

Northumbria University, Newcastle.
Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory. UoA 32.



**Northumbria
University**
NEWCASTLE

A PROPOSAL TO ASK WHERE DOES A THRESHOLD BEGIN & END



The research is located
in the field of context-
specific contemporary
art practice and the
debates and practices
of public art.

Type of output:
Exhibition

by
Tom O'Sullivan

Front cover: *A Proposal To Ask
Where Does A Threshold
Begin & End*, Installation view.

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SUMMARY

Arts Council England (ACE) awarded Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (MIMA) funding to invite Tatham and O’Sullivan to create their 30th major commission. Drawing on their 25 year scrutiny of the values and behaviours of contemporary art, the research took the commission’s context as both site and focus of the enquiry.

The enquiry was positioned in relation to MIMA director Hudson’s proposition that it be a “useful museum”, drawing on Bruguera’s concept of Arte Útil. The research asked what MIMA and its audiences expected from contemporary public art in Teesside. How were existing representations of Middlesbrough perceived and what approaches could make new ones meaningful?

The research is located in the field of context-specific contemporary art practice (Dellar, 1999 and MacKay, 2015) and the debates and practices of public art (Free, Acconci). Strategies of institutional critique (Ondak, 2003 and Fraser, 1989) underpinned the approach, allowing for a new aesthetic mode of public art-working circumnavigating those of Arte Útil.

The enquiry used site-specific methods, including archival and local historical research, and auto-fiction. The approach was collaborative and discursive, with formal and informal encounters with staff and visitors engendering iterative processes of enquiry. Located research methods were then transformed using satire and absurdity to create disruptions and displacements within and around MIMA in the form of publicly-sited sculpture, photographs, publication and associated events. MIMA and its audiences were offered a “Teesside imaginary”, a complex work that engendered an entangled relationship between MIMA, its audience and Middlesbrough.

The exhibition fulfilled objectives for both MIMA and Middlesbrough Council and took a key role in Tees Valley’s bid for 2025 City of Culture. In response to an initial maquette, Middlesbrough Council provided an additional £10K to realise the central sculpture at a more ambitious scale. MIMA decided to acquisition the artwork into their collection after extending the exhibition by six months.

INTRODUCTION

A Proposal To Ask Where Does A Threshold Begin & End was exhibited in and around Middlesbrough's Centre Square between 4th March 2017 and 31st March 2019. The exhibition was commissioned by MIMA with an initial ACE capital grant of £11K and was a key part of MIMA's ten-year anniversary programme.

A Proposal To Ask Where Does A Threshold Begin & End is a multi-modal exhibition and comprises a number of elements designed, produced and written by Tatham and O'Sullivan and then located at sites selected by them within and around Middlesbrough's Centre Square.



Above: *A Proposal To Ask Where Does A Threshold Begin & End*, Installation view.

‘A Proposal to Ask Where Does A Threshold Begin & End’ is a multi-part public artwork which investigates representations of the area, histories of art, and relationships with landscape.

Sam Dobinson, 27th September, 2018. NE Volume.

RESEARCH CHALLENGE

The research began with an interest in the relationships between contemporary art, its audiences and its sites of public exhibition, and went on to ask: what did MIMA and their audiences expect or want from contemporary artwork and its public exhibition in Teesside? How were existing representations of Middlesbrough perceived by residents, and what mode might a new publicly sited artwork use to successfully engage audiences with MIMA?

These questions occurred against the proposition, by MIMA director Hudson, that MIMA could best serve its audiences by becoming a “useful museum” (Bruguera). The research considered this curatorial proposition, and the aesthetics of the social and public art practices it might engender. Consequently, the research argues for the value of ‘the imaginary’ in establishing meaningful relationships to place, and proposes its own hybrid methodology to achieve this.



Above: *A Proposal To Ask Where Does A Threshold Begin & End*, Installation view with *Bottle of Notes* by Coosje van Bruggen and Claes Oldenburg in foreground.

CONTEXT

To achieve its aim to be a “useful museum”, MIMA invited local audiences to contribute to the curation of exhibitions, and commissioned artists to deliver institutional utilities, such as the café, or as in Tatham and O’Sullivan’s case, to re-design the building’s doors and entrance area. This commission brief was then taken as a tool to enquire into the curatorial proposition put forward by Hudson, and to develop and test the hypothesis that there was an alternative aesthetic model that could successfully engage Middlesbrough’s audiences.

