

A Blue Feeling In The Gallery: Roger Hiorns's *Seizure* And The Arts Market

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Sometimes the Turner Prize feels like the English weather. We love to talk about how disappointing, how surprising, and how unpredictable it is. The shortlist for 2010 had made some critics' eyebrows raise yet again. Susan Philipsz has won this year's edition with *Lowlands*, a recording of the artist singing the Scottish lament played under the bridges of Glasgow, which *The Telegraph* defines as "think-me sensitive tuneless stuff."¹ *The Independent* evaluated the shortlist as "moderately mediocre,"² and it considers the jury's verdict a "dismal decision."³ Commenting on the shortlist, *The Guardian* stated that it only presented two "decent" artists out of four, while the other two were nothing more than "duds – as far from genius as it is possible to get."⁴ The Prize indeed has a long history of controversies around its shortlists. In 1993 Rachel Whiteread won the Prize with *House*, while simultaneously being assigned the prize of Worst Artist of the Year by the K Foundation. In 2001 Michael Creed's work *Lights Go On and Off* had enraged the artworld and the public, and in 2002 Labour culture minister Kim Howells left a comment outside the gallery where he defined the artwork as "cold, mechanical, conceptual bullshit." The 2008 edition was considered to have "hit rock-bottom with a shortlist universally derided as long on pretension and short on talent"⁵, with a display of "bloodless, academic and quiet"⁶ work, which *The Guardian*

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¹ Richard Dorment, "Turner Prize", *The Daily Telegraph*, 7 December 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk> (accessed December 16, 2010).

² Michael Glover, "Turner Prize is Far From Picture Perfect", *The Independent*, 5 October 2010, <http://www.independent.co.uk> (accessed November 17, 2010).

³ Michael Glover, "Three Cheers for Sound Artists. But Not For This One", *The Independent*, 7 December 2010, <http://www.independent.co.uk> (accessed December 16, 2010).

⁴ Jonathan Jones, "Turner Prize 2010: A Shortlist That is Half-Baked", *The Guardian*, 4 May 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk> (accessed November 17, 2010).

⁵ Richard Dorment, "Turner Prize 2009: The Shortlist is a Foregone Conclusion", *The Daily Telegraph*, 28 April 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk> (accessed November 16, 2010)

⁶ Laura Cumming, "Shhh... It's The Turner Prize", *The Observer*, 5 October 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk> (accessed November 16, 2010).

labelled as “modest art.”⁷ The Turner Prize 2009, on the other hand, received a rather welcoming and enthusiastic response from the press, acclaimed as a “wonderful 25th year” of the Prize.⁸ The work on display appeared less ‘academic’ and more ‘skilful,’ and in the same article that strongly criticized the 2008 edition, Richard Dormant defined the Turner Prize 2009 as “[a] great shortlist, but a foregone conclusion.”⁹ What he was referring to in his article was the controversy that aroused around the winner of the Prize in 2009. In fact, while the press already seemed to take for granted Roger Hiorns’s triumph, while he was supported by most of the signs left by the Tate visitors, and while he was predicted to be the winner by 11/10 at William Hill betting, Hiorns did not win the Turner Prize after all, indeed leaving some “controversialists [...] in despair.”¹⁰

