Afterimages: Reflections on an artistic response to site and community at The University of Warwick

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Abstract

Afterimages is a series of artwork I developed after becoming involved in the Then & Now: Arts at Warwick project from initial exploration of the Modern Record Centre's archive. The construction of the new Faculty of the Arts building is the central focus for my work, which is interested in the impact that communities have on their spaces and vice versa. This article aims to discuss and analyse the concepts presented in Afterimages and the process of creating the work. This includes the methodological influences of psychogeography, the architectural theories of Léon Krier, and the contextualisation of the work amid the global pandemic. Following the events of the past six months, much of the student experience of Warwick has moved online. In light of this, this article also seeks to reflect upon how this shift in community has impacted elements of the artwork and its investigation into the built environment.

Keywords: Art; space; psychogeography; architecture; built environment; community

Snowdon. Exchanges 2021 8(4), pp. 76-86

76

In the beginning of 2020 and the new academic term, I was presented with an opportunity to produce artwork as part of my History of Art degree module option centred around a practical, studio based artistic practice. Working with the *Then & Now* project, I quickly became interested in the history of the University of Warwick's campus. I was immediately drawn to images from the Modern Record Centre's archive shown to us by Dr. Kathryn Woods, Melissa Downing, and Liz Wood. When we look at images of the past, there is often an immediate instinct to place ourselves within the scene we see before us. This was my experience as I poured through the archival images found in the Modern Record Centre's collection. The photographs showed me the campus as it was at the very beginning of Warwick, in the first years of the university's life. Obvious changes in architecture, design, and layout within the old buildings led me to think about how people might have interacted with these spaces. It seems a distinctly human notion to want to actively shape our built environments, even in spaces often considered lacking in traditional beauty, such as those built at Warwick during its inception (**Perrigo, 2015**). Before life was interrupted by the global pandemic, while strolling down the dark corridors of the Humanities Building, we would have seen bunting strung up, and watched people chatting and leaning against old walls with chips and scuff marks still present from interactions with a long since graduated cohort.
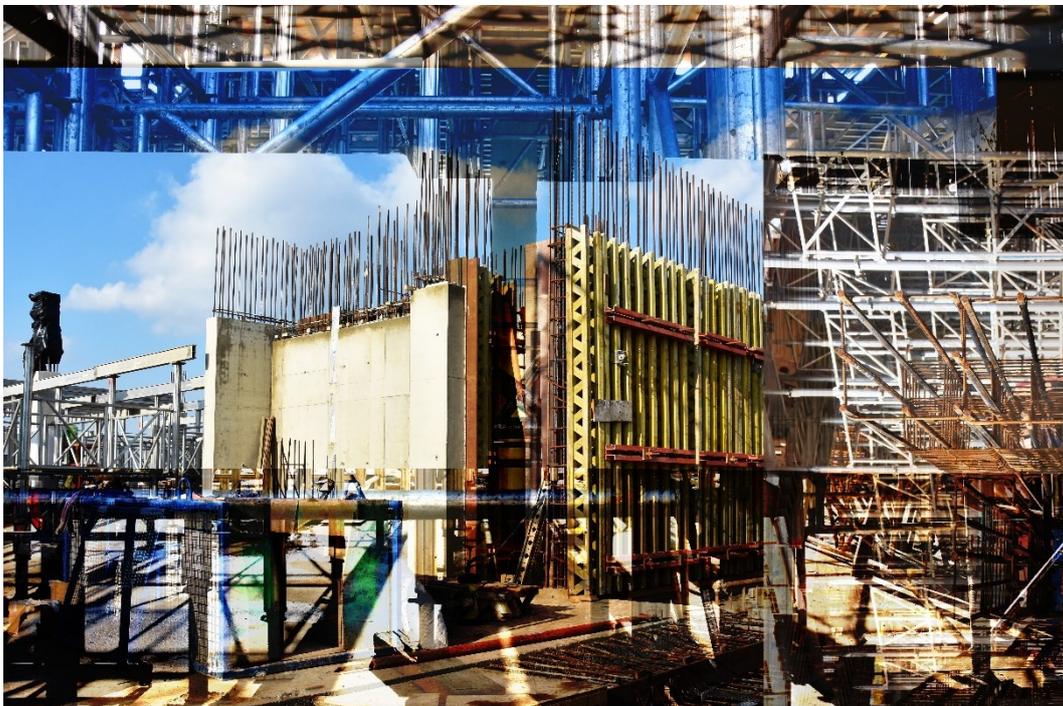

Figure 1: Afterimage 1: 6000 x 4000 px, digital collage. Source: Author's own work.

