

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: Bournemouth University
Unit of Assessment: UOA34
Title of case study: Socially engaged art: Provoking reflection on society's critical ethical issues.
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

Bournemouth University (BU) research by White (BU 2003 to present) focuses on the relationship between art, technology and culture. Exhibitions, workshops and presentations across the UK, Europe and in the USA have provoked societal reflection on critical topics such as genetics and germ warfare, among other controversial ethical issues. The work examines how sites, technologies and events shape our ideas of culture, political and personal life, whilst exposing audiences to ordinarily inaccessible information. Beneficiaries include the arts organisation with whom White has collaborated, and their participants, but more widely, those benefiting from his contribution to socially engaged art. The work has also furthered art–science discourse, providing impetus and critical breadth to the development of art and science as a cultural sector in the UK.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

BU has conducted interdisciplinary research across art and techno scientific disciplines since 2003, following the appointment of White. White is a BAFTA award winning digital media artist and former director of O+I (formerly the Artist Placement Group – APG). He is a leading figure in socially engaged practice in art. His work uses art as a reflective framework – an active cyclical experiment – through which we can ask questions that will lead to unexpected events and ideas.

White's research projects have led to international outputs at galleries, museums and artist publications. These include:

- **Cleanrooms** at the Natural History Museum (2003) and exhibited at the Barbican Gallery (2005). This work was made after The Gulbenkian Foundation funded an 18-month period of research at the National Institute for Medical Research. Various cleanroom facilities and manufacturers were studied, including OLATS (European Space Agency), Marseilles, France; Pfizer Research Europe (Biotech), UK; and the cleanroom manufacturer, Envair.
- **The Void** developed at The National Institute for Medical Research (2004–2005), funded by The Wellcome Trust. This work was based on the lost event of Yves Klein's experimental cocktail, given out informally at the opening of 'Le Vide' in Paris. Void participants recreated the experience personally and the project was written up as a clinical trial (R1).
- **Space on Earth Station** at Camden Roundhouse with N55 (DK) (2006). Funded by the Arts Council of England, this explored living conditions and experimented with our removal from and reconnection with what is natural.
- Collaborative research with Max Planck academics for **Truth Serum** (2008–2009). The project sought to highlight artists such as Steve Kurtz and Critical Art Ensemble, and their persecution in the USA, which marks the creep of the security state into the nervous system of culture.
- Research funded by the Henry Moore Foundation in the USA with the Center for Land Use Interpretation (2008–2010) and commission from the Washington DC Arts and Humanities Commission (2012) as part of the Centenary Celebration of the National Cherry Blossom Festival.

In order to communicate the research, White founded the Office of Experiments (OOE) in 2004–5. Working with world-leading experts, the independent artistic research organisation's aim has been to explore the spaces and places that standard academic research finds challenging.

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OOE is developing autonomous resources such as archives, databases, publications and field guides, from which we can draw material evidence and interpretive speculation on ordinarily inaccessible sites, spaces and events. The aim is to create an alternative public resource that will inform the broader perception, engagement and critical response to the scale, time base and structures of the rational world.

- The OOE's **Overt Research Initiative** commenced in 2008. It was developed with artist Steve Rowell (Center for Land Use Interpretation - CLUI), geographers at Bournemouth, and UCL, as well as information engineer Lisa Haskell. This led to White co-curating the exhibition of International artists in '**Dark Places**' (John Hansard Gallery). OOE constructed a database of field research and documentation of sites not normally accessible to the public. OOE catalogued and exhibited over 15,000 de-classified secret documents pertaining to experiments on the public obtained through freedom of information requests by local campaigner, Mike Kenner. The Overt Research Initiative included the Heritage Lottery funded **Experimental Ruins** project, which explored the history and geography of post-1945 scientific research. OOE engaged the public at this event through a bus tour – **Cold War Secrecy and Technology** – and other forms of experimental fieldwork.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Exhibition Outputs

P1. White, N. (2003) *Cleanrooms*. London: The Jerwood Gallery at The Natural History Museum. Other artists include Critical Art Ensemble and Gina Czarnecki.

P2. White, N. (2005-2006) *The Void*. Manchester: The Sensory Clinic at International3, 9–24 May 2005; *Colour After Klein*. London: Barbican Gallery, 1 July 2005; *Self Rapport and Introspections*. Berlin: Max Planck Institute, 5 May 2006; *Artist and Alchemists*. Dorset: Sherborne House, 20 May–18 June 2006.