The jury assigned the Prize to the “quietest’ yet most established”¹¹ of the four artists, the “least demonstrative and the most unassuming”, whose work combined minimalism with a special type of luxury.¹² Richard Wright’s work had been the judges’ favourite due to its originality, its complexity and ethereal beauty. He was nominated for the works he presented in the 55th Carnegie International in Pittsburgh and at the Ingleby Gallery in Edinburgh which, while exquisite and fascinating, they perhaps triggered a quieter ‘awe’ than the golden leaf fresco he created for the exhibition at Tate Britain in London. And so the Prize’s dearie walked out without the Prize. Both Hiorns’s and Wright’s works were of a spectacular nature, they transformed the surrounding space creating an immersive environment, and they were interestingly short lived. Both artists were in fact nominated for works of art that *had to* disappear once their exhibition time was over. One was painted upon in the reverential and silent space of the art gallery, the other is now being crashed and pulverised by a demolition bulldozer in one of the poorest areas of the capital. *Seizure*, the work that deserved Hiorns the nomination for the Turner Prize, was an installation piece in South London where the artists covered the interior of a council flat slated for demolition with copper sulphate, which in time formed a thick layer of bright blue crystals on the walls, floor and ceiling of the flat. The installation was a success, attracting such large amounts of visitors, that there would often form queues outside the flat. It was so successful, that it was initially extended for another month, until the end of November 2008, and it reopened in July 2009 until January 2010, following Hiorns’s nomination for the Turner Prize. Undoubtedly, such success was partly due to *Seizure*’s spectacular aesthetics. When entering the flat, the visitor almost

⁷ Mark Brown, “Modest Art: Out Goes the Controversy as Magpie of the Artworld Steals the Show”, *The Guardian*, 1 December 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk> (accessed November 16, 2010).

⁸ Jones, “Richard Wright: A New Renaissance for the Turner Prize”, *The Guardian*, 8 December 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk> (accessed November 17, 2010).

⁹ Dormant, “Turner Prize 2009.”

¹⁰ Arifa Akbar, “The Shock of the New Turner Winner”, *The Independent*, 8 December 2009, <http://www.independent.co.uk> (accessed November 3, 2010).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Michael Glover, “You could Call Wright’s Art Minimalist, but it is also Luxurious”, *The Independent*, 8 December 2009, <http://www.independent.co.uk> (accessed November 16, 2010).

delved into a magical world, into a fantasy landscape, into a dark blue dream. However, when digging under the thick blue crystals, so to speak, one might find that *Seizure* perhaps represents an anomalous installation, one that might challenge traditional models of production and consumption of the work of art, and one which can potentially resist appropriation by the capitalist logic of the British ‘creative industries.’ I want to propose here a reading of Hiorns’s piece as potentially offering some resistance strategies to the capitalistic mechanisms which exploit the arts for economic profit, endanger the spectator by reducing him or her to a consumer, and turn the term ‘culture’ into the more appealing term ‘creativity,’ for the sake of increasing its rate of consumption. First, *Seizure* can be understood as an atypical installation, in that the performative *destruction* of the material, rather than its *production*, is the key to the experience of the work of art, and ultimately to the establishment of *Seizure* as a work of art. Second, the installation represents a ‘non intentionally’ site oriented work for, while Hiorns was more concerned with the creation of a particular aesthetics rather than with social engagement, the location of the artwork has invited a reading of *Seizure* as site oriented, problematically reshaping it into an ‘alternative’ work, perfectly fit for the discourse of the British ‘creative industries.’ After having presented a brief history of installation art, from its inception as a socially challenging practice, to its progressive commodification in global capitalism, I will proceed to analyse *Seizure* as a work of destruction, whose ‘site specificity’ and ‘social engagement’ are incidental rather than conscious, thus allowing the installation to conceptually resist appropriation by the logic of the ‘creative industries.’

Both installation and site-oriented art began to emerge in the United States and in Europe in the 1960s, influenced by Modernist and Surrealist practices, as well as by Allan Kaprow’s Environments and Happenings of the early 1960s. Installation art constituted a departure from traditional sculpture, a strategic counter-practice against the elitist and exclusive environment of the museum, and a celebration of the anti-commercial status of the work of art.¹³ Installation art in the 1970s represented an institutional critique, for artists began to “question their role within the museum system,” thus rejecting the notion of the work of art as a commodity.¹⁴ In this sense, the *physical experience* of the space of the installation along with a phenomenological understanding of it were fundamental, in that they contributed to create an ostensibly non-reproducible work of art. Installation art, especially, often aimed at what artist Ilya Kabakov defines as a ‘total installation,’ which presents “an immersive scene into which the viewer enters” and becomes submerged and overwhelmed both physically and psychologically by the work.¹⁵ To the extent that an *embodied* experience of the installation is fundamental for its reception, the installation works its way into the status of a non-commodifiable object, as it includes not only the work, but the work as interactively experienced by a subject.¹⁶ Physically walking through the space and confronting its reality is

¹³ Julie H. Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001 [1999]), 70-76, and Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 1, 24.

