

Art

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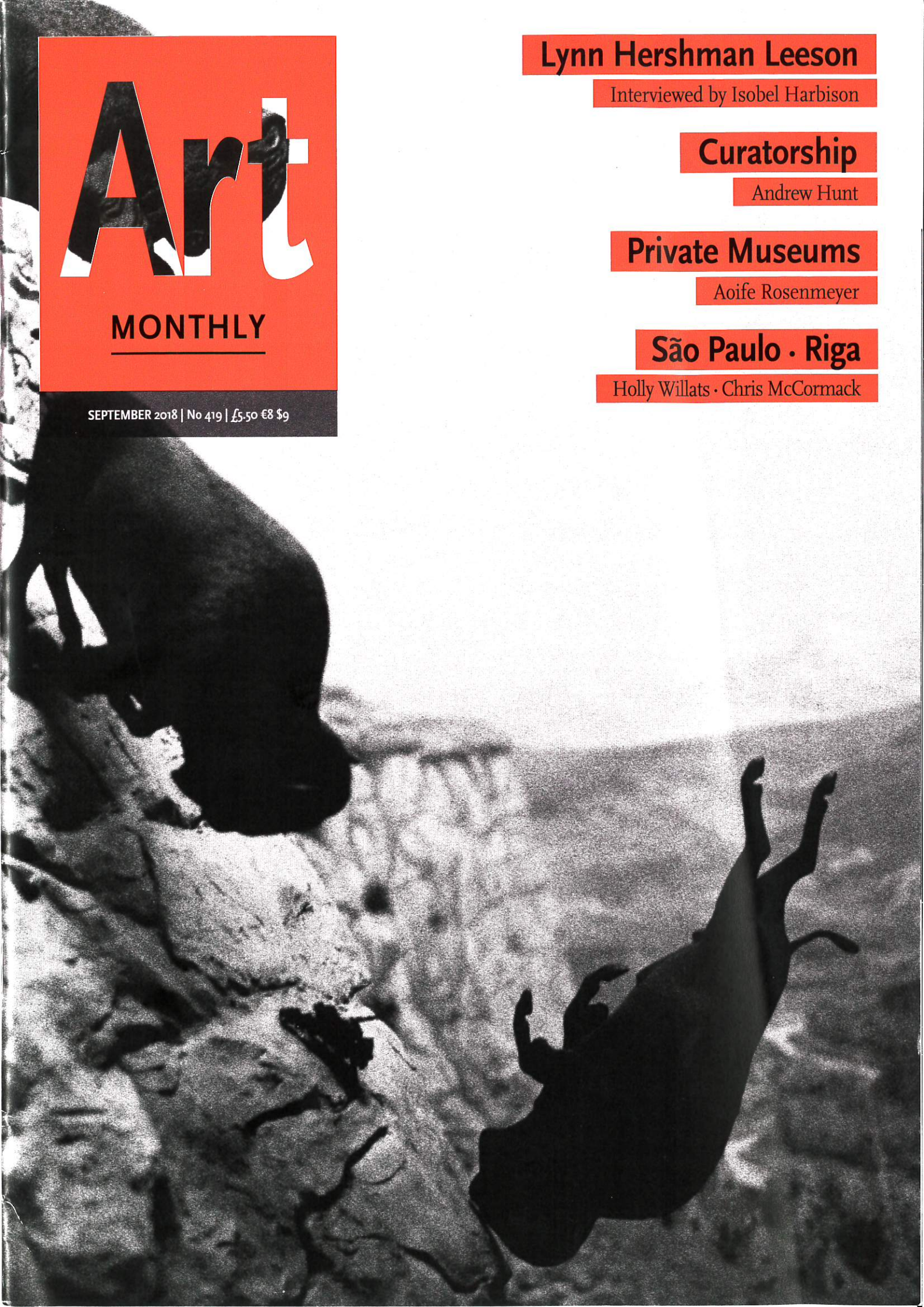
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BOOKS

Artists in the City: SPACE in '68 and beyond

The cover photo for *Artists in the City*, published to mark SPACE's 50th anniversary, shows a tiny figure tethered between two giant inflatable cylindrical sculptures. This acrobatic, surreal performance, by stuntman Eddie Bowery on Graham Stevens's inflatable, was part of a shoot for the artist's film *Atmosfields*, 1968-70. Here it acts as a visual metaphor for the urban artist's resilience in the face of near-insurmountable challenges: ever-rising rents, fear of displacement and political instrumentalisation. The first section of the book covers the early history of SPACE as a non-profit organisation founded in 1968 by Bridget Riley and Peter Sedgley (together with *Studio International* editor – later *Art Monthly* founding editor – Peter Townsend, law professor Anthony West and actress Irene Worth) to offer cheap studio spaces to fellow artists. Essays in the second section consider SPACE's expansion throughout the 1970s, while the third section addresses contemporary concerns around gentrification. Against the odds, SPACE's set-up has proven to be a viable model for studio provision, one that has inspired others nationally (SPACE, Acme Housing) and internationally (Künstlerhaus Bethanien, PS1), and the organisation continues to advocate the wider benefits to society of artists working in the city.

