

From the Neighbourhood into The Gallery: The Ill-Fitting Gresham Wooden Horse

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Figure 1. Gresham Wooden Horse exhibition at Newcastle Contemporary Art gallery.

‘A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully’.

(Benjamin, *The Task of the Translator*, 1923)

There is something seemingly implausible about Isabel Lima’s exhibition, *Gresham Wooden Horse*, currently showing at Newcastle Contemporary Gallery (17 Nov-10 December 2022). For the orientation of socially engaged art practice is mostly rooted/routed in and on place-based social relations, ‘participation’ and ‘process’ rather than via ‘object’ production in the context of a gallery aesthetic.

Yet Lima, having spent several years working alongside and with different communities in Gresham, Middlesbrough (a series of neighbourhood projects navigated through collective making and public performance, workshops, relationship-building and urban planning), has chosen to 'translate' this significant body of work into and beyond the context of the gallery. In so doing, she follows (though with different aims) international artists such as Suzanne Lacy, Pablo Helguera, and Tania Bruguera in moving the politics of social practice into the museum and gallery space via installation and public conversation – a trajectory strategically deployed through the lens of pedagogy.

The key word here is the 'translation' of social practice into a white cube space. On the one hand, it arguably is an impossible task – doomed to inadequacy in terms of replicating the depth and authenticity of place-based work or a sense of social verité; especially a project that has had many layers of hidden and visible dynamics, pathways, obstacles and outcomes. Yet at the same time, the 'task of translation', invoking Benjamin's epigraph above, opens a necessary challenge for the gallery (museum) space to grapple with the contradictory demands of place-based practice; of introducing local, neighbourhood initiatives and community knowledge to a new set of audiences and public conversation.

For Lima, the **Gresham Wooden Horse** exhibition involves a carefully crafted form of storytelling, weaving between the past, present and the future. This critical transparency shapes Lima's show, resulting in a beguiling mix of reconstructed props, objects and material traces (perhaps benevolent ghosts) of the **Gresham Wooden Horse** project, harkening back to when it was originally researched and incrementally made by a diverse group of residents and local actors in the neighbourhood.

The show comprises a series of milestones, which include a giant (5 metre) collectively made wooden horse; a community allotment; a neighbourhood plan; a film made with people seeking asylum and charity workers; a football tournament; and a collaboratively stitched banner made by women from the neighbourhood.



Figure 2: The 5 metre Gresham Wooden Horse was inspired by the Trojan Horse myth. It was collectively built by the community, enabling residents to come together through its making; providing a symbolic presence – a dramatic physical and new structure – in a landscape scarred by a decade of demolitions.

At a single glance the giant horse in Gresham Wooden Horse dominates the space, since it stretches into the upper eaves of the gallery. The visitor has to literally strain their neck to look up at the very head of the horse. It is 'ill-fitting' as Lima puts it, serving as a reminder of the jarring juxtaposition of socially engaged work first enacted in the community versus the staging of the practice in a controlled setting. Yet this 'ill-fitting' is meticulously choreographed by Lima. The height of the wooden horse matches the height of the terraced houses demolished in Gresham (2016 - 2017); we are reminded of this destruction in the sheer scale of the horse, evocatively mirrored in the skeletal boundaries of the homes drawn by the artist on the opposite wall.



Figure 3: A film documenting the process of making the horse is projected onto the refabricated structure, highlighting the scale of the demolished houses on the adjacent wall.

A visceral sense of loss and displacement but also resilience is being communicated in this conceptual alignment.

The exposed wallpaper and interior rooms of the demolished houses (a manifestation of private space made brutally public) – an image that Lima encountered when she first visited Gresham – is re-invoked in the wallpaper pasted as a backdrop to the Gresham Neighbourhood Plan, providing a prop displayed at the last stop on the project timeline. Here Lima reveals the project's journey from practice to policy (arguably from images of displacement to agency), when the process of local planning is researched with residents and the charity 'Streets Ahead For Information', in response to the Localism Act for communities to exercise the right to plan in their own neighbourhoods.



Figure 4. The 'Gresham Neighbourhood Plan' was launched in 2018 by residents via the submission to the local council of a formal group forum constitution, together with a designation of the map indicating the boundaries of the neighbourhood. This was the first Stage of implementation of the Gresham Neighbourhood Plan into Local Planning.