¹⁴ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), 32.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

the activity that renders the spectator integral to the completion of the work.¹⁷ In this sense, installation art developed almost concomitantly with the Happenings and performance art of the 1960s and 1970s, maintaining a relation of mutual growth with such practices, and the disciplines fed into one another to the point of being at times hardly distinguishable.¹⁸ In line with the principle of the work of art as non-commodifiable, not only was installation art in the 1970s set in very specific locations, where the space was treated as a single entity and where the environment was also part of the work, but the installation was also dismantled as soon as the exhibition was over.¹⁹ However, after a period of institutional critique and tensions between artists and museums in the late 1970s, when installation art flourished again in the 1980s, its re-emergence was also marked by its institutionalization, which tended to include installation art in the packaging and commodification of ‘alternative culture.’²⁰ As scholar Miwon Kwon notes, while early site-specific installations insisted on their immobility, and therefore their non-portable and non-marketable status, the arts market is currently requiring more and more artists to produce site specific work in a number of different locations, paradoxically rendering ‘site specificity’ more portable and exchangeable.²¹ Therefore, if the traditional immobility of a site-specific installation prevented the work from being easily commodified and capitalized, to the extent that “the nomadic principle [...] defines capital and power in our times,”²² the mobility of various contemporary installations might pave the path towards the marketisation of such a work of art as portable, buyable and sellable, thereby partaking in a capitalist ‘colonisation’ of the arts.

Roger Hiorns’s *Seizure* was situated in Harper Road, in South London, in a council flat that was going to be demolished after the installation had closed. *Seizure* consisted in the display of the interior of the flat as covered in blue crystals, obtained by the chemical reaction of copper sulphate exposed at a low temperature for several weeks. In fact, three weeks before the opening of the installation, in September 2008, Hiorns and his team poured 90,000 litres of boiling copper sulphate solution into the flat from a hole in the ceiling, and they then locked the hole, allowing the temperature to lower in order for the crystals to grow. It was only weeks later, when Hiorns could open the door of the flat, that he realised the ‘experiment’ had actually worked and that the crystals had covered and indeed ‘seized’ the walls of the flat, thus ‘providing’ him with the work of art. While Hiorns had already worked with copper sulphate and other peculiar – and perishable – materials, such as soap (*Done For*, 2006) and fire (*Vauxhall*, 2003), this time, “rather than present[ing] a sculpture inside an architectural space, he [had]

¹⁷ Reiss, xiii.

¹⁸ See for instance some of the work by Marina Abramović such as *Rhythm 0* (1974), where the audience was invited to interact with the – impassive – artist by employing a number of objects at their disposal, amongst which lay, rather famously, a loaded gun.

¹⁹ Bishop, 10.

²⁰ Reiss, 137.

²¹ Kwon, 31.

²² *Ibid*, 31.

