radar4 Special Issue
public/engagement and
contemporary/impact

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Editorial: Contemporary, Engagement, Impact, Public(s)

Anna Powell and Catriona McAra

radar is the Review of Art, Design and Architecture Research, an annual publication by the School of Art, Design and Architecture at the University of Huddersfield. The publication was launched in March 2010 during the School’s Research Festival. radar showcases the work of both early career and established researchers within (and outside) the School, and highlights their interdisciplinary research interests. Now entering its fourth year, radar serves as a medium to promote and disseminate the School’s research strategy to a wider audience, and has been successful in giving the School a profile in the local and national creative arts sector and beyond. In addition to contributions from invited participants and open calls, postgraduate research students within the School have been encouraged to have voice in radar. Accessible in two formats – print and electronic – the publication is intended to be a design artefact as well as a way of communicating the School’s research to different audiences. radar is a free publication and it is hoped that it will soon become a peer reviewed, postgraduate-led journal.

In the wake of the recent 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF), the fourth issue of the School of Art, Design and Architecture’s research journal radar has taken four keywords as its theme(s): contemporary, impact, public(s) and engagement. The latter three are recurrent terms in REF literature and policy, and much debated as part of the impact agenda, and their precise meanings both in this context, and beyond are difficult to define. Contemporary is likewise a multifarious term, yet one which necessarily defines current art, design and architecture research and practice. The Oxford English Dictionary offers the following definitions, to select just a few:

**Public**
1. a. In general, and in most of the senses, the opposite of private.
   b. Open to general observation, view, or knowledge; existing, performed, or carried out without concealment, so that all may see or hear. Of a person: that acts or performs in public.
   c. Of a book, piece of writing, etc.: in print, published; esp. in to make public.
   d. Easily seen, conspicuous, prominent.
   e. Of a person in the public eye: prominent, well-known.
2. a. In a public place; before spectators or onlookers; publicly, openly, without concealment. Formerly also in the public:
   b. In general; collectively.
   c. The community or people as an organized body, the body politic; the nation, the state; the interest or well-being of the community, the common good.
   d. The community or people as a whole; the members of the community collectively.
   e. The human race.

**Engagement**
1. The action of engaging; the state, condition, or fact of being engaged.
2. A formal promise, agreement, undertaking, covenant.
3. An ‘appointment’ made with another person for any purpose of business, festivity, etc. Also attrib., on engagement book.
   c. Promises to pay; pecuniary liabilities. In phrase, to meet one’s engagements.
3. The fact of being engaged by an employer; an ‘appointment’, salaried post.

4. Moral or legal obligation; a tie of duty or gratitude.
5. Attachment, prepossession, bias.
6. In Literary Criticism.
7. The fact of being entangled; involved or entangled condition.
8. The state of being engaged in any occupation; a piece of business requiring attention.
9. In an active sense: That which engages or induces to a course of action; an inducement, motive.

**Impact**
1. Belonging to the same time, age, or period; living, existing, or occurring together in time.
2. Having existed or lived from the same date, equal in age, coeval.
3. Occurring at the same moment of time, or during the same period; occupying the same definite period; contemporaneous, simultaneous.
4. a. Modern; of or characteristic of the present period; esp. up-to-date, ultra-modern; spec. designating art of a markedly avant-garde quality, or furniture, building, decoration, etc., having modern characteristics.

b. Used by a journal or periodical in referring to others published at the same time.'c. A person of the same age as another.

The above examples might begin to demonstrate the extent of the meanings associated with these terms. While evidently not all applicable to the research areas and disciplines reflected and explored within radar4, their breadth and variance underlines the scope of their application, and their tendency to resist finite definition.