Figure 5: The Gresham Wooden Horse was dismantled and the wood salvaged to build a temporary community allotment. The site of the allotment and the Newport Settlement Hub sit near the site of an older allotment garden (circa 1890) together with the original Middlesbrough Settlement House. The Settlement House in Gresham was one of the first to be established outside London (circa 1892). Wood from the dismantled horse was recycled to form a mobile cart, holding seedlings to be re-planted and re-distributed by residents (as an alternative to the refusal of the council to grant permission for a permanent community allotment and garden).

In the materiality, solidity and placement of the objects we get a feeling of craft and care. A direct homage, according to Lima, to the many collaborators – fabricators, architects, residents and engineers – who over several years in Gresham and in the recent gallery installation have played a central role in the making of things, echoing the sensitivities and considerations of Tom Finkelpearl in *What we Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation* (2013).

There is a distinct DIY aesthetic in much of socially engaged practice, says Lima: 'But it's important to include a well-crafted presence and a sense of beauty'.



Figure 6. The Gresham Banner collectively sewn and embroidered by a group of local women.



Figure 7. Detail of the Gresham Wooden Horse timeline.

Lima directs visitors via a project timeline outlined on the gallery wall, inviting viewers to step into the shoes of the artist; to share the acts of discovery, uncertainty and slow incremental knowing underpinning the rhythm of her work. There is no attempt to gloss over and render 'neat' this inevitably flawed and fragmentary process. Exhibitions often endeavour to tell a 'full story' suggests Lima, but **Gresham Wooden Horse** is punctured by gradual encounters, stops and turns, barriers to progress, joyful and demanding surprises and unpredictable outputs/outcomes.

We take this walk step-by-step through the project, as Lima once did.

At certain points in the timeline, Lima reveals some of the hidden labour and the 'learning on the job' of place-based work: for example, the health and safety and safe-guarding forms, the required event planning and paperwork and crowd management permissions, among others. All of which play a central part of the labour and are rendered transparent in the exhibition.

Lima's own familial history is shaped by migration and displacement. She explains that it is her experience of being 'out of place' which first drew her to Gresham, why her practice is informed by a decolonial lens. She has lived in neighbourhoods such as Gresham and has an intimate understanding of how communities live alongside each other with difference. Nevertheless, Lima cautions that you 'cannot shy away from the dangers of extractivism in this type of work or disavow a sense of authorship'. The challenge, therefore, is to be aware of what is being exchanged between the artist and the community; what is the mutual connection and balance in the reciprocal sharing of knowledge; and how and where that knowledge will travel and eventually land.



Figure 8. *The Birds* is a film developed in collaboration with people resident in Gresham and seeking asylum, together with charity workers and activists.

There is no easy theory of 'social change' nor claims about 'transformation' in Lima's methodology. Rather, she deploys a decolonial mindset as a constant agitating presence questioning the inevitable power dynamics of the practice. Accepting that the field of relations in such work is inherently messy and in motion, the task of the socially engaged artist is to navigate in and between these relational fault lines.

While well aware of the current caveats about cultural appropriation, Lima's approach to storytelling throughout **Gresham Wooden Horse** is influenced by the feminist Adriana Cavarero, who suggests that 'the "self" comes to desire the tale of his or her own life-story from the mouth (or pen) of another' (*Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, 2000). For Lima, **Gresham Wooden Horse** is therefore a 'gift and love letter' to the people of Gresham, and in turn it is a 'gift' offered by Gresham residents to 'others'. The project duration (running over a period of 4 years) and the exhibition itself, aims to mediate a process of mutuality and exchange of local and community knowledge, which ideally will travel beyond the gallery to other like-minded projects in other places, other neighbourhoods.

Counterpoints Arts has had the privilege of walking with Isabel Lima on the **Gresham Wooden Horse** project. It has been a journey rich in friendship and mutual learning. <https://counterpointsarts.org.uk/>

Counterpoints Arts will run a Learning Lab in Newcastle Contemporary Art exploring some of the above on 9th December 2- 4:30 pm. Please see here to register: <https://www.visitnca.com/events/learning-lab>

Counterpoints Arts' Learning Lab Programme is committed to the collective power of public learning and the constructive risks entailed in pushing the boundaries of accepted knowledge and practice. Exploring migration, the creative arts and social change, together with the role and value of the arts and culture as a necessary, democratic right. Individual Labs facilitate lively exchange and debate, forging alliances between artists and activists, cultural workers, curators, educators, community residents, human rights advocates and policymakers. Breaking down silos and responding to need – where no one participant can claim hierarchy of thought or skill.