

Manifesto and the future at Rogue Artists' Studios

This article was first published as a feature for Corridor 8 Magazine and can be found here: <http://www.corridor8.co.uk/article/manifesto-and-the-future-at-rogue-artists-studios/>



Manifesto installation view. Image courtesy David Barton.

It's cold, freezing cold. There are cracks in the windows, it smells of old paint, it's full of strange furniture, and it's a bit spooky. The former school buildings on Barrass Street in Openshaw, Manchester, are in short, everything you would want in an artists' studio. For the first time since Rogue Artists' Studios moved into their new home, they have opened their doors, allowing the public to explore members' work and find out about their plans for the future. Forced to move out of their previous premises at Crusader Works in Central Manchester when developers Capital & Centric bought it in 2015, with the help of the City Council, Arts Council England and the developers themselves, they were able to relocate to Openshaw in 2017.

The first exhibition at their new site, titled *Manifesto*, features fifty-six members and is situated in the studios' ground floor project space. Due to the large number of exhibitors the exhibition isn't cohesive or focused but isn't cluttered or messy either. Curated in collaboration with Manifest Arts, works are presented effectively so that each holds its place in the room. Spanning painting, drawing, photography, print, sculpture and installation, what binds together this diverse collection of works is – unusually – the very lack of continuity. Like an open studios in one room, Manifesto is true to its name, giving each artist the opportunity to present who they are and what they create. The result is an engaging collection of works that are by turns strident, personal, contemporary and unusual. The title is apt in a broader sense too. Manifesto feels like a declaration to the arts community in Manchester that Rogue is alive and kicking, eager to make its voice heard.

The future of the project space should be eagerly anticipated. It sits at the heart of the building, with the ground floor studios opening directly onto the grand space. These punctuate the white walls at intervals around the hall and reassuringly connect it to Rogue's primary purpose. The planned mixed programme of internal and external projects will raise the public profile of the space and provide a professional exhibition venue. In Manchester's current cultural climate this is much needed and is something that co-director of Rogue David Gledhill is keen to promote. He stated that "it should aim to become a public space, just at the heart of a studios". There will also be a strong drive to encourage proposals from students, schools, and community groups, thus widening Rogue's cultural contribution and embedding it in its local community.

Other plans for the future at Rogue include use of the onsite caretaker's cottage to host an international residency programme and launch of a graduate spaces programme within the studios. Relationships are being forged with international arts organisations with the residency programme aiming to begin in summer 2019. Also planned to launch during the warmer portion of next year, the graduate spaces programme will offer a number of studio spaces to graduates from Greater Manchester art schools. These will be awarded to selected students at degree shows and will support the recipients as they make the turbulent transition from student to practising artist.

Building a sustainable cultural community lies at the heart of what Rogue is trying to achieve. This has begun by inviting partners Company Chameleon and TASC (The Architecture School for Children) onto the school site. Both organisations are celebrated for their leading roles in youth community

work in the North West. TASC work with schools and community groups to engage young people in their built environment; and when not staging award winning productions, Company Chameleon run Chameleon Youth, the only youth dance organisation in Manchester associated with a professional dance company. Having TASC and Company Chameleon at Barrass Street is testament to how ambitious Rogue are about cultivating a diverse creative community. Within the grounds of the school Gledhill envisages a micro arts ecology developing that can feed back into the cultural community of the region. This feels possible given the size of the site, but it is a vision and no more at present. Whilst the same could be said for a number of projects at Rogue, a year ago the school site was empty and falling into disrepair, and a year before that Rogue was faced with homelessness and an uncertain future. Whatever happens, the durability and tenacity of the studios cannot be denied.

With over eighty current studio holders, the diversity of practices at Rogue is substantial. Manifesto clearly demonstrates that any way of working is valid here, but all are challenged. After narrowly avoiding joining the slew of studio organisations that have disappeared in recent years, Rogue has survived to continue to stand for its ethos of secure and affordable studio spaces for artists. The studios have been at the heart of Manchester's artistic community for over twenty years and have helped shape the way we see the city. It is vitally important that we work to ensure a future for that community whilst we still can, and Rogue Artists' Studios are key to achieving this. So let us hope that action follows *Manifesto*.

Exhibition continues until January 31st, weekdays by appointment.

Rogue Artists' Studios will host Manifest Arts Festival in July 2019 and will be accepting exhibition proposals from interested parties from 7 January 2019.