P3. Aarbake, I., Sorvin, I. and White, N. (2006) (N55 – Office of Experiments) *Space On Earth Station*. London: Camden Roundhouse, Space Soon. With Danish Art Collective, N55.

P4. White, N. (2009–2010) (Office of Experiments) *TRUTH SERUM*. Luxembourg: Casino Foundation for Contemporary Art, September 2009–January 2010; *TRUTH SERUM*. Liverpool: FACT, Luxembourg, September 2008–February 2009. International exhibition titled 'Crossing the Borders of Art and Technology'. Including work by Art Orienté objet, Critical Art Ensemble, Wim Delvoye, Eduardo Kac, Antal Lakner, Kira O'Reilly, ORLAN, Philippe Rahm, Stelarc, The Tissue Culture and Art Project and Paul Vanouse.

P5. White N. (2009–2010) (Office of Experiments) *Curator of Dark Places*. Southampton: John Hansard Gallery, November 2009–January 2010. Exhibition with artists Steve Rowelkl, Beatrice da Costa, Steve Beard and Victoria Halford.

P6. White, N. (2011) *Dark Places (Exhibiting Ideology)*. Art and Covert Culture Conference, Selected Paper. CRASSH, Cambridge University, February 2011.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

White has become a leading figure in socially engaged practice in art. His work has had considerable reach across the UK, Europe and the US, through exhibitions, workshops and the media. It provokes societal reflection on the critical issues it addresses; notably how sites, technologies and events shape our ideas of culture, political and personal life. In addition, the work has contributed to the art-science discourse, providing impetus and critical breadth to the development of art and science as a cultural sector in the UK.

Reach

White's interdisciplinary research has been disseminated widely across the internet, periodicals, magazines and radio, leading to enhanced engagement with the critical issues presented through his work. The Overt Research Initiative (2008–date) was included in *BLUEPRINT* magazine, *Afterimage Journal* and *New Scientist*. The research has also been discussed in a large number of critical texts and publications by leading cultural contributors (R2–R4 among others).

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Public engagement projects for the Overt Research Initiative have taken place locally in Dorset (Secrets of Portland, 2010; Resonant Terrains, 2013) as well as in London (Experimental Ruins funded by Heritage Lottery Fund, 2012) and through artist talks at the Association of American Geographers in the US (2012) and in public conferences such as 'Art and Covert Culture' (CRASSH, Cambridge University) (R5).

Public engagement and cultural enrichment

White is a former director of O+I (formerly the Artists' Placement Group – APG), who have defined socially engaged practice in art since 1966. During his time in the role (2007–2009), White led numerous events at Tate and the setting up of Flat Time House, the home of one of the founders John Latham. O+I/APG is well documented as laying out the public and social engagement dimensions of art, argued as leading to the development of public arts policy under New Labour (Bishop 2012). White's significant role in developing social and public engagement is evidenced through his work with OOE and the Arts Catalyst organisation.

For example, the Overt Research Initiative's Experimental Ruins project opened up sites such as the Department of Homeland Security, Admiralty Research at Southwell Business Park, Portland ROC Nuclear Bunkers and the Women's Peace Camp at AWE Aldemaston. These sites are accessed and reimagined as sites of cultural importance or as future heritage. The significant impact of the research projects has been recognised in terms of the contribution to cultural enrichment, the discussion of sites of national heritage and engagement of public in moral and ethical issues arising from new scientific developments and the transparency of closed sites.

This is further evidence in participant feedback from the Experimental Ruins project. The majority of participants said that the critical excursion drew attention to elements of technological heritage that they hadn't known of before. Many respondents believed the critical excursion provided an opportunity to push the frontiers of investigation into improbable, underground or unremarkable sites in suburban settings. Around half felt the experimental field workshop presented them with new ideas and ways to explore and map contemporary heritage sites (R6).

Reviews and commentary consolidate this impact claim, citing White's approach as addressing and engaging audiences in new experiences and discussions of complex and sometimes difficult subjects. Examples of these include cultural reviews (*Afterimage*, *BLUEPRINT*, *Art Monthly*) and published books, *The Body in Contemporary Art* (R2), non-art academic paper in *Geoforum Editorial* (R7), online interview *we-make-money-not-art* (R8) as well as leading edited publications on contemporary art such as *All this Stuff* (Libri Publishing, 2013), *How Artists Think* (Black Dog Publishing, 2013) and *Experimental Systems, Future Knowledge and Artistic Research* (University of Leuven, 2013).