The collaborative art practice of Tatham and O’Sullivan was instigated in 1995 and has been active for 25 years. All elements of the conceptualisation, production and negotiation of their research is co-authored. Their collaborative model is foundational to their hybrid and discursive methodology and contributes to a discourse and analysis of collaboration as an antidote to more hierarchical structures of authorship within contemporary art.

METHODS AND PROCESSES

Tatham and O’Sullivan returned to their previous research methodology (notably used with *Are you LOCALIZED*, 2014, also submitted as a REF output) to use their professional encounter *as* artists to enquire *as* researchers. This methodology draws on the histories and practices of conceptual and critical art practice and is underpinned by the strategies of institutional critique. Satire and absurdity (Ondak, 2003, Seghal, 2012, Kelly, 2009) is employed to produce disruptions that illuminate and change relations between the institution and its actors.

- The project began by using methods of socially-engaged and site-specific working, conducting site visits, archive research and engaging users and audiences in dialogue. For example, a walking tour of Middlesbrough’s sited artworks with Director of Tees Valley Arts James Beighton in April 2017. This was an early opportunity through which to explore, with and through public engagement, the local context and history of public art commission in Middlesbrough.
- From March 2017, a maquette was exhibited in the atrium of MIMA, launching as part of ‘How we got to this; 10 years of MIMA’, a day long event that brought together those with both professional and local interests in MIMA’s civic role. This allowed dissemination of the research processes from an early point, and also directed the development of the project and shifted the proposed sculpture out of MIMA’s atrium and into the public square.



Above: Maquette exhibited in the atrium of MIMA in March 2017.

Below: Walking tour of Middlesbrough's sited artworks with Director of Tees Valley Arts James Beighton in April 2017.



- From July 2018, a large sculptural construction was sited in Middlesbrough's Centre Square, abutting the façade of MIMA. The motif is derived from the Tees Transporter Bridge, an industrial landmark that has acquired an uneasy metonymical relationship to the town and region. Whilst the Transporter Bridge is a source of pride in the town, residents are less positive about the frequency with which it has been used to represent the region. Re-imagined with rainbow colours and palm trees, the motif enlisted the facade of the museum to make an absurd new symbol of place and point of access to MIMA.



Right: *A Proposal To Ask Where
Does A Threshold Begin & End,*
Installation view.

- From May 2018, ten photo-works of particular local landmarks and buildings were exhibited in venues in and around Central Square. Both the images and this positioning was intended to provoke active contemplation on these representations. For example, “Untitled (Middlehaven)” was exhibited in the foyer of Holiday Inn Express between images selected by the hotel chain of local landmarks. Middlehaven was the site of Riverside One, a development area that failed to materialise the ambitions of its 2007 launch. The photograph shows FAT’s Community in a Cube, one of the buildings that was completed.



Above right:
“Untitled (Middlehaven)” exhibited
in the foyer of Holiday Inn Express.

Right: Detail of
“Untitled (Middlehaven)”.



- “Untitled (The former Cleveland Gallery)” also positioned in the Holiday Inn Express, shows John Maine’s Solid State (1978), a sculpture sited in the grounds of one of the three Middlesbrough galleries that predated MIMA. Along with the other photo-works in the series, this image illuminates a network of relationships between artworks, art institutions and place.



Above right:
“Untitled (The former Cleveland
Gallery)” positioned in the Holiday
Inn Express.



Right: Detail of “Untitled
(The former Cleveland Gallery)”.

- “Untitled (Tees Transporter Bridge)” and “Untitled (Danby Moor)” were exhibited in MIMA above Will Alsop’s architectural model for Middlehaven, the location for the Riverside One development and the Tees Transporter Bridge. “Untitled (Danby Moor)” shifts the geographical focus beyond the town, to the North Yorkshire Moors and the stone cross known as Fat Betty.