turned every surface of the architectural space into sculpture.”²³ In this sense, Hiorns engaged with the space as a totality and, in line with the principles of installation art, the spectator was brought to experience the space as a single entity, as one had to physically walk through the various rooms of the transformed and flat. In the case of *Seizure*, however, this spectacular transformation should be seen as a process of destruction, rather than a process of creation. The growth of the crystals, in fact, implies the *erosion* of the wall, and not its adornment:²⁴ the aesthetic *creation* of the work of art happens through the physical *destruction* of the environment where the very work is hosted. In addition, Hiorns’s opening of the main door after three weeks of patient waiting irreversibly raised the temperature of the environment, thereby impeding the copper sulphate to grow any further, somehow shattering a work in progress. As Brian Sholis colourfully puts it, there were two phases in the project: the first one was to let the crystallization process happen behind closed doors, and the second phase was to “open the doors and tamper with that process – to fuck it up.”²⁵ Finally, the spectator of *Seizure* unknowingly participated in the ‘completion’ of the work in a very particular manner: the visitors made an inevitable intervention to the work by slowly consuming the crystals, for their presence maintained a high room temperature, and they constituted threatening impurities for the crystals.²⁶ In this sense, the consumption of the work of art in *Seizure* happens in a very literal sense: the consumption, appreciation, validation of the piece as a work of art represents its very destruction. As Hiorns himself puts it, “the viewing public is always a paradox for me. In a way I make artworks in spite of people. The people who come to visit the work are fundamentally the people who are destroying it.”²⁷ Nonetheless, he firmly believes that the presence of the public who is eroding the surface of the crystals is a necessary part of the work, as the progressive, slow consumption of the work by the audience is indispensable to its completion.²⁸ To a certain extent, this process blurs the line between the subject as a visitor and the subject as a creator – as a destructor – of the work of art. The audience is unavoidably endowed with a fundamental agency as they relate to *Seizure*, establishing the experience as an interactive and performative form of engagement. While installation art traditionally relies on the physical presence of the spectator, whose *experience of* the work merges *with the work* in order to render the installation a non-reproducible work of art, *Seizure* requires the spectator to experience the work by using violence on it, thus validating its non-reproducible status through its very obliteration.

²³ Jeremy Elder, “Roger Hiorns: Seizure,” *Shape and Colour*, 11 September 2008, <http://www.shapeandcolour.wordpress.com> (accessed December 12, 2009).

²⁴ Helen Sumpter, “Chemical Brother,” *Time Out*, 4 September 2008, 54.

²⁵ Brian Sholis, “Roger Hiorns,” *Artforum*, 28 August 2008, <http://www.artforum.com> (accessed December 13, 2009).

²⁶ Hugh Pearman, “From Bedsit to Paradise,” *The Sunday Times*, 9 November 2008, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk> (accessed December 15, 2009).

²⁷ Kim Patrick, “Seizure: Roger Hiorns and the Art of Disappearing,” *Culture24*, 9 October 2008, <http://www.culture24.org.uk> (accessed December 12, 2009).

²⁸ Sumpter, 54.

If the audience is indeed the destructor of the work, and the work itself erases its own environment, one might wonder who the *creator*, or indeed the *artist*, the maker of *Seizure* is. Hiorns's interest in engaging with materials that grow in an autogenetic way and create the work of art by themselves is reflected and perhaps even magnified in his 'production' of *Seizure*. In fact, "with *Seizure*, Hiorns expands on a central theme of his work, that of the thing that makes itself, an object that *self-produces* rather than is produced by the agency of the artist."²⁹ As Hiorns describes: "we filled [the flat] up with 90.000 litres of boiling hot copper sulphate solution and then watched it go. *That was the simplicity of it.*"³⁰ In the first phase, then, the agency of the artist seems to partly lie not only in the process of initiation, but also in the artist as being a yielding witness of this very initiation: pouring the solution and letting 'nature' take over, temporarily handing over to chemical processes the 'authority' of the work, and then, somehow à la Duchamp, putting a signature to that work. It was during this very time – those three weeks before the opening of *Seizure* – that the labour of creation was being carried out not strictly by Hiorns, but by 'nature' for, in the installation, "the work composes itself",³¹ to the point of revealing some paradoxes when referring to such practice as 'work.' To a certain extent, the artistic agency intrinsic to the second stage of *Seizure* can be firstly discovered in Hiorns's appropriation of the work accomplished by the copper sulphate, and secondly in his validation of the destructive process of consumption of that work by an audience. His role as an artist, therefore, might lie precisely at the point of consecrating a process of destruction *as* a process of creation. Somewhat resounding the practice of precursor artists such as Gordon Matta-Clark and his notorious *Splitting* (1974),³² *Seizure* is predicated on the very destruction of its site, on the work of art *as* an annihilation of its site, and on such destruction *as* the work of art.³³ While this notion of 'artistic' destruction is a key element in understanding *Seizure* as a conceptually anomalous installation, I will show below that the threat of its very final destruction encouraged a materialist understanding of the installation, which attempted to read and almost canonise *Seizure* as a socially engaged – or at least socially oriented – piece of installation art, against Hiorns's mainly aesthetic concerns.