Imagine now a building without people, devoid of all the characteristics of community: common room decorations, out of place furniture, and the comforting imperfection of a lived-in space. Shortly after spending time

with the archival images, I tasked myself with seeking out such a place. I felt that there was humanity to be found through the promise of future history, even within the sometimes cold and uncompromising bleakness of concrete. In this way, a building site becomes a gestational space, full of potential. This idea of architecture having potential through its interactions with communities is, of course, not new. Architect Léon Krier alluded to this in referring to the sentiments of Winston Churchill, writing, 'we make buildings and then they make us' (**Krier, 2009: 29**). Churchill was arguing for the rebuilding of the bombed Commons Chamber in its original rectangular shape, claiming that this architectural form had shaped the two-party system of British democracy (**UK Parliament, 2020**). Krier took this statement further in *The Architecture of Community*, asserting that: 'Whatever their size, buildings influence the world' (**Krier, 2009: 29**). This statement strikes me as particularly true in the context of a university setting, where students may not share the same cultural history, faith, or background, but community is nonetheless forged through the bringing together of individuals within the built environment of the campus.

It was with this thought in mind that I sought to visit the new Faculty of the Arts building in its development. This turned out to be no mean feat: it took some degree of convincing to allow an undergraduate armed with a camera and tripod, not to mention a noticeable lack of their own steel-toed footwear, to wander around a building site. It was with great patience for my cumbersome camera and frequent stops for photographic opportunities that project manager Alastair Dixon (University of Warwick Estates Office) and site manager Kevin Williams (Bowmer & Kirkland) led me around the site. This was the structure that would eventually supplant the old Humanities building with which I was so familiar. When I began to document the building site, I wanted to draw out the future from its vacant space. I was keen to know more about the site, not only its human spaces, but also the infrastructure that would become its beating heart, without which the building would be uninhabitable. However, I was also interested in the small and seemingly insignificant details that collectively make up a place. This interaction was something I had been introduced to through research into psychogeographical practices employed by writers and artists of the past.

[Snowdon. Exchanges 2021 8(4), pp. 76-86](#)

78
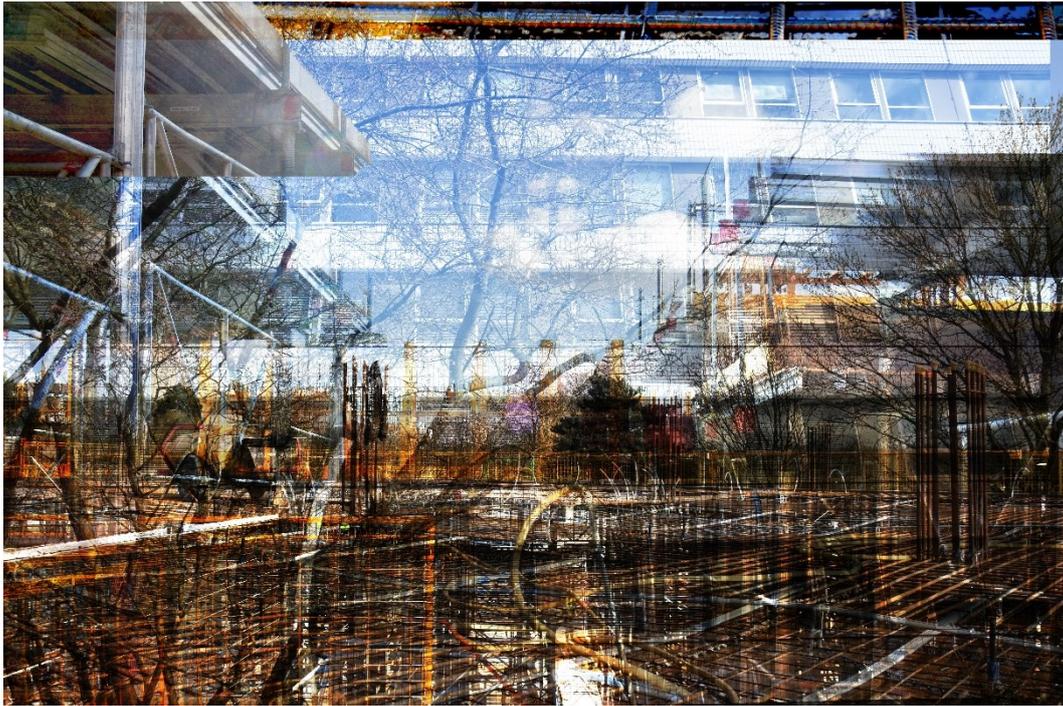
Figure 2: Afterimage II. 6000 x 4000 px, digital collage. Source: Author's own work.