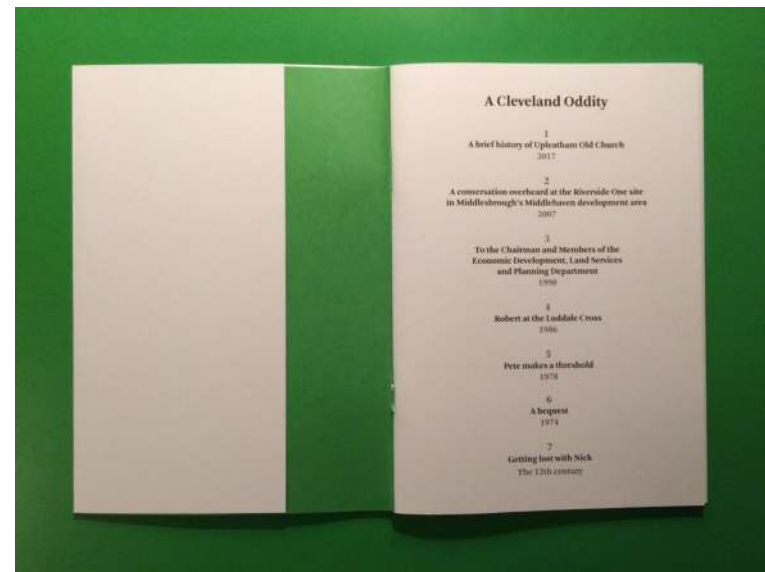
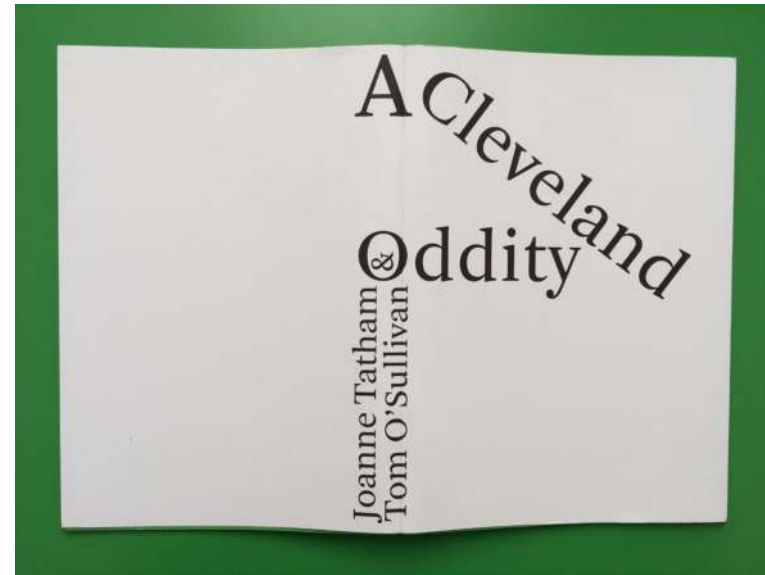


Above right:
“Untitled (Tees Transporter Bridge)”
and “Untitled (Danby Moor)” exhibited
in MIMA.

Right: Detail of “Untitled
(Danby Moor)”.



- “A Cleveland Oddity”, a publication containing a sequence of seven fictional texts by Tatham and O’Sullivan, was available at all four venues to read or take away. The publication takes a fictive approach to archival, historical and autobiographical material related to the Middlesbrough area, affirming and expanding relationships made evident through and across the photo-work series and offering a speculative history of public art in Teesside, and contributing to contemporary discourse on the role of art in the public sphere.



Right: The publication
“A Cleveland Oddity”.

DISSEMINATION

Processes of sharing and dissemination occurred formally and informally with MIMA's staff, volunteers and publics, and those working within arts and cultural professional practice. This was embedded within the research design, directing the investigation and outcomes over a 27-month period.

The launch of MIMA's re-hang of the Middlesbrough Collection in June 2018 highlighted the relevance of the collection and archive to the research and created a renewed opportunity to share this with a wider public by re-positioning the maquette within the re-hang.

In July 2018 the project was a focus for a public Q&A session with MIMA senior curator Elinor Morgan.

In August 2020 the work was further contextualised in an Interview published online with assistant curator Helen Welford, reflecting on the project 18 months on.

Press coverage for the project included articles in the local press:

<http://nevolume.co.uk/culture/art/art-a-proposal-to-ask-where-does-a-threshold-begin-end-at-mima-middlesbrough/>

<https://www.gazettelive.co.uk/news/teesside-news/spotted-colourful-addition-central-middlesbrough-14935923>

“A Proposal to Ask Where Does A Threshold Begin & End” looks at tensions between how people may wish to represent the places where they live, and how those places are represented by others”.