radar has undergone an evolution since it was first realised in 2010. radar1 (edited by Steve Swindells and Joseph McCullagh) introduced the work of a broad selection of researchers within the School of Art, Design and Architecture, as well as highlighting the role of the research centre at the University. radar1 also performed the crucial task of introducing the journal’s intention to illustrate and disseminate the School’s research across University departments; to act as an open invitation for further collaborations in the education and creative industry sectors; and to highlight our interdisciplinary practices and the impact of our work on society. Through radar2 (edited by Swindells and Kevin Almond) the journal became a means of addressing
current policy changes, namely those in the economic and education sectors. It aimed to identify how the School’s research might be situated within these wider issues/debates. *radar3* (edited by Verena Gafdar and Juliet MacDonald) took a more conceptual approach, as a hommage to Félix Guattari and new narratives of activism, by posing a series of questions for the invited contributors to reflect upon. Seeking a logical continuation of these developments, *radar4* maintains an experimental and responsive approach. For example some of the contributions appear deliberately more like games, tours or conversations than traditional research papers. By leaving the brief and theme open to interpretation, we encouraged a range of contributions, including written papers, drawn images, photographs, transcribed dialogues and interviews. Incorporating elements of all three previous journals, *radar4* takes a conceptual, playful and self-reflexive approach to the questions it raises, asking for individual interpretations and collaboration to shape both the form and content of the issue. Further, it seeks to address recent trends and issues in the social, political and cultural life of the University, while tracing their relationship to relevant art, design and architecture practices happening beyond its walls. The current issue of *radar* thus situates itself at the interface between the research-orientated arena of the University and the broader art aware/culturally engaged public sphere. While maintaining a commitment to showcasing academic and professional research, *radar4* aims to facilitate a process of osmosis between the academic institution and the broader public, including individuals and public bodies, both within and beyond the creative and cultural industries. Where earlier issues of *radar* have solicited from within Huddersfield’s academic community, this issue is positioned at the cusp, often moving outside of traditional research zones. This can be recognised in contributions from municipal Library staff, local arts enthusiasts and independent ethnographers, whose contributions, participation in related *radar* events, and general interest and feedback has helped to shape cultural events across the University and Huddersfield town centre.

As part of our preparation for *radar4*, and in an attempt to make it as collaborative and inclusive as possible, we sent out postcards inviting different publics (from both within and outside of the University) to interpret and respond to the *radar* logo. Acting as invitations, the postcards also encouraged participation in a series of short primer events, held off-campus at local cafes and bars in Huddersfield, involving discussion and invited talks on each of our four key words (highlighted throughout this issue). The events perpetuated an informal, democratic and transparent approach to the subsequent call for papers for *radar4*. Images showing the results of this dialogic postal communication process can be found at the back, and in the centrefold of this issue.

The pilot event, Christmas 2012, was hosted at Coffee Evolution, Church Street, and in Huddersfield town centre. Attended by staff and post-graduate students, ideas were shared and forthcoming seminar plans developed. The second event on 13 March 2013 took the first two themes — public(s) and engagement — as its focus, and the format of invited talks, held at Zephyr bar, King Street. It featured presentations from Bristow and Lloyd, a collaborative project between community worker Lisa Bristow and educator, artist and designer Christian Lloyd, and from Chris Marsden, who conducts public art tours of the town and recently completed a postgraduate study at the University of Huddersfield. Also held at Zephyr, the final event on 20 March 2013 took impact and contemporary as its key themes, with contributions from artist and University of Huddersfield lecturer Claire Barber, and artist, illustrator and designer Stephen Calcutt. As well as joining discussions, members of the public were invited to respond to the talks on the *radar* postcards, and these were projected onto the walls as a slideshow throughout the events.

To reiterate, *radar4* aims to contribute to the University’s wider research project around public engagement in art, design and architecture; part of its commitment to cultural leadership and local well-being. It reflects the project’s concern to examine the ways in which different groups are able to encounter and interpret practice-based research across these disciplines. It also highlights the project’s self-reflexive nature, asking how we might define the terms contemporary, engagement, impact and public, in part through the development of the aforementioned series of public events which enabled attendees to contribute to discussions on these topics, and, in turn, to shape *radar4*. It considers whether we should, perhaps, be speaking of publics, and whether engagement might be more easily understood as different levels of encounter, ‘interpretation’ or ‘participation’ — or as something else? This current *radar* issue stems in part from an exploration of how issues around public engagement, impact, contemporary and public(s) might feed into — or stem from — broader issues and questions around, for example, cultural and political agendas. It begins by querying what the future of contemporary art, design and architecture in education, research and practice might look like with, or without, effective public engagement strategies; how the concept of impact might differ in a contemporary art, design and architecture context compared with other fields; (why) it might be important that publics are able to engage with contemporary art and design research and practice; what can be achieved through effective public engagement strategies; what the challenges and the barriers to public engagement might be; and how can we measure and articulate impact in these fields. These themes were addressed concurrently by researchers in the School of Art, Design and Architecture and invited speakers in May 2013 at a symposium entitled Public Engagement and Impact: articulating value in art and design, held at the Institute for Contemporary Arts, London. The discussion continues.

**Notes**

1. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the current research assessment system for higher education institutions. Responsible for determining future research funding within different academic schools, the REF has replaced the previous Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), the last of which took place in 2008.


3. All definitions taken from The Oxford English Dictionary online: <http://www.oed.com>

4. Further details about the event and feedback from delegates and participants, as well as links to social media responses to the symposium’s key questions can be found at: <http://contemporarylanguage.wordpress.com/ka-symposium/> and in the related publication by Steve Swindells and Anna Pawel, entitled ‘What is to be Done? Cultural Leadership and Public Engagement in Art and Design Education’ (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).