In the 1990s, artists looked to the Situationists of the 1950s, such as Guy Debord, and saw value in what Debord calls the *dérive*, the act of interacting with the built environment with curiosity and awareness through walking without destination (**Marcus, 2002: 4**). The term psychogeography, as discussed by Coverley, was coined by Debord himself, who described it broadly as a study of how a place can impact the emotions and behaviours of those who experience it (**Coverley, 2010: 8**). Artists such as Francis Alÿs, who conducted and recorded various walks in Mexico City, took great inspiration from this approach (**Craig, 2016**). In creating Afterimages, I took inspiration from the manner and attitude with which these artists viewed the world, not with the action of walking, but with my photographic methods. It seemed that the process of photographing the space in an imaginative way, and not for a particular shot or angle of the building, liberated me from becoming overly focused on form as opposed to honest documentation. I was then better able to capture the details and idiosyncrasies of the site.
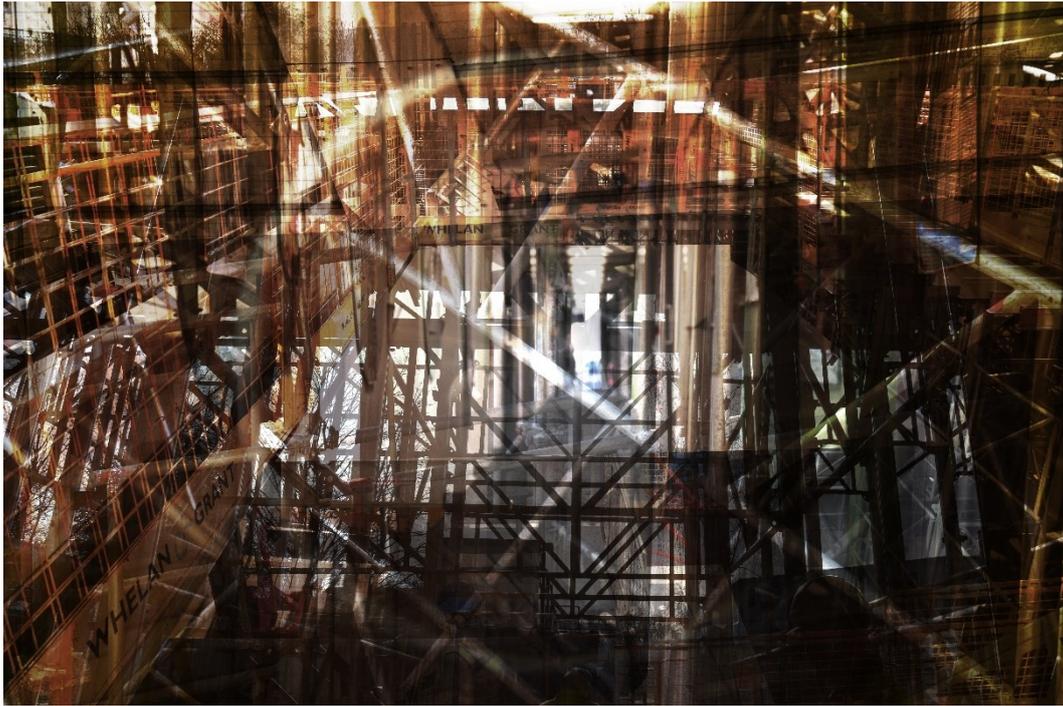
Figure 3: Afterimage III. 6000 x 4000 px, digital collage. Source: Author's own work.

Perhaps psychogeographic methodologies are even more relevant and useful now than in the past. Due to our increased reliance on the digital world, particularly in light of the COVID-19 crisis, it may be easier to lose engagement with the physical spaces we inhabit (**Ofcom, 2020**). The result of this way of examining our environment has an entirely new context in light of the events since spring 2020, when once-daily walks became a means of escape, and we found ourselves all too familiar with the built environment of our homes. My approach to the photographing of the community-devoid space of the building site would have undoubtedly been different if the visit had occurred after the UK had gone into lockdown, if it would have taken place at all. With hindsight, the almost abstracted skeleton of the building as captured in my images appears as less of a glimpse of a vibrant and vital future, but rather, an uncomfortable allusion to the current emptiness of our built environments, in a world without gatherings. In the painting titled *After Site* that I completed during lockdown as part of the Afterimages series, a glimpse of two figures can be seen, standing close and talking. This scene was extracted from an image I had taken months before of the Humanities Building café, which while creating the piece became for me a reminder of the ways in which the world has dramatically changed. I had visited the Humanities Building shortly after the building site visit, this time focusing on photographically capturing elements of what made the building feel lived-in and a catalyst for community. This was both a way to look back at the past and record a building that will soon be demolished, and a way to look to the future and envision the Arts community at Warwick translated to the new building.