Elinor Morgan, Senior Curator, MIMA.

The exhibition was extended by five months due to its local popularity, successfully creating a new symbol for MIMA and Middlesbrough. It will play a key role in Middlesbrough's bid for Tees Valley City of Culture 2025 and was chosen as the backdrop for the launch of Teesside University's MIMA School of Art, communicating their "innovative approach to community engagement".

The artwork is being reconfigured for acquisition into MIMA's Middlesbrough Collection, creating an embedded and on-going system for disseminating the research.

We chose to develop a work based on Middlesbrough's best known landmark, the Tees Transporter Bridge. We looked at the ways in which it had been used and overused as a motif which is an approach we've used elsewhere. Rather than digging deeper "into" the context we are working within, we make artwork through and in relation to pre-existing representations of a place or a site.

Tom O'Sullivan and Joanne Tatham
in conversation at MIMA, 2018.



Above: Promotion image for the launch of Teesside University's MIMA School of Art.

Below: Cladding on MIMA's garden storage.



Project on the MIMA website archive:

<https://visitmima.com/whats-on/single/joanne-tatham-and-tom-osullivan-a-proposal-to-ask-where-does-a-threshold-begin-end/>

Interview about project on the MIMA website:

<https://mima.art/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/FINAL-Tatham-Osullivan-MIMA-Interview-5.pdf>



Joanne Tatham & Tom O'Sullivan Hearing from Artists

Joanne Tatham and Tom O'Sullivan's collaborative practice examines identity and representations of place through large scale sculptural installations and associated research. In 2018 they worked with MIMA to develop a new commission. They are in conversation with Helen Welford, Assistant Curator, in July 2020.

HW: How do you use humour and play in your practice?

JT: This has always been central to our collaborative processes. Our ideas for the sculptural constructions are often – initially at least – quick and playful. There is a lot of work after that to ensure they keep that quality. We know we've done that well when there is a sense these things “just arrive” or are “dropped in” somehow. They belie their labour.

This matters. Their lightness and absurdity offer a point of connection, or ownership even. We love how frequently these constructions invite those who see them to reimagine and reconstruct a future life for them.

This absurdity is the pivot upon which the success of our work balances; it's the gateway for more satirical or unsettling interpretations. Nothing that insists it's just as simple as it looks, could ever be as simple as it looks.

HW: Your practice deals with particular contexts and situations, such as art spaces,



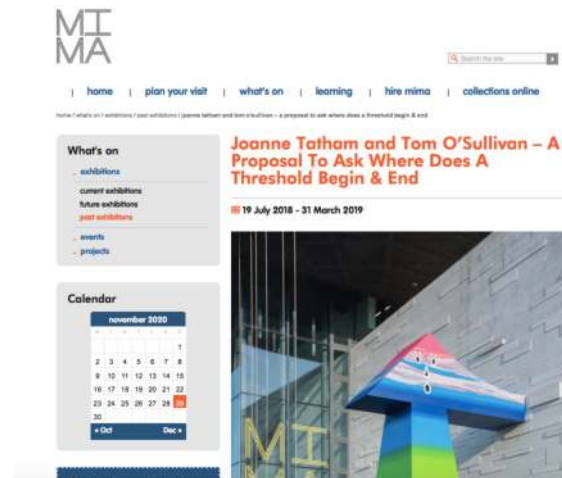
A Proposal To Ask Where Does A Threshold Begin & End 2018. Installation view at MIMA detail. Photography by Hynes Photography

festivals and historic sites. What techniques and strategies do you adopt when approaching a particular space and their communities?

JT: We start from the position that, as artists, we are invited *into* a situation to work. Although many of our projects are long term, we are wary of imagining, or claiming, that we will acquire a level of knowledge in excess of what is possible given the temporary, often intermittent, nature of an art commission.

A Proposal To Ask Where Does A Threshold Begin & End reflects this admission in a very direct way: we chose to develop a work based on Middlesbrough's best known landmark, the Tees Transporter Bridge. We looked at the ways in which it had been used and overused as a motif which is an approach we've used elsewhere. Rather than digging deeper “into” the context we are working within, we make artwork through and in relation to pre-existing representations of a place or a site.

Our bridge construction outside MIMA functioned through its very direct and identifiable relationship with its visual precursors, but we also consider representations of place or community that



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