

### *An Empty but Repeatable Space*

*“An Empty but Repeatable Space”* is a research project by Alexandra Symons-Sutcliffe that metabolises the relationship between documentary, performance and the city. Leading from the British photographer and historian Terry Dennett (1938 – 2018) whose documentation of London and Londoners during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s used Brechtian theatre and radical pedagogy to explore the camera as a tool for political education and action. Engaging with Dennett’s methods, as well as his peers and collaborators Jo Spence (1934 – 1992) and Keith Kennedy (1934 –), and to a degree ignoring their aesthetics, *“AEbRS”* presents the document as an aggregate and performative form which can be shared across contexts.

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In the gallery a display of photographs centred around Dennett’s *“The Crisis Project”* (c.1973 – 2011), a documentary and autodidactic investigation into the effects and causes of financialization on London, centred on the economic crash of the late 1980s, form a scenography. Some of the photographs and research materials presented in the gallery pre or post-date *“The Crisis Project”* but largely are from the late 1980s and combine street photography of business foreclosure, homelessness, and degradation of the urban environment with studies on the new economic culture of de-regulation and speculation. Dennett’s materials are presented in three stages, ‘raw’ photography, research documents, and the two synthesised into panels of information. Both the crisis and *“The Crisis Project”* were ongoing in Dennett’s lifetime and remain pertinent in our negotiation of the contemporary city.

Dennett believed strongly in the political efficacy of photography to document, educate and transform. For him — and Spence and Kennedy, who developed rehabilitatory performance workshops using the camera and photography for adults excluded from employment and education due to behavioural and psychological issues — photography’s true purpose was not to stabilise a context, event, or person, but to demystify and reproduce an alternative set of conditions. One of Dennett’s most important interventions into photographic theory, history and practice, was the rejection of any form of bourgeois property relations to the understanding of subjectivity and citizenship. When understood in this framework, *“The Crisis Project”* can be read as an argument for the difference between what someone is, what they have, and what they can do.

*“An Empty but Repeatable Space”* embraces Dennett’s political commitment and methodology and attempts to share and develop Dennett’s work by extension rather than replication. The re-staging of *“The Crisis Project”* seen in the gallery deliberately amplifies the theatrical and performative aspects of Dennett’s work, as well as the ambulatory mode in which he documented the city. Alongside the presentation of Dennett’s photography is a script of a play, compiled by Symons-Sutcliffe, and ceramic masks representing the characters of the play designed and produced by Kathryn Pell. The inclusion of the play is in reference to Kennedy’s work with theatre, which in turn influenced Spence

and Dennett's 'photo-theatre' methodology, as well as to the play Kennedy wrote about Spence and Dennett after Spence's death in the early 1990s.

The "AEbRS" script was compiled from a round-table discussion between four contemporary artists and researchers, Alkisti Efthymiou, Winnie Herbstein, Chris Jones, and Ming Lin, who all work on issues relating to current urban conditions including: housing, commerce and anti-gentrification struggle. Initially, gathering these artists together presented an opportunity to share Dennett's work with the group and have them respond to each others' practices as well the issues and histories documented in "*The Crisis Project*". This conversation was recorded and dramatised, the text is offered as a blueprint for a conversation on how art practice influences and is affected by what we term 'gentrification,' though as discussed in the play, this word may no longer be a helpful descriptor.

Loosely based on Euripides' "*The Trojan Women*" (415BC), in which four former queens — now Greek war prizes and slaves — meet to discuss the destruction of their kingdoms and the obliteration of their social positions by the war. The "AEbRS" play mimics some of the characteristic of greek theatre and includes a discussion on the definition of tragedy, which the characters agree is defined by a prior knowledge of your own failure. Especially in the U.K, a pathos laden narrative of decline determines popular understanding of recent history and economics, and following the asset-stripping project of Brexit and the radical redistribution of wealth upwards brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic it appears that the game is well and truly up. Nevertheless, the characters in the play believe that to be a citizen is to live in a truly humane way, and that sharing knowledge of past and contemporary practice and struggle may not provide a solution but can at the very least texture this sense of inevitability with alternative histories.

