

## Letter

### Spike Island Studio Evictions

I often visit the Open Studios at Spike Island in Bristol. Each time, I have had the pleasure of seeing artist Howard Silverman's latest works in his studio and of talking with him about contemporary art and practice. I have come away warmed by his curiosity, gently educating nature, and generous and informed intellect.

Silverman is prolific and his often-radical output goes back half a century. He maintains an active and engaged practice in 2020, sharing his back catalogue and new experimental works direct from his studio on social media. We have kept in touch through Instagram, which is how I learnt of his impending eviction, which he was notified of on 24 October. He was then notified on 29 January that his appeal had been turned down.

Less than two years ago Robert Leckie was appointed director of Spike Island. He is former curator and head of programmes at Gasworks in London and on his appointment said: 'I look forward to working strategically with colleagues and partners in Bristol and beyond to further Spike Island's impact on a local, national, and international scale.' But at what cost? What is his strategy?

Spike Island's latest annual report, which was submitted under Helen Legg, Leckie's predecessor, reveals a plan to expand its international residency programme and to provide studio and living space for visiting artists. Indeed, previous directors have sought to review the way in which studio leases are managed, with discussions dating back ten years or so, but for numerous reasons these have been rejected by studio tenants as unworkable. These consultations have been continuing with no agreement being finalised. Leckie has, however, simply drawn a line under these negotiations and implemented a new system without formally putting it back to the studio artists. An online poll was responded to by

57 studio-holders in early March revealing that 61.5% agree in principle with a five-year review, although 82.5% are not satisfied with how the current five-year review process is being conducted.

Artists up for review can submit a single statement responding to five questions, or they can be interviewed in their studios. They are asked to demonstrate 'an engagement with the wider contemporary art context' - an assessment criterion which, to my mind, is both unclear and highly subjective. So far, of the six artists vetted, half have been asked to leave and will not have their five-year leases renewed (leases that have been introduced during this review process). Only after Silverman's threat of legal action and a concerted #noevictions campaign did Spike Island finally publish its policy statements on its website in mid April.

When Silverman appealed the termination of his lease, the board initially declined to comment on its decision. However, under legal pressure from Silverman, the board relented and issued its reasons to evict. These included such bureaucratic pedantry as 'you failed to caption your images clearly or stick to the word counts'. Silverman was also told that his letters in support would be taken into account but they in fact were 'procedurally excluded' - ie ignored. To date, he has been denied the right to challenge the decision and his further appeals against the procedure have been turned down.

No one is opposed to promoting diversity and equal opportunities and there is good turnover in the studio. Other than Arts Council England, Bristol City Council and the Charity Commission, who is driving these changes and why? When asked, the administration vaguely refers to 'funders' - who are they and do they have a say or agenda in these unclear guidelines?

At stake is the freedom to practice without distinct or quantifiable outcomes. Globally, socioeconomic and cultural forces are knocking

hard at the studio door. While there is enormous pressure on art institutions to adopt profit-led business models, we wonder what metrics are at play here - what is the business model that is being adopted? The director and trustees have repeatedly refused to meet studio holders to discuss their future vision.

The most shocking aspect of this sorry situation is the fact that it is partly through Silverman's hard work and administrative labour and commitment that the local creative economy, which supports hundreds of artists, technicians, fabricators and creative industries such as Aardman Animations, came into being: Silverman co-founded Artspace Bristol in 1974 and was part of the group which oversaw the organisation rebrand as Spike Island in 1998. Before the intervention of Silverman and his colleagues, artists migrated to London. Now the flow is the other way.

I urge Spike Island to reconsider these evictions and to safeguard the sanctity of the artist studio. A studio is an essential place for an artist, being both refuge and battleground. Eviction will be catastrophic for Silverman and the Spike Island community.

As a non-profit publicly funded art organisation, we need to question the governance structures and interests of Spike Island. I urge funders, trustees, artists and the public to pressure the management by signing the Action Network petition against these evictions.

<https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/spike-island-stop-unfairly-evicting-artists>

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