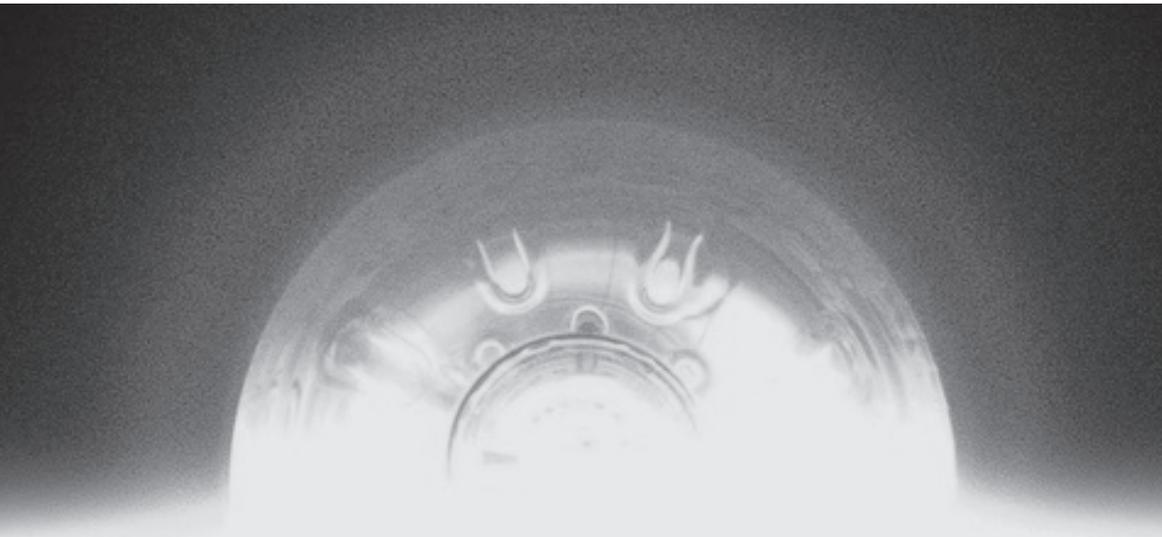


**LEILA HOUSTON**

**A LOCAL VOICE  
CONVERSATION SERIES IIII  
COLLECTIVE SCULPTURE**



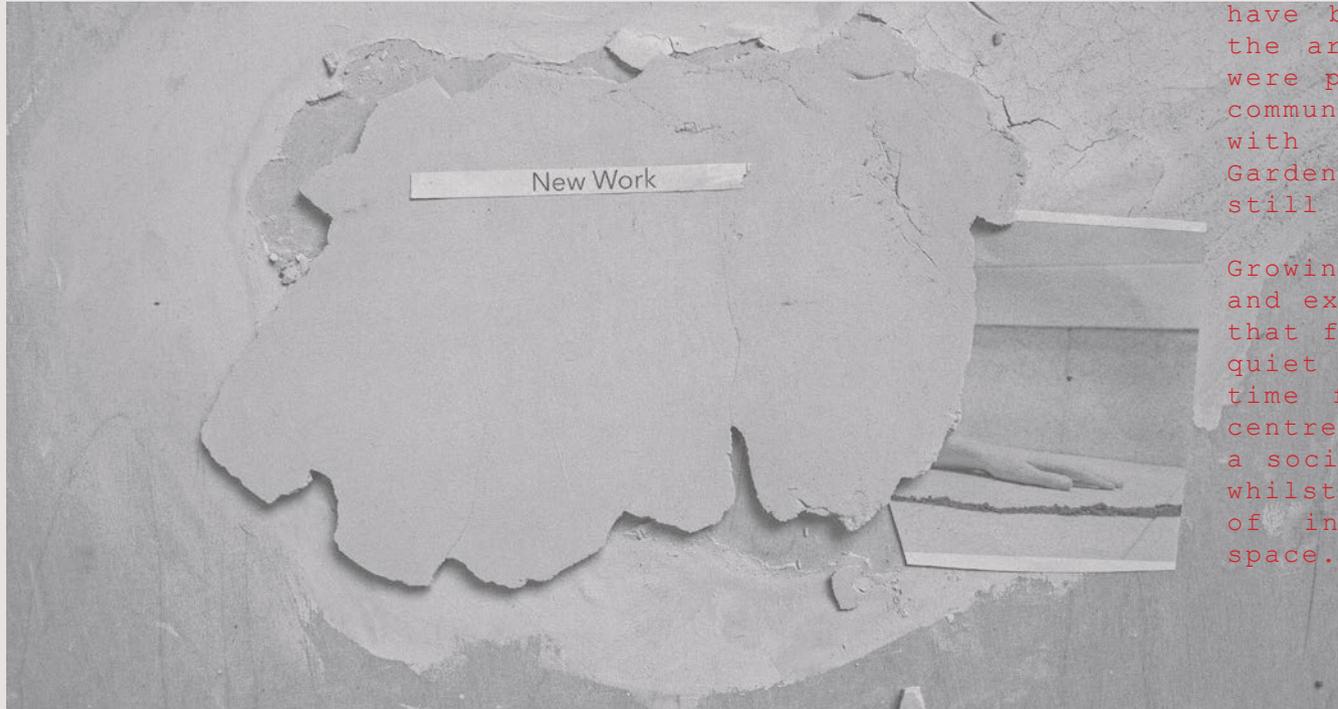


Leila Houston (London, 1977) is a visual artist whose work has often explored the social, political and historical aspects of a place and the impact we have on our environments.

Working predominantly with video, sound and structure, much of her artwork has cultivated immersive atmospheres for the spectator, often inviting them to take part or contribute to the work.

Houston uses site-responsive installations to investigate the connections between the external atmosphere and the internal sensation within places, providing reflections on the language of architecture and the associations we draw through memory and the senses.

Houston grew up in North Kensington Community Centre, London, which was run by her parents for 11 years between 1977 and 1988. Purpose-built in 1936, the large building was later demolished, thought to have been due to regeneration in the area. New housing and streets were paved in its place, with the community centre later replaced with the much smaller Dalgarno Gardens Community Centre, which is still open today.



Growing up in a place of discussion and exchange, the impact of spaces that foster both communication and quiet reflection has been a long-time fascination of Leila's. The centre gave those that came both a social platform for development, whilst also allowing them a degree of individual ownership of the space.

COMMUNITY



When the building was empty I would wander down the long corridors, finding little hidden spaces of my own at the back of the stage or in the recording studios.

They were particularly haunting and atmospheric, perhaps due to my memory of how busy it could be, and the old Victorian school-like structure of the place. It gave me a space to daydream and get lost in.

Leila Houston



Along with other local children at the centre, Houston was given the opportunity to take risks growing up in the centre. Taken out of their comfort zone, young people were offered trips including days out rock-climbing or abseiling, or even camping in France.