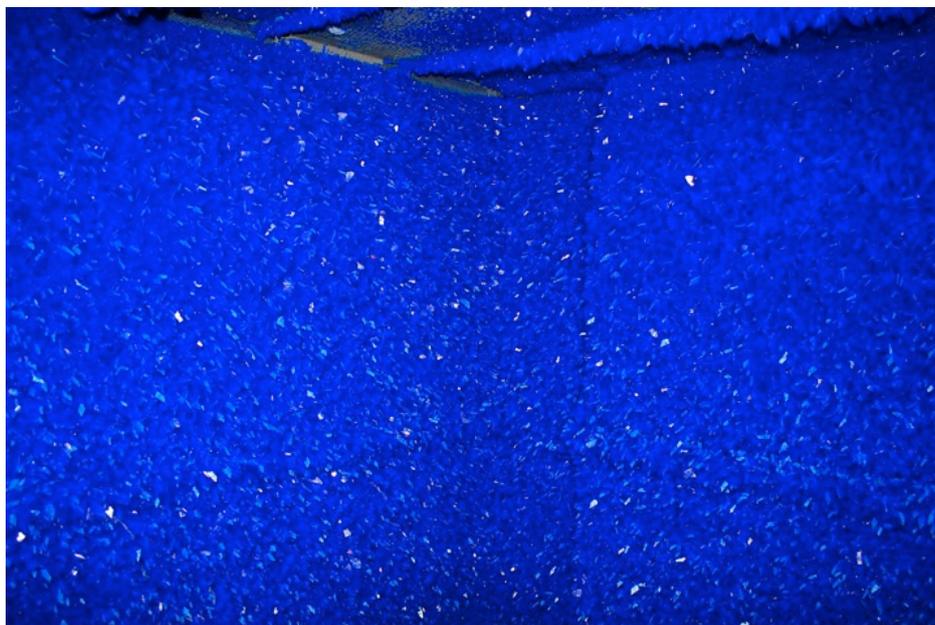
²⁹ C.C. Charlesworth, "Signs of Life," in *Seizure*, ed. Roger Hiorns and James Lingwood (London: Roger Hiorns and Artangel, 2008), 55.

³⁰ London-Se1 Community Website, "Harper Road Council Flat Filled with Blue Crystals," 31 August 2008, <http://www.london-se1.co.uk/news/view/3473> (accessed December 13, 2009), emphasis added.

³¹ Brian Dillon, "Fissures" in Hiorns and Lingwood, 45.

³² In *Splitting*, Matta-Clark (1943 – 1978) used a power saw to literally cut through a house that was slated for demolition in the town of Englewood, in New Jersey. The photographs that the artist later took were rearranged as a collage of prints and recreated the environment as utterly disorientating.

³³ Pamela M. Lee, *Object To Be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2001), xiii, xiv.



Corner of the living room
Photo: Courtesy of Marco Devetak

A site-specific piece can be understood as offering a “virtual point from which we may experience [the] space,” thus facilitating the creation of “various relationships between the ‘virtual point’ and that which surrounds it: between what is illusion and what is real, between process and product.”³⁴ When applying to *Seizure* Andrew Houston and Laura Nanni’s view on site-specific performance, Hiorns’s piece might indeed appear, at a first glance, as a site-specific installation. In fact, in site-specific practices there is an exchange between “the work of art and the places in which its meanings are defined,” and the essence of site specificity is understood to partly lie in the process of reading this exchange.³⁵ Importantly, *Seizure* was promoted by Artangel, a British arts organisation born in the early 1990s, for which “the relationship between artist and place is of primary importance,”³⁶ and an organisation that “has built a reputation for creating excellent exhibitions in unusual venues across London.”³⁷ Given the interest of Artangel in such work, one might easily be tempted to approach *Seizure* as a site oriented installation which consists of “a dramatic durational sculpture

³⁴ Andrew Houston and Laura Nanni, “Heterotopian Creation: Beyond the Utopia of Theatres and Galleries,” *Canadian Theatre Review*, 126 (2006): 7.

