?

YP: When you begin to work with the technology that we have it seems very basic. It's not a case of science-fiction becoming reality or AI taking over, because when you start working with these things you realise that technology breaks all the time and is still quite basic, it's humans who are responsible for these complex systems. It's more to do with power and people, and these are the mechanisms of power. That's what I want to emphasise by having servers in the space, that function to control the elements in the physical space: to block out light, to control lighting panels, to control our sense of time within the space. I'm interested in how those servers and that network does that on a global level too.

EM: So, you've created a microcosm with its own network, in which you foreground the level of control exercised by new technologies and to an extent the tech industry?

YP: Yes, in some ways. In other ways it's also connected to the same network as all these other laptops, PCs, servers and 'internet of things' devices. It's connected to a bigger network. The strategies I've employed work in similar ways. All these networks do connect; they're all part of the real world.

This is related to my interest in the digital economy and how that has now become part of the physical, 'actual' economy – how cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin act like a connected model within the actual economy. So I've built a crude Bitcoin based MONIAC with scale model people trapped inside the water loop of the model economic circulation. This mirrors the critique of the existing economic structures that is built into Bitcoin by its creator. As a working model Bitcoin continues to question these systems. Perhaps that is why it's so compelling to artists, it exists almost like a conceptual readymade.

I'm interested in Bitcoin as a digital currency and the artificial controls in place within its structure. The analogy of mining is interesting as it relates to a finite amount of Bitcoin. To mine Bitcoin you have to use computer power to solve complex cryptographic puzzles on a network that other computers are also dealing with those puzzles. This encourages people to sustain the network because if you solve the puzzle then you get a Bitcoin (or portion of). The Bitcoin network, maintained by its users, also approves, logs and regulates transactions unlike a centralised bank.

There are several Bitcoin mining rigs in the show, which are taking advantage

of the free power here. Combined, they will probably produce around three or four dollars a day up until the middle of July when the profitability will fall dramatically. And this is because the cryptographic problems get harder and harder until they're impossible and that limits the amount of Bitcoin.

My initial use of a Bitcoin rig within one of the works deployed in Second Home's lobby was meant as a trade off, I was thinking of the exchange of cultural capital happening by Second Home hosting an artwork in their space, and their association with Chisenhale Gallery, and attempting to rebalance this with a symbolic hijacking of their free electricity to mine the digital currency as a sort of royalty which would then be rolled back into the project.

EM: Could you talk more about time and the manipulation of time in the show? For example, through the programming, via the Raspberry Pi computers, you are able to control different elements of the exhibition, including the natural light that comes into the space.

YP: I am interested in how the network-based digital economy is shifting people's sleep patterns and work patterns in accordance with centres of power.

One of the things I found, whilst spending time in these co-working places late at night, is that London is still very much a 9am – 5pm city. These spaces however are open 24 hours per day but they are mostly empty out of 'regular 'working hours, which for me embodies the sophistic embracing of Silicon Valley culture here in London. Walking around these spaces, they present themselves as very aspirational, mixed use spaces and yet most of the time they don't really function. I had a strange experience walking around with the lights coming on automatically and there was a subtle yet unsettling sense of automation.

The eight-hour working day is an artificial idea too. It has been formalised by society and has become a rule that we are all used to. And now we are at a point where borders and time zones are diminishing. On a personal level, we're using devices and looking at screens from when we wake up, on and off, until we go to sleep and this has a physiological effect on our bodies. For instance we're more willing to embrace doing Skype calls at impersonal and unhealthy times and are more flexible in our sleep patterns. A lot of people are also medicating their sleep.

EM: Do you mean they're able to control when they do and don't sleep?

YP: Yes. This is prevalent in America where people are using melatonin or using drugs in the opposite direction, like Modafinil, to stay awake. They regulate their sleep patterns on their terms rather than on nature's terms. It is a well-documented fact that if you look at your computer or your phone, it suppresses the onset of melatonin so you don't feel sleepy.

There is a whole industry that has sprung up around these drugs, branding a lifestyle dependent on them as aspirational where sleep is presented as a problem to be solved and something that only the disadvantaged will partake in in the future. In reality, sleep is slowly being turned into a luxury experience.

So there are some references to self-medication within the show. This 24/7 working culture is so driven by coffee too. The coffee culture is linked with the tech industry and there has been a coining of the term 'the flat white economy'. It's all this empty energy.

EM: What does 'the flat white economy' mean?

YP: It's not a very inventive idea. It's a rehashing of the promise that the eighteen to thirty-five-year-old bracket of consumers will, by having less money, save and reinvent the UK's economy – by killing themselves in order for the generations older than them to profit and to make the economy globally relevant. The idea is that they will do this by being flexible, working in cafés and spending their disposable income on goods and services, whilst not really thinking about their future. It was used a lot as the basis for the policies of London's Tech City and digital conservative policy. I am interested in the fact that the baseline for all of this is caffeine, and this empty, giddy energy.