Snowdon. Exchanges 2021 8(4), pp. 76-86

80
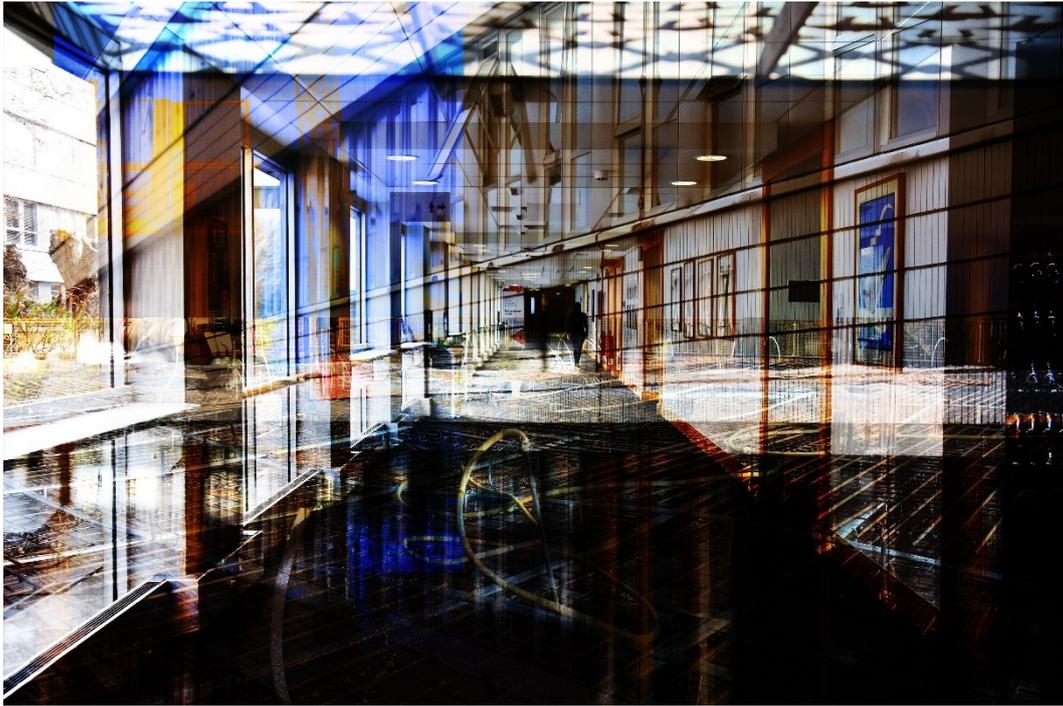
Figure 4: Afterimage IV, 6000 x 4000 px, digital collage. Source: Author's own work.

The resulting work from visiting and documenting these sites at Warwick was in the form of the Afterimages series itself. The term 'Afterimages' attempts to describe the transient and faded memories that are tied to the site: a chair out of place, a scuff mark on the wall, an abandoned thumbtack no longer pinning anything. Whilst the images are often obscured, glimpses of bunting from an old Humanities corridor, construction workers, scaffolding, notice boards, and more are present in each print. The works, as shown in this article, are digital prints produced using numerous overlays of the images I took at both sites. Each image varies and displays different viewpoints of the two buildings, with characteristics from each intervening in the space of the other, often to the point of abstraction. The contrast between finished and unfinished, lived-in, and vacant space attempts to demonstrate how human it is to actively participate and engage with the buildings we inhabit. It also reflects upon how history unfolds in these spaces with both the building and the people changing and interacting with each other.
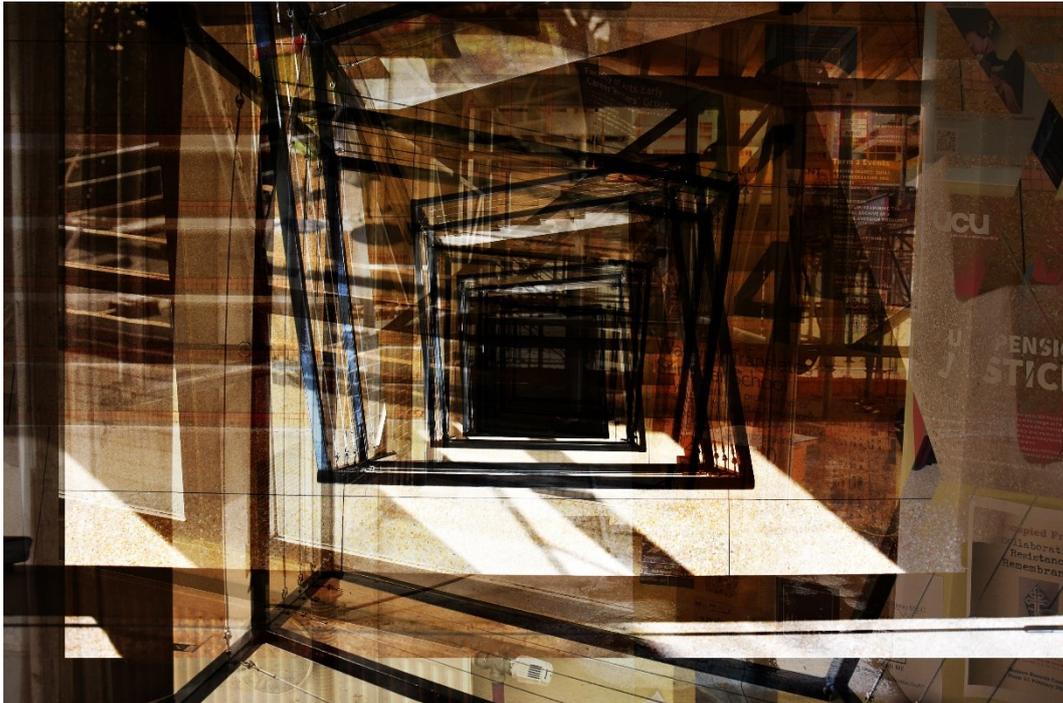
Figure 5: Afterimage V. 6000 x 4000 px, digital collage. Source: Author's own work.