Director for the Arts Catalyst organisation describes White's work as "providing cultural enrichment, insight, discourse and provocation for public and professional audiences across the UK and internationally" (R9).

Arts Catalyst

The Arts Catalyst organisation commissions art to experimentally and critically engage with science. Their work often features in *New Scientist* and *Design Week*, among other high profile publications. Much of White's research has been presented in partnership with them, with 12 repeat commissions to date. White's research has made a significant impact on this leading cultural organisation in the International Digital Art and Science field.

In a letter to BU, the Director described the on-going relationship the organisation has with White as having "made a real impact on our ability to conduct our core aims to enable the public to have distinctive, thought-provoking experiences that transcend traditional boundaries of art and science" (R9).

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Since working with White the organisation has received significant public funding on joint bids from the Gulbenkian Foundation, Arts Council England and Heritage Lottery Fund. This has facilitated a more direct impact on audiences across the UK and in Europe at third party venues. During the impact period these include: FACT Liverpool (Human Futures programme 2008, European City of Culture), Casino Foundation for Contemporary Art (Luxembourg, 2009) John Hansard Gallery (2009–10) as well as Arts Catalyst's own events (Art and Ethics 2012, Experimental Ruins 2012).

Collaboration with White has contributed to the steady growth of the Arts Catalyst organisation. Between 2009 and 2012 the numbers participating in exhibitions increased fourfold (12,006 to 51,662) and page impressions on their website more than doubled (R10).

The Arts Council of England have scrutinised the impact of Arts Catalyst activity through the annual review process. Subsequently in 2011, during the period of the Overt Research, they awarded National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) status to the Arts Catalyst, stating: "The Arts Catalyst is a science-art agency that aims to extend the relationship between the arts and science. It organises and promotes exchange and collaborations between artists and scientists, and research in multidisciplinary laboratory situations. Events include exhibitions, education and critical debate, which are presented in a range of arts, science and public venues" (R11).

White's on-going relationship with the Arts Catalyst is cited by the Director as an important factor in securing NPO status (R9).

Art-science discourse

In addition to public engagement and cultural impact, White's research has made significant contributions to the discourse of art and science. For example, in January 2012 White presented work from his project 'The Void' (2004–5) to an ethics panel drawn from some of the UK's leading ethics committees. The event 'Trust Me I'm an Artist' investigated the new ethical issues arising from art-science collaboration and considered the roles and responsibilities of the artists, scientists and the institutions involved (R12).

To summarise, the extensive international reach of White's interdisciplinary research across art and techno scientific disciplines has provoked reflection on society's critical ethical issues, furthering art-science discourse in the process. As a leading figure in his field, he is making significant contributions to socially engaged practice in art.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- R1.** The Ethics of the Void. *Contemporary Magazine*, 81, 74–75 (available on request).
- R2.** O'Reilly, S. and White, N. (2009). *Truth Serum. The Body in Contemporary Art*. London: Thames and Hudson. World of Art Series. ISBN: 9780500204009 (available on request).
- R3.** Evans, D. (2012) 'O' is for Overt Research. *Critical Dictionary*. London: Black Dog Publishing, pp. 92–97 (available on request).
- R4.** Scott P. (2010) New Topographies. Office of Experiments. *BLUEPRINT magazine*, March, 54–60. Six-page full colour feature on Overt Research Project and Office of Experiments from interviews with Neal White and Steve Rowell (available on request).
- R5.** All project are listed under Neal White or Office of Experiments at: <http://www.artscatalyst.org/>
- R6.** Arts Catalyst feedback report from Experimental Ruins project (available on request).
- R7.** Davies, G.F. (2010) Where do experiments end? *Geoforum*, 41(5), 667-670. DOI: 10.1016/j.geoforum.2010.05.003.
- R8.** Batty, R. (2012) Dark Places and experimental geography – interview with Neal White. [We-make-money-not-art](#), 6 June 2012.
- R9.** Letter from the Director of the Arts Catalyst (available on request).
- R10.** Arts Catalyst statistics provided by Jo Fells at Arts Catalyst (available on request).
- R11.** Arts Council England. National Portfolio Agency summary 2011. Available from: <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/browse-regularly-funded-organisations/npo/the-arts-catalyst/>.
- R12.** [Trust Me I'm an Artist](#): An event investigating ethical issues arising from art and science.