³⁵ Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 1.

³⁶ Artangel, “About Us,” <http://www.artangel.org.uk/pages/aboutus.htm> (accessed December 8, 2009).

³⁷ Eliza Williams, “Roger Hiorns’s *Seizure*,” *Creative Review Blog*, 8 September 2008, <http://www.creativereview.co.uk> (accessed December 13, 2009).

transforming a *specific* piece of architecture”³⁸ and, as a member of the public has stated, “most powerful of all is the installation’s *setting* – within this rejected and rundown late-modernist development.”³⁹ Nonetheless, in the case of Hiorns’s work, the actual site of the installation – an abandoned council flat in South London – was not the artist’s primary concern. In fact, while generally interested in Brutalist architecture, he initially hoped to make *Seizure* in Robin Hood Gardens in East London, or high up in a tower block, but he was not given permission to use such sites.⁴⁰ After having “traversed every single borough of London in search of a suitable building to host the installation,”⁴¹ Hiorns was finally allowed to use a flat in South London, on Harper Road, which later imbued his work with social and political significance. As he states, “I wanted to introduce the chemical procedure to no particular interior, specifically. In reality this resulted in a place representing both early modernism and social housing.”⁴² In fact, Harper Road and the Lawson estate have been defined as a “social housing failure,”⁴³ an assemblage of “derelict flats.”⁴⁴ In such a bureaucratic struggle, Southwark Council played an important role in the actual constitution of the work, and its following interpretation within a discourse of social policy, as I will argue below. The fact that *Seizure* was hosted in a council flat – a flat that had been previously occupied by squatters and asylum seekers – potentially rendered the installation somehow disturbing, as visitors had to confront an extremely small environment, with very little light, and a rather claustrophobic feeling to it, aspects which were even enhanced by the presence of the crystals, as Picture 1 shows.⁴⁵ These spatial elements were indeed powerful political reminders of recent British history, strongly reminiscent of social housing conditions during the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the block of flats was built, and the following decade of privatisation and reduced state intervention, with the concomitant economic crisis of the less wealthy part of the population or, as Baz Kershaw puts it, when “the numbers of homeless bodies lying in the streets of our major cities began climbing to epidemic levels.”⁴⁶ In this sense, as Hiorns notes above, the installation acquired a specific social significance, as it was almost metonymic of “the contemporary decimation of social housing stock amidst the fanfare of regeneration.”⁴⁷ Therefore, both the geographical and architectural settings of the

³⁸ The Jerwood Artangel Open, “Commissions,” <http://www.thejerwoodartangelopen.org.uk/commissions.php> (accessed December 8, 2009), emphasis added.

³⁹ Williams, “Roger Hiorn’s Seizure,” emphasis added.

⁴⁰ Catherine Croft, “Growing Crystals From Architecture,” *Building Design Online*, 29 August 2008, <http://www.bdonline.co.uk> (accessed December 13, 2009).

⁴¹ Sholis, “Roger Hiorns.”

⁴² Paul Carey-Kent and Vici MacDonald, “Roger Hiorns,” *Artworld*, 7 (October–November 2008): 88.

⁴³ Patrick, “Seizure: Roger Hiorns and the Art of Disappearing.”

⁴⁴ Fiona Maddocks, “Crystal Method,” *Evening Standard*, 26 August 2008, 39 (N).

⁴⁵ Adrian Searle, “Don’t Forget Your Wellies...,” *Guardian*, 4 September 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk> (accessed December 12, 2009).