Bowery's performance took place at St Katherine Docks, the first home of SPACE studios, although you would be hard pushed to guess the location from the post-apocalyptic scene, with its bombed-out and derelict buildings and scrubby wasteland. Sedgley called it a 'concrete and water desert'. Riley recalls the six-inch-deep pigeon shit she and other hardy artists had to shovel into bags before creating makeshift studios spaces for 120 artists. The vast 60,000sqft warehouse previously housed wines, ivory, spices and perfume before the shipping industry moved downriver in the wake of the British Empire's demise.

SPACE occupied the site for two years, before developers took over. This entrepreneurial model of working with both private and public sectors to lease buildings awaiting development – so-called 'meanwhile' spaces – became the modus operandi of SPACE until this decade, when it began to acquire freeholds for added security. Half a century later, St Katherine Docks is unrecognisable: featuring a yachting marina, luxe apartments and a heritage pub, it is a pristine tourist destination that seems as if it has always looked like this. The website for the Docks omits any mention of SPACE

in its history, a reminder of why such alternative histories of London, as with this publication, are so important in refuting cleaned-up, corporate-funded histories.

Indeed, this book offers several approaches to SPACE's history, from factual to contradictory subjective accounts. A list of all artists connected to SPACE runs to an impressive eight pages, a *Who's Who* of the London art scene. A timeline of SPACE buildings is illustrated with modest black-and-white photos, avoiding post-industrial building porn and highlighting the temporary nature of so many of the leases. There are subtle differences in Riley's and Sedgley's foundation myths of SPACE. Robert Kudielka, in a 1971 essay reproduced here, writes as if SPACE was Sedgley's idea, with Riley and friends merely helping. SPACE's chief executive, Anne Harding, redresses the balance in her introduction, reprinting numerous letters Riley wrote to secure the funding and support for SPACE, including one to the first minister for the arts, Labour's Jennie Lee, as well as one to Henry Moore, who donated half his Erasmus prize money (nearly twice the £3,000 Arts Council grant).

The substantial increase in arts graduates in the 1960s and the trend for making larger work coincided with a decline in contemporary galleries, and these circumstances required new sites of production and an alternative to the conventional dealer system of marketing and selling work. This was the impetus behind SPACE's predecessor, AIR, which, in a pre-digital era, produced a card index of around 700 artists for anyone to consult. AIR demonstrated the power of artists to organise themselves, going beyond a mere bureaucratic role to co-ordinate protests at museum charges and make proposals for the development of the Serpentine tearoom. AIR's activities must be understood, writes (former *AM* deputy editor, now trustee) Andrew Wilson, as part of the radical 1960s experimental movement to break down hierarchies and boundaries between disciplines, shared by the likes of Arts Lab and the Antiuniversity. Today, Ana Torok argues, younger artists are drawing inspiration from such initiatives, especially what became the Artists Union (1972-83) for the recently launched Artists' Union England (Artnotes *AM376*).

Arts Council cuts precipitated the closure of AIR Index in 1977 and AIR Gallery in 1997. *AM* contributor Naomi Pearce, for one of her two essays on AIR, describes a visit to (former *AM* managing editor and company secretary) Letty Mooring, the Index's former administrator and unofficial custodian of the archive – what's left of it. Pearce's essays reflect on the haptic elements of historical research (the smell and texture of the Index cards) and the fragility of human memory

(what happened to the cards; no one seems to be sure). Pearce is troubled by this negligent attitude to archiving – unthinkable now.

Sedgley scornfully notes that the then Arts Council of Great Britain – which he describes as 'civil servants acting as curators' – took over AIR's Serpentine proposals for themselves, albeit watered down. Indeed, the anti-establishment attitude of early AIR and SPACE prevails throughout the book. Neil Mulholland's essay on artist-run spaces in Scotland from the same period is similarly scathing about the Scottish Arts Council (later Creative Scotland), devolved from the Arts Council of Great Britain in 1967, which ignored home-grown artist initiatives in favour of inventing its own galleries administered 'with the cold dead hand of the British civil service'. Mulholland nonetheless acknowledges that artist-run organisations everywhere are trapped in a 'financial ouroboros' of self-subsidy, and eventually must concede to accepting state or private subsidy.

SPACE's 1974 upgrade to charity status indeed came with additional responsibilities to the wider public and to funders – a duty to honour the set of values listed in the organisation's full name: Space Provision (Artistic Cultural and Educational) – and to professionalise its management structure, such that artists are now excluded from the board of trustees, ostensibly to avoid conflict-of-interest issues such as rent increases. This shift has, understandably, met internal resistance, even occasional mutiny, SPACE artists vigilant at safeguarding their basic need for workspace as a priority.

Yet SPACE thrives. To what does it owe its success? Sedgley contrasts SPACE's 'disguised protest' with the more explicit protests of the late 1960s; that combination of productive anger at unaffordable workspace and capacity for diplomacy has stood it well in the face of variable political support and pressure from hard-nosed developers. David Morris admires SPACE's dual DIY ethos of 'home improvement and makeshift utopian(ism)', such that the organisation remains ever flexible and forward-thinking. With 3,500 artists likely to lose their studio spaces by the end of next year, according to the London Mayor's 2014 *Artist's Workspace Study* (Editorial *AM392*), SPACE is needed more than ever. ■

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