Time and space, and production of both, are the conditions of capital, culture and the city. The related but distinct elements of "*An Empty but Repeatable Space*" define a specifically contemporary and urban temporality, the immediate public roughness of encounter contrasted with the slower narrative of external and invisible forces that compress and distort our ability to live collectively. Dennett's "*Crisis Project*" contains all of these contradictory experiences, it is both historical and prophetic, documentary and productive. Returning to Dennett's practice, embracing it as method, opens up new strategies for living in the increasingly inhospitable city.

Materials relating to Terry Dennett's *Crisis Project* are provided courtesy of MayDay Rooms Archive, London and in collaboration with the Jo Spence Memorial Library Archive, Birkbeck, London.

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Free Home University (Nikolay Oleynikov, Alessandra Pomarico)

FHU drifting library has been put together through gifts and suggestions to explore different approaches and practices during our artistic and pedagogical radical experiment. Sometimes, some books dock to other learning sites, and they encounter new writers, readers, practitioners, and conversations.

firefly frequencies (Silvia Maglioni, Nikolay Oleynikov, Alessandra Pomarico, Graeme Thomson)

*firefly frequencies* is a vernacular radio for molecular forms of life and (un)learning co-founded by Silvia Maglioni, Nikolay Oleynikov, Alessandra Pomarico, and Graeme Thomson in 2020. Bringing together artists, writers, musicians, filmmakers, theorists, and other collaborators from different geographies, the radio became a place of gathering where many voices can meet, mix, and transform. A membrane, a communal body that perpetually reinvents itself through different modalities and temporalities, through resonance, care, and the shared powers of reception and receptivity.

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## About Materials/Materialien

The poet small press Materials was co-founded by Lisa Jeschke and David Grundy in Cambridge, UK, in 2012. Lisa moved to Munich in 2016 and began a German branch named Materialien, publishing work in translation, as well as both English and German language work written in Germany. The two branches of the press have operated in parallel since that time.

Initially, we produced a photocopied and stapled A4 magazine chaotically assembled, bulky and typeset entirely in Microsoft Word, going on to produce four issues between 2012 and 2014. In 2014 we began printing single-author pamphlets, which make up the majority of our publications. These have generally been printed in A4 or A5 formats, saddle-stitched and using a low-key design aesthetic; more recently, in the UK, we have produced more extensive perfect-bound collections by authors including Gabrielle Daniels, Candace Hill, and Alli Warren. Over the years, we have also made occasional one-off magazines, broadsides and flyers produced for particular occasions, for example "*Brexit: Borders Kill*" (2016).

The Materials/Materialien Reading Series – featuring both poets published by the press and poets published elsewhere – was founded in 2013. We began by putting on readings every fortnight in Cambridge; in recent years, the reading series has occurred more irregularly on various occasions and at various venues in London, in Munich, or online. Readers have included, among many others, Caroline Bergvall, Sean Bonney, Don Mee Choi, Peter Gizzi, Robert Glück, Adelaide Ivánova, D.S. Marriott, Erin Moure, Denise Riley, and Ayna Steigerwald. An archive of introductions is available on the Materials website (<http://material-s.blogspot.com/p/blog.html>).

As of 2023, we continue to publish in small run editions and run as a strictly not-for-profit enterprise. As a general rule, the press endeavours to publish work by a wide variety of authors rather than sticking to a particular catalogue of writers. We have published work from established authors such as Pulitzer-prize winner Anne Boyer and San Francisco poet laureate Tongo Eisen-Martin to first books by younger writers. Much of the material we publish might formally be identified with avant-garde, experimental or Modernist writing, and politically with left-wing, anti-racist, feminist and queer politics. We don't, however, have any strict selection criteria, and what all this means may change over time: we seek to be a responsive and open enterprise interested in drawing together politically and aesthetically exciting work of any kind.

Our contribution to the present exhibition is an opening reading on 28 January 2023 featuring Laurel Uziell, Lütfiye Güzel, and James Goodwin, and a booktable featuring copies of most of our books and pamphlets currently in stock. The table has been set up for the opening reading and left here for the duration of the exhibition. All books are regularly for sale: please feel free to browse, and for purchase, please get in touch with the staff of the Halle für Kunst.

—David Grundy & Lisa Jeschke, January 2023

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