As previously mentioned, the final piece of work resulting from this project, After Site, was a large-scale painting created far away from the Warwick campus, during lockdown at my home in rural Norfolk. This situation was difficult, for instance being unable to return to the Faculty of the Arts building site to re-photograph it to capture its development, as had been my intention. However, I was able to utilise the images I had taken on campus using large scale projection and manipulation to create a more complex merging of the different photographs. My approach to composing the painting was quite different from my digital work, in which I focused on creating a high density of imagery. Within my painting there is a greater emphasis on absence within space, which is perhaps apt given the comparative isolation of lockdown in which the work was created.

Snowdon. Exchanges 2021 8(4), pp. 76-86

82

Figure 6: After Site detail view, 225 x 160cm, acrylic; ink; pencil on gesso primed plasticised poster paper, image render. Source: Author's own work, render courtesy of Zac Rosamond (Birmingham City University).

Figure 7: After Site scale view, 225 x 160cm, acrylic; ink; pencil on gesso primed plasticised poster paper, image render. Source: Author's own work, render courtesy of Zac Rosamond (Birmingham City University).

Exploring the campus of Warwick and reflecting upon its past, both within the *Then & Now* project itself and in creating the Afterimages series, has given me a greater appreciation of how the university is constantly growing physically and culturally. As Warwick's campus continues to evolve, students may arrive, and graduate never having experienced the physical site of their education without the presence of building sites and construction. The physical changes happening around campus at the moment are of particular concern to Arts students with the construction of the new Faculty of the Arts building. For students, the campus and its buildings as a place of both work and socialisation may form an integral part of the culture of a university in that we are inherently affected by our built environment, as suggested by the ideas of Krier. In the current state of the world and in the face of a reduced physical interaction with Warwick's campus, it is perhaps even more important to retain its culture and sense of community through documentation and engagement, as exemplified by the *Then & Now* project. The Afterimages series therefore attempts to capture the fleeting moment of transition as the Arts community at Warwick anticipates the new building, drawing from the past and future to represent a community in flux.

Snowdon. Exchanges 2021 8(4), pp. 76-86

84

Acknowledgements

Madeleine Snowdon is a final year History of Art undergraduate student at the University of Warwick. Her main interests lie within the study of contemporary art practices and critical theory, which feeds into her own artistic practice. Her artwork was featured in the Warwick Faculty of the Arts Digital Arts Lab showcase 2020. She is currently working on her dissertation, which focuses on the psychogeographic enquiries of Internet-concerned art practices.

List of Illustrations

Figure 1. Afterimage I, 6000 x 4000 px, digital collage. Source: author's own work.

Figure 2. Afterimage II, 6000 x 4000 px, digital collage. Source: author's own work.

Figure 3. Afterimage III, 6000 x 4000 px, digital collage. Source: author's own work.

Figure 4. Afterimage IV, 6000 x 4000 px, digital collage. Source: author's own work.

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Snowdon. Exchanges 2021 8(4), pp. 76-86

86