⁴⁶ Baz Kershaw, “Discouraging Democracy: British Theatres and Economics 1979–1999,” *Theatre Journal*, 51.3 (1999): 268.

⁴⁷ Patrick, “Seizure: Roger Hiorns and the Art of Disappearing.”

installation, and its commission by Artangel constituted two factors that invited a reading of *Seizure* as a site specific work of art which addressed the issues of social housing and contemporary ‘regeneration.’

I suggest that there might be significant politico-economic implications in framing *Seizure* as a site specific or as a site oriented artwork in that, to a certain extent, this might facilitate the insertion of the installation into the political market of the – rather profitable – ‘cool arts’ or the ‘creative industries.’ *Seizure* was produced as part of a £1 million commissioning initiative for the arts by the Jerwood / Artangel Open in association with Channel 4 and the Arts Council, and the commission was directed to art that can make “transformations of sites and situations across the UK.”⁴⁸ As I will discuss below, I propose that site oriented installations often risk being subsumed to a process of commodification and marketisation of the arts for the sake of producing standardised cultural value, national prestige and, ultimately, economic capital. Following Pierre Bourdieu, one should extend “the idea of capital to all forms of power,” be it material, cultural, social or symbolic:⁴⁹ the pressure for capital production often lies at the very basis of cultural promotion. In this context, the free entry to *Seizure* is almost irrelevant, for the installation was inserted into a wider schema of value-production and creativity-promotion, which reveals an extensive political and economic strategy of capital production in the field of the fine and performing arts. It seems that there are indeed several political strategies at work as the Arts Council referred to *Seizure* as having become “a site of pilgrimage,”⁵⁰ for such a definition resounds with a series of ideological values attached to the work of art and its visitors. As Bourdieu puts it, “the art business, a trade in things that have no price” involves certain practices that “can only work by pretending not to be doing what they are doing,” that is, creating capital.⁵¹ In this sense, site oriented artworks and installations might incur into a commodification under the banner of the ‘creative industries,’ where commercial value is prioritised over artistic value, being formally promoted as ‘socially relevant’ artworks. As Kwon notes, “as more artists try to accommodate the increasing demand for singular on-site projects [...] the definition of site specificity is being reconfigured to imply not the permanence and immobility of a work but its immanence and transience.”⁵² Thus, the focus of site specific art is shifting from the actual physical location of the artwork to the more fluid and discursive status of ‘site specificity’:⁵³ the same artwork tends to become mobile and portable, so as to satisfy the current request of site specific artworks. In this sense, site specific art can be seen as becoming a mark of the ‘creative industries,’ being therefore the subject and object of contemporary political and economic strategies at work in the visual and

⁴⁸ The Jerwood Artangel Open, “Commissions” (accessed December 8, 2009).

⁴⁹ David Swartz, *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 73.

⁵⁰ Arts Council England, “Our Work,” <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/our-work/artangel-seizure/> (accessed December 8, 2009).

⁵¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essay on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity, 1993), 74.

⁵² Kwon, 4.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 29.

performing arts. If, as Bishop points out, “today, installation art is a staple of biennials and triennials worldwide,”⁵⁴ I suggest that site oriented installation work is at risk of lending itself to play a significant role in the lucrative promotion of the ‘creative industries’ in the British context.