Community centres and youth clubs offer young people a familiar yet constructive environment to experience new things and new people. These hands-on, 'life' experiences mean the chance to build confidence and explore identity that is essential for development, in a time rife with racism, class divides and political chaos.

In today's financial climate, many communal spaces are being forced to either relocate or close down completely. Without community, youth or arts centres, these opportunities are dwindling - affecting the underprivileged in our society the most.



Places for community may be decreasing in the infrastructure of our towns and cities; but they are growing rapidly online. Despite increased forums for discussion and debate, our digital platforms come with a swathe of obstacles. The rise of fake news, unstable politics and even more unstable politicians are often warped even further by the platforms we are using, becoming far removed from human empathy.



'A Local Voice' is in part a search for the genuineness of face-to-face interaction, a reestablishment of compassion and a step away from the strident individualism encouraged online. It is in part an exploration of why these gatherings are important, and what is at the heart of them. It is in part an attempt to understand space and its impact upon us, and our impact upon it. It is a platform for many voices. It is an ongoing expedition, a journey down a sprawling path with no single destination.

## A LOCAL VOICE



Over two days, local and national people came together with people from Leicester to take part in an installation and create a collaborative sculpture with Houston at Two Queens Gallery's Project Space. People were from all ages and backgrounds, and many had no art experience at all.

I was in London after visiting the Tate Modern, looking at a block of flats that have been built in the area, which all have huge glass windows looking out over the city.

They'd been complaining that a part of the Tate Modern was looking into their apartments. Yet, they had bought glass apartments, the design of which was part of the aesthetic the Tate Modern had created in the area.