Through playing with the cycles of both daylight and artificial light, and using various sized screens as materials in the space too, I'm playing with this idea of time, and this slippage or distortion of time. There will also be various allusions to the chemicals that we're consuming.

EM: And that emerges through the more subtle elements of the exhibition like your research images and the coffee smell that is diffused in the space?

YP: Yes. I've done a lot of work around melatonin, which is a sleep hormone that is a controlled, prescription only substance in this country but is available

over the counter in the US. I have done work relating to that and its discovery as a sleep aid at MIT. I'll be revisiting melatonin more broadly as a self-medicated drug because a lot of people order it into the UK. The other drug I'm interested in is caffeine and there's a fake coffee smell that is dispersed from the front desk to circulate throughout the space.

EM: We've talked about adaptability, mobile working and the presumption that you are constantly available to work. The table structure that you have made in the space echoes this idea of café culture and it functions or semi-functions as a workspace. Do you want people to use it in that way?

YP: I hope they do. That is the way art is going in London, isn't it? There are all these galleries, including young galleries and project spaces, which used to use studio models but now they have a gallery that seeps, almost seamlessly, into a co-working space. And my work confronts that too, the marrying of these two industries. People have certain expectations and make sacrifices, within the wider creative industries but also within the arts, in order to do what they want to do. So this division of space and time into smaller and smaller fragments puts more of a squeeze on everything enjoyable about the city. The table structure is important within this as it represents a typical rented slot of space and time, but these tables are also often deployed as a lazy representation of some sort of trappings of community – without any of the deeper ethos or connections behind that. So it's thinking about a co-option and fragmentation of community and culture.

EM: I want to ask you about the title user, space, *which links to these ideas too.*

YP: I was in the different co-working spaces I researched at both regular and very weird times, often quite late at night. So I was thinking about space, about how these spaces impact us, and how the design of these spaces manipulates us. They do have physiological effects. The use of sound within these spaces is also present in the show. I've used a soundscape that changes from white noise to various community made mixes used for productivity or relaxation. One of these mixes is actually a strange 'whooshing' sound from *Bladerunner* (Dir. Ridley Scott, 1982) that someone turned into a 12-hour mix with the idea that you could use it to work or relax to. So that's in there too, a sort of side reference to *Bladerunner* as the default citation for anything uncomfortable about the present. In relation to that, I'm interested in our inability to have a critical language around the present without resorting to

references within a film that's now 34 years old. I think science fiction has lost its edge in that respect.

Walking around the space at night though, if you're in there on your own the white noise can be quite oppressive and then when there's a lot of people in the space it functions in a different way. But when you're on your own the architecture of the building or the design of the building becomes very apparent and you become aware of how it imposes itself on you. How bodies exist in space is still, even with digital labour, something that is ever-present.

I was also thinking about this idea of the user within all of this. I was at DLD, a tech industry conference in Munich in 2015, and I saw a presentation by the CEO of Uber who, throughout all of it, referred to 'users' and the 'user-base'. I was invited to be there as a sort of sideshow art panel, which gave me an interesting insight because I realised that I am the user and the user-base. Again, there is a flattening of a whole demographic of people into a commodity, which I'm also thinking about.

User space, without the comma, is a computing term that relates to a cordoned-off area within a computer operating system. There is a 'user space' where software and files can be handled by the user, and then there is a kernel space where the critical operations of the operating system happen. These are strictly divided spaces.

I was thinking about how in computing those very powerful divisions are present for practical reasons but also how those ideas around power divisions from computing are seeping into broader culture and architectural models – with very defined spaces and permissions. I was also imagining the conversations Frank Gehry might be having with Mark Zuckerberg about their 'z town project' (Facebook's planned town for its workers).

EM: What is the significance of presenting the work at Chisenhale Gallery, as an ex-industrial space and in the context of regeneration in the East End?

I thought a lot about this, in particular as we're at this point where art (in its physical forms) exists as the last type of light industry to be pushed out of these spaces within the city. I noticed how many of the apartments, work and co-working spaces use these building's industrial history as a key fabric to their branding but we're now also seeing that with how art is being co-opted.

The cultural history of a space also becomes a footnote in the building. A good marker of this beginning might be *The Haçienda* apartments in Manchester, which co-opt the history of the infamous nightclub that was sited there before and which the housing development is named after. The group who ran the club also made partial reference to Manchester's industrial past through their own name - *Factory Records*. As a last visible industry, art and artists are being used to dress these spaces and to some degree I imagined how a space like Chisenhale and its own history might end up being subsumed into such a co-working space. This is a local reference but these effects and trends are global.

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