

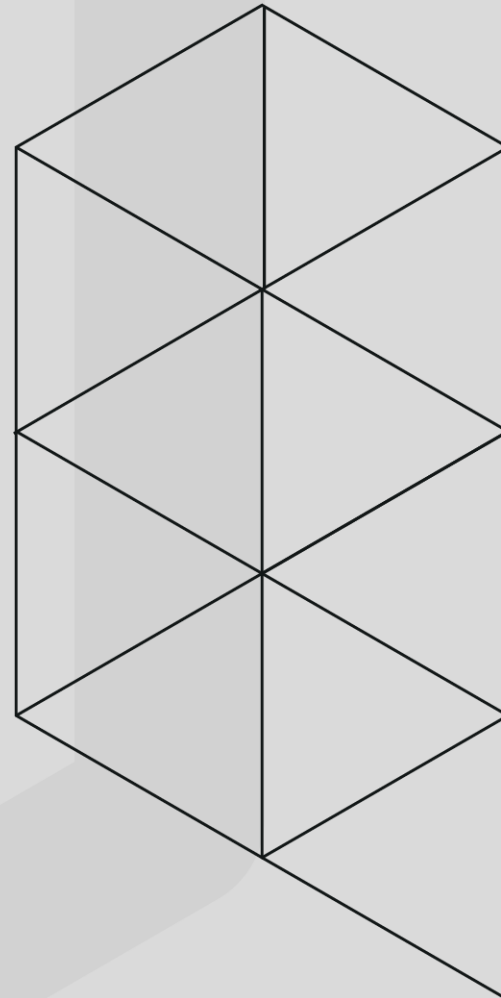
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Spatial Practices in
Art & Architecture for
Empathetic Exchange

Reflections on the First Season of Coventry Biennial Cycle Club

SPACE X Deliverable, Work Package 5 (D5.6, D18)

Ryan Hughes, Coventry Biennial
SPACE X Work Package 4: Archives
Secondments: University of Amsterdam



Reflections on the First Season of Coventry Biennial Cycle Club

Ryan Hughes, Coventry Biennial

By the time you read this publication (originally published May 2023) we will have ridden almost 100 miles together. At the time of writing (originally written March 2023) we've collectively saved 59.7 litres of fuel and reduced our collective CO2 by 140,235 grams.

We've visited Jephson Gardens, Warwick Arts Centre, Coombe Country Park, Herbert Art Gallery & Museum and Jo Gane's studio in Nuneaton. We've ridden canals, cyclepaths, greenways and a few main roads. We've got a flexible but growing membership that has been built quickly since January 2023 and that is developing our organisation's audience base¹.

But why a *Coventry Biennial Cycle Club*?

When I was an art student I made a durational performance as a part of an international exchange with peers from Utrecht in the Netherlands. I "cycled" the 350 miles between the 2 participating art schools on an exercise bike. John Wigley, the course director, asked if I was some kind of masochist.

Some years later I made a project called *Pentref Crwydrol* in Snowdonia National Park. I led a group of early career artists and photographers on a walking, climbing and camping trip. We became the inhabitants of a Nomadic Village over the few days when the UK had just voted leave in the Brexit referendum.

Later in that same year I worked with Heath Bunting on a presentation of his much celebrated online work *BorderXing Guide*, a project that "primarily consists of documentation of walks that traverse national boundaries, without interruption from customs, immigration, or border police²".

Throughout my time working in the arts I have been developing projects with, around and about journeys. Physical activity has connected me with art, ideas, places and people.

As Coventry Biennial has developed, this combination of physical activity and intellectual or creative activities has been a key feature of our work. In 2017 we worked with Katie Hodson and Aleksander Wojtulewicz on an *Artist-Led Yoga* session, this evolved into a full programme in 2019 with Lynnebec Performance Company leading regular yoga practices throughout the Biennial. Most recently we worked with Rachael Davies of the Centre for Dance Research at Coventry University on making an exhibition and engagement programme in 2021 highlighting and reanimating the archives of a radical dance group called Cycles who were based in the West Midlands in the 1960s.

As we were in the very early phases of thinking about Coventry Biennial 2023 I completed a secondment at the University of Amsterdam as a part of *Spatial Practices in Art and Architecture for Empathetic Exchange* (SPACEEX), a research project that asks how art and design “effect public exchange and opinion formation in urban spaces, and enable more empathetic and inclusive ways of living together?”³. During these 31 days in the Netherlands the ubiquity of bicycles across the country was pretty hard to ignore, after all, 28% of all trips in the country happen by bike. Every gallery, museum, studio or office I visited during this secondment was surrounded by bikes⁴. Cycling had a very close relationship to making and seeing art. No gallery was too far away. The systems, cultures and habits across the country ensured that getting to exhibitions was easy.

When I returned to Coventry, bicycles were on my mind and I was quickly reminded that the city had once been “the home of the British cycle industry and at one time produced the greatest output of cycles in the world.”⁵

This combination of experiences, practices, facts, interests and histories galvanised. Starting the *Coventry Biennial Cycle Club* as a programme designed to connect people with artists and cultural institutions in Coventry and Warwickshire in a social way that benefits health, wellbeing and promotes mutual support was an exciting possibility.

Early in 2023 we delivered a pilot event with a small invited audience of local colleagues, all of whom work in the creative sector and who I happen to know cycle frequently. We set out from the car park

Coventry Biennial Cycle Club

outside Coventry Artspace and rode to Leamington Spa where Janet Tryner delivered an intimate and informal debossing workshop using objects gathered during what she refers to as “ground-level investigations”.

Since then we have delivered a number of meetings of the *Coventry Biennial Cycle Club* in collaboration with an evolving, local and publicly open membership.

In February we rode, again from the car park outside of Coventry Artspace through Coventry’s Memorial Park and along the Kenilworth Road cycle path to the Mead Gallery at Warwick Arts Centre. The gallery’s Exhibitions Curator Thomas Ellmer (who is also a cyclist) gave us a guided tour of Katrina Palmer’s exhibition *What’s Already Going On* that poignantly explored “our capacity to change paths, to confound stereotypes and to act in new ways”. On our way back into the city centre we paused at Hearsall Common for a few laps of the gravel oval that is more often used for funfairs or learning to drive.

In March, with some horrid weather, we cycled to Coombe Country Park, stopping along the way at Binley Mega Chippy (of TikTok fame). It was during this meeting of the *Coventry Biennial Cycle Club* that we encountered our first mechanical. A pedal and crank arm fell off one member’s bike, after collectively spending a while searching the roadside for the missing fixings, we returned to the city centre where we visited the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum to see the recently acquired and installed sculpture by Leilah Babirye that we originally presented during Coventry Biennial 2021. This work uses burst inner tubes to create dreadlocks, referencing Leilah’s time working as a cycle courier in New York.

For April we headed towards Nuneaton, departing from the Coventry Canal Basin, mostly following National Cycle Route 52. When arriving in Nuneaton we were treated to a studio visit with Jo Gane who showed us a series of works in-progress and offered an amazing spread of freshly baked croissants and fresh tea and coffee. Jo and her family then led us to nearby Riversley Park where we completed a specially designed pinhole photography activity, marking our contribution to international Pinhole Photography Day.

These collaborative and participatory meetings will continue

Coventry Biennial Cycle Club

throughout the upcoming year, activating the fourth Coventry Biennial programme.

Our next meeting, taking place just a few days after this text is being published, sees this network grow. We are working with Shift Cycling Culture⁶, a Rotterdam-based, globally active not-for-profit who are working to make the cycling industry more environmentally sustainable. While their work is specific to the cycling industry, we can see clear points of connection and learning that could be applied to the art sector and our programmes more specifically.

Riding bikes has connected me with art, ideas, places and people. Through the delivery of *Coventry Biennial Cycle Club* this is being extended and amplified.

Riding bikes is supporting interpersonal, intergenerational relationships. Riding bikes is making art making more accessible. Riding bikes is giving people access to public space and improving their perception of Coventry and the surrounding area⁷.

Riding bikes is fun.

Notes

1 4.3% of survey respondents reported that they had not previously attended a Coventry Biennial exhibition or event.

2 <https://www.tate.org.uk/intermediaart/borderxing.shtm> (20th February 2023)

3 <https://www.spacex-rise.org/research/> (20th February 2023)

4 <https://s23705.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Netherlands-Cycling-Facts-2020.pdf> (20th February 2023)

5 Kimbley, D, *Coventry's Bicycle Heritage*, The History Press, 2015.

6 <https://www.shiftcyclingculture.com/> (2nd May 2023)

7 85.7% of survey respondents reported that their perception of Coventry was improved by attending a Coventry Biennial Cycle Club Meeting.