In one of these glass windows was a line of grass. I couldn't tell if it was real or fake. It got me wondering about the idea of authenticity and genuineness again. Here were people who had bought into the world the Tate had in part created, but they didn't want it in its totality. They wanted it on a superficial level.

It got me thinking again about what makes a space, the genuineness and authenticity found in a place and how we protect this in the face of fakery. I wanted to bring that into this project, and that inspired this activity.

Leila Houston





your eyes or hands  
the person using  
camera which you'd  
prefer

Participants were asked to take part in various activities.

#### TWO TRUTHS AND ONE LIE

Film eyes or hands and tell the person on the camera two truths and one lie.

#### MEMO CARDS

Leave a message or a picture to your past self or if you'd rather a visitor who will be coming tomorrow (or both). Create as many as you like using the materials provided and the cable ties to attach to the postcard stand.

#### THE OLD TV

At the old television there is clear, sticky plastic. Create an appropriate colour / shape / text that you'd like to leave on the TV.

#### THERE IS GRASS IN THE ROOM

Please put in order (remember the other group will change it so it will be temporary).

#### FLOATING NEWSPAPER

From the installation, find a title or headline of your personal choice at the bottom of one of the strips. Tear off and create something out of clay (positioned under carrier bags). After doing this, attach it (morph) to someone else's handmade clay sculpture and position / attach to the wood.

Leave a message /  
for your past self



After the Two Truths and One Lie activity, an atmosphere of elation and playfulness, if perhaps a little awkwardness, filled the room - as people discussed their lies, truths, how they told them and how they felt about doing it.

For a moment we are mistaken, we think the tasks are the thing, but everything is the thing. We have just been filming ourselves and we chat after and yet we are still being recorded and the project is about exchange. Exchange is the work. It's really interesting.

You can tell the work has been thought about and there is reason behind it, however it allowed space for us to create our own work and put our own ideas onto it.

Musician and participant  
David Dhonau



## DENNY

Participants knew they were being recorded throughout the event, resulting in an element of self-awareness. Leila cultivated aspects of the project to relax people as a result, including and most importantly, Denny the dog.

Filmed beforehand alone in the empty space, Denny had a radio mic on her throughout each day, allowing her footsteps and interactions with the group to be recorded.



When people talked to the dog they forgot they were being recorded, and there was something genuine in that.

Leila Houston



An expansive collaboration between Leila Houston, participants and musicians, the final work was exhibited at LCB Depot in August 2017.

Taking the echoes of thumps, crashes, steps and conversation recorded over two days (clay models collaboratively sculpted, activities, videos and recordings), Leila collaborated with musicians to develop a responsive sound work to be played between five speakers and created a further installation.

Taking the marks and memories made in a space and moving them to another, this work is concerned predominantly with our experience of place. Once removed from their original settings, how does the new space receive the echoes of the original one? How does it change or adopt them? How does the new place foster new experience?

This renewal of place pulls us back to Leila's original inspiration: the community centre where she grew up. Knocked down and rebuilt, spaces can be temporal, ever changing, whether they are old or young - much as the people who inhabit them do.



I feel very, very proud of myself for taking part. I can't wait to tell my carer what I've done and if Leila ever has another one I'd like to take part in it again.

Participant Eddie Malcolm

## COLLABORATIVE SCULPTURE

One of the most important things actually comes back to the value of sitting drinking tea and eating biscuits prior to the tasks, which was something I decided to do on the Sunday, whereas on the Saturday we did it at the end. The basic, age-old act of sharing food made a huge difference to how at ease people were.

Leila Houston

[www.leilahoustonart.weebly.com](http://www.leilahoustonart.weebly.com)  
[leilahouston392@gmail.com](mailto:leilahouston392@gmail.com)

### Credits

This essay was printed with the support of public funding by Arts Council England under their Research & Development Grant.

Text by Leila Houston with the support of Natalie Beech.

Design by Melissa Fletcher.  
[melfletcher.com](http://melfletcher.com)

All images © Leila Houston.

With thanks to Natalie Beech, Melissa Fletcher, Tove Dalenius, Jodi Shadforth, Jimi G Jenga, Sarah Campbell, Denny, Craig Ashenden, Courtney Askey, Sepia Sun, Harvey Sharman-Dun, Myoptik, Damon Gibbons, Anna Lucas, Two Queens Studio and LCB Depot for their support during this project.