The process of marketisation and commodification of culture appears to have fully taken off in Britain during the 1980s, after forty years following World War II, when a left-liberal policy had tended to promote state subsidy for the arts.⁵⁵ From the 1980s, as Kershaw points out in the case of theatre, the arts were incorporated “into a service-oriented economy [...] so to compete with other attractions in the burgeoning media, heritage, tourist and related industries,” and the public began to transform itself into a collection of customers and consumers of the arts.⁵⁶ As Kershaw continues, “by the end of the 1980s, then, British cultural policy [...] had been refashioned by monetarist ideologies which favoured the commodification and marketization of art,” and which promoted an instrumental use of the arts for economic profit.⁵⁷ In this context, Jen Harvie notes that even after 1997, when the Conservative Party was replaced by Tony Blair, the New Labour’s establishment of the Creative Industries Task Force and the Creative Industries Export Promotion Advisory Group (CIEPAG) relied on a model which tended to “prioritise[s] commercial value over social value,”⁵⁸ resounding the rhetoric of ‘Cool Britannia’ that hunted the 1990s. As the definition goes, “the creative industries are those industries that are based on individual creativity, skill and talent. *They are also those that have the potential to create wealth and jobs through developing intellectual property.*”⁵⁹ A strong emphasis is placed on the economic benefit produced by the ‘creative industries’ both in terms of art consumption profits and the export of the ‘creative industries’ which, for example, in 2004 only, was worth £13 billion pounds.⁶⁰ In addition, Harvie thoroughly notes the far-reaching political and social implications of the terminology adopted in the context of the ‘creative industries.’ She examines the preference for the adjective ‘creative’ rather than ‘cultural,’ underlying that “the term potentially disempowers people by transforming them from collective audiences and makers into individual and alienated consumers. It celebrates anti-social capitalist commodity fetishism at the expense of social practice.”⁶¹ One can indeed detect a rather populist view of ‘culture,’ which is simplistically reduced to ‘creativity,’ advertised and promoted as spectacle and entertainment. Furthermore, it is worth noting the consequences of assimilating artistic production into the

⁵⁴ Bishop, 37.

⁵⁵ Kershaw, 268.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 268.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 274.

⁵⁸ Jen Harvie, *Staging the UK* (Manchester and New York : Manchester University Press, 2005) 23.

⁵⁹ Department for Culture, Media and Sports, “What We Do,” http://www.culture.gov.uk/what_we_do/creative_industries/default.aspx (accessed December 8, 2009).

⁶⁰ Department for Culture, Media and Sports, “Creative Industries Economic Estimates,” http://www.culture.gov.uk/images/research/Creative_Industries_Economic_Estimates_Jan_09.pdf (accessed December 8, 2009).

⁶¹ Harvie, 23.

category of ‘industry,’ in that such a linguistic choice frames and constrains ‘the arts’ into a factory-like model, where “consumers appear as statistics,”⁶² and where the main goal is consistent productivity, thus contributing to the production, circulation and reproduction of economic capital. Assigning to ‘the arts’ the status of ‘industry’ effectively inserts the artistic field into a capitalist logic of production. In a ‘cultural’ and ‘industrial’ framework, as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue, art becomes a product to be consumed, for the ‘culture industry’ has established the consumption of art as its principle.⁶³ In their view, “art renounces its own autonomy and proudly takes its place among consumption goods,”⁶⁴ while use value is slowly but radically replaced by exchange value. As discussed above, *Seizure* is an artwork that could apparently be easily appropriated by the logics of the ‘creative industries,’ boasting its ‘cool’ ‘site specificity,’ its ‘status’ as an installation, and its supposed political engagement and commentary on the ‘hot issue’ of social housing. In this sense, *Seizure* might seem to readily play a part in what Julie Reiss defines as the “packaging of alternative culture,”⁶⁵ the subsuming of the artwork into the world of the freshly baked products of the ‘creative industry.’



Detail of the bathtub
Photo: Courtesy of Marco Devetak

⁶² Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London and New York: Verso, 1997 [1944]), 123.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 135.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 157.

⁶⁵ Reiss, 131.

I propose an understanding of *Seizure* as a strategically resistant work, which partly eschews the traditional definition and logics of installation art, and which potentially destabilises the process of appropriating ‘creative’ art for economic purposes. First, as discussed above, both the formation and the experience of *Seizure* rely on performative processes of destruction, rather than processes of production. Following the logic of installation art, while the consumption of the work of art happens in a very material way, the product of *Seizure* cannot be appropriated and packaged, because it consists in the whole experience of the installation *as* its disintegration, and as the physical consumption of the very work. In other words, while sharing a fundamental character with a traditional definition of installation art – consisