

Citizen Manchester

A black, hardbound book sits before me. It is outsized and weighty. On its cover, printed in gold, is the picture of what appears to be a civic building and it bears the title, *Citizen Manchester*. This is a book, which by outward appearance at least, reeks of authority, of power. No flighty fonts here; no bright pictures designed to woo; no sexy title.

The civic building rendered in gold is in actual fact Manchester Central Library, which, between 2010 and 2014, was closed in order for it to undergo renovation and for a new extension to be added to the Town Hall, which backs onto it. Opening the book, one of the first paragraphs I read is attributed to Sir Richard Leese, Leader of Manchester City Council. Here Leese describes the civic buildings in Manchester as being ‘undemocratic’. The Town Hall in particular, he says, was designed to “stink of bourgeois power.” He goes on, “We’re attempting to transform the Town Hall extension from that undemocratic building into a democratic building, an open building.”

The Town Hall, completed in 1877, is a monument to Manchester as a powerhouse of industry. Its then height-of-fashion neo-Gothic style was intended as both an affirmation of the city’s modernity and an acknowledgement of Manchester’s mediaeval heritage in the textile trade. Manchester Corporation demanded at the time that the new town hall be “equal if not superior, to any similar building in the country at any cost which may be reasonably required.”ⁱ The Central Library, which opened in 1934 (but looks older), is by contrast a domed building, its entrance a columned portico, loosely inspired by the Pantheon in Rome. In these two civic buildings therefore we have firstly a temple to modernity and to the gods of industry, secondly a temple to classical antiquity and to the value of learning.

Over 18 months leading up to the Central Library’s reopening in 2014, the artists Dan Dubowitz and Alan Ward were commissioned to photograph the two buildings’ transformation. The outcome of this commission was the afore-mentioned book, *Citizen Manchester*, and an exhibition of the same name comprising 40 large-scale photographs divided between the Library, Town Hall extension and a third civic building: Manchester Art Gallery. In the publicity blurb accompanying the project, it stated “Unusually for a public project of this scale, the builders Laing O’Rourke commissioned the artists not to showcase or document the building work but to explore the meaning to Manchester of the buildings’ transformation ...[The artwork] reveals how the refurbishment of a building can go far beyond physical refurbishment, questioning the relationships between a city, its citizens and place.”ⁱⁱ

Certainly book, exhibition, and indeed the very title, *Citizen Manchester*, compels a consideration of the various power structures at play within these three distinct civic buildings. It also compels a consideration of the position of art in relation to them. The Town Hall and Central Library are separated from Manchester Art Gallery by a civic square. In other towns and cities, gallery and library are commonly housed within the one building: citizens ascending through the library in which they may better themselves to reach the gallery in which they may stand before ‘high’ art. What temporary exhibitions we have come to expect in a library or town hall are usually by artists whose work has yet

to be admitted within the hallowed walls of the gallery or are presented by community groups upon a subject of local interest. These exhibitions are invariably distinct from, and by implication subordinate to, the portraits of civic dignitaries that continue to grace many a town hall wall and from the city-owned paintings hung high enough so as not to be grubbied by the public's straying fingers.

Not so *Citizen Manchester*. Upon first entering Manchester's Central Library, I walked blithely past the photograph by Dubowitz and Ward that immediately faces you and was obliged to double back upon myself. This oversight was not a reflection of the artwork's lack of authority; rather it was *because* of its authority. Printed to a scale proportionate to that of the building and float-mounted within their frames, these photographs are neither subordinated by their surroundings; nor do they dominate them. The photographs *are* their surroundings, or at least their surroundings with the wallpaper peeled back and the toilet door left open. In the promotional material associating the exhibition, the works are described as 'interventions', which implies a degree of disruption I did not recognize. Rather, I would argue that these photographs are 'integrations.'

Usually, when people talk about democratic buildings, they are referring to large open spaces with glass walls, places in which one can see and be seen. Does turning work spaces into goldfish bowls really make a building more democratic? Or does it merely reposition power? Neil MacInnes, Head of Libraries at Manchester City Council has proudly stated that in the old library 70% of the building was not accessible to the public; now that situation has been reversed so that 70% is open.ⁱⁱⁱ I was relieved to discover therefore that the opening up of Manchester's Central Library did not signify turning its librarians into performers for the education and entertainment of its visitors. Instead of glimpses into the library's back offices, here visitors are afforded glimpses of the old stacks housing cloth and leather-bound books – the smell of foxed pages now hermetically sealed, seducing only the nostrils of the imagination. If this building has been made more democratic, more open, it is in attempting to integrate its past within its present. Yet the library's books were moved into temporary storage in a Cheshire salt mine during the building work. These stacks are a reconstituted version of the building's authorised history, only marginally more authentic than a museum tableau.

The bibliophiles among us understand that the fetishistic appeal of old books lies less in how they look than in how they feel. It lies in their smell, their weight and the traces they bear of readers who have been there before us; the turned-down corners of pages where places have been marked before turning out the bedside light; the torn spine where a beloved book has been repeatedly pulled from the shelves; the marginalia and under-linings denoting passages of personal significance. Dubowitz and Ward's photographs of the library are evocative of its past in a way that the glass-encased stacks are not. Despite the project's claim to be about the relationship between citizens and place, people are markedly absent from these images. Made using real film – a medium that in recent decades has adopted a rarified, almost fetishlike, status among its devotees – the photographs instead examine the physical

traces of human presence within the library as it is denuded, stripped back, decade by decade, and then made over for the 21st century. And in this makeover is revealed history being decided: what is saved and what is lost; what is remembered and what forgotten. The painstaking restoration of the reading room's domed ceiling is in the photographs, certainly, but more as a canvas to the transient shadows cast upon it by scaffolding erected on a temporary floor below. Elsewhere the artists have photographed library stamps indelibly printed on the checkout desk, chewing gum stuck beneath reading tables, an old sign for art periodicals soon, we presume, to be erased. And the traces revealed in Dubowitz and Ward's photographs are not only of the long gone. They incorporate also the marks made by the construction workers. These workers were the two buildings' inhabitants at the time the artists were working on the project but, like previous readers of a library book, they are present only as enigmatic, shadowy figures. Deprived certain understanding of the meaning of the marks the workers make, these contemporary hieroglyphics become points of imaginative departure. A rudimentary red crucifix transforms a phone booth into a confessional; exposed cabling becomes an abstract study of line and colour. The fragility of these marks, our presumption that they have since been expunged, renders them all the more beautiful.

Presenting Dubowitz and Ward's photographs within the now restored library, they allude to the people and stories that have not made the final edit and serve to acknowledge that neither building nor history can ever be truly democratic. But of course, what has been lost from Manchester Central Library was in many ways incidental. Recalling Richard Leese's description of Manchester Town Hall as a building stinking of bourgeois power, it could be said that what has been lost within the Town Hall extension was, by contrast, wilful. Here Dubowitz and Ward have photographed unplumbed toilets lined up behind an open door bearing the sign 'Strictly Private. Members of the Council Only' and a buzzer to Room 1027 enigmatically labelled 'Special Projects.' Despite the humour evidently to be found in these images, there is a sense of loss in them too that surpasses the wistfulness of the library photographs. Attempts to dismantle class hierarchies inherent in the old building may be laudable but remember that this building was erected in celebration of a new industrial age and one in which Manchester led the way. Whereas Manchester Central Library has retained its fundamental purpose post-restoration and has reasserted its power in the Kindle Age, that of Manchester Town Hall is irrevocably compromised.

So, how does Manchester Art Gallery fit in relation to the story of these two buildings and the project, *Citizen Manchester*? In recent years, galleries have been tasked with opening their doors to a wider public, with making themselves more accessible, less elitist. And yet there remains an internal hierarchy within most galleries and Manchester is no exception. Following the gallery's own transformation between 1998 and 2002, the gallery now incorporates, on the ground floor, a 'Manchester' gallery of local interest displays; on the first floor, galleries housing the permanent

collection; and on the top floor, large exhibition spaces the purpose of which, according to the objectives set out in the expansion project, were “to provide exhibition galleries to international standards in order to attract high profile exhibitions.”^{iv} *Citizen Manchester* is not presented in these top exhibition spaces. Nor is it shown in the Manchester Gallery. Instead, it is presented as ‘interventions’ (this word again) within the permanent displays as well as in the stairwell of the new extension.

Contemporary interventions in galleries have a chequered record of success. Too often artists and curators are constrained by what space is afforded to them amongst difficult to change permanent and semi-permanent displays. Artists are also commonly constrained by unimaginative briefs, which call upon them to respond to works already there. Frequently, interventions are spoken of in terms of how they reanimate the collection. Certainly, the intelligent positioning of contemporary works amongst permanent displays can make us look afresh at works we have become blinded to by familiarity. Conversely, the development of collections through such commissioning strategies has at times rendered them self-reflexive and the contemporary works difficult to display meaningfully in any other context. It is telling in fact that such interventions often fall within a museum’s interpretation strategy. *Citizen Manchester* of course was not commissioned by Manchester Art Gallery and the project relates only indirectly to this building. Removed from the library and town hall, here was an opportunity for the photographs to assert themselves as a single body of work, which, conceptually and aesthetically, was not dependent upon direct reference to the transformation project. Yet displayed as interventions rather than as a cohesive exhibition, the works are compelled to make formal connections with works in Manchester’s art collection – with the subdued palette of Adolphe Valette’s early twentieth century paintings of Manchester or with the composition of James Tissot’s painting, *Hush* (a word, of course, frequently associated with libraries). They are also compelled to deal with the loaded context of an art gallery and the specificity of Manchester Art Gallery (formally the Royal Manchester Institute), which first opened its doors in 1824 and predates both other civic buildings.

The artists have introduced into Manchester Art Gallery the same display cases as those used in the library and town hall – cases decommissioned during the transformation project. In the library, the presentation of photographs in these cases and on risers formed from stacks of books, spines outward facing, titles legible, act a reminder of what has been lost in the redevelopment process. In Manchester Art Gallery, this display method is less successful. Conceivably the artists intended to give these discarded library cases new value by presenting them in a gallery. Yet if this is true, it implicitly acknowledges the gallery’s presumed greater authority. Moreover, such cases are not uncommon in an historic gallery; frequently they are used to present documentary material (quite possibly on loan from a library), which enhances our understanding of the wall and plinth-based high art. *Citizen Manchester* raises questions about how historical buildings are redeveloped, about what is lost as much as what is

preserved or reinstated; it acknowledges the contemporary politics at play within this editing process and the shifting power relationships between a city, its buildings and their users. These questions are equally pertinent to Manchester Art Gallery as to library and town hall. Yet, here the project's authority seems ultimately subordinated to both the hierarchal structure of the building and to its art.

The authority of *Citizen Manchester* in Manchester Central Library by comparison is incontrovertible. A truly democratic, open building may be a futile aspiration, but in the library *Citizen Manchester* demonstrates the power of art in giving voice to the invisible, the anonymous and the forgotten citizens, living and dead, who are an integral part of both a building and a city's history. So much so that one cannot help but feel that stripping *Citizen Manchester* from the library – and this is, after all, intended only as a temporary exhibition – would be like a secondary phase of redevelopment, and one that could only be to the building's detriment.

Fiona Venables, 2014

ⁱ Hartwell 2001, p. 71

ⁱⁱ <http://www.manchestergalleries.org>

ⁱⁱⁱ The Guardian, 21 March 2014

^{iv} <http://www.manchestergalleries.org/about-us/about-manchester-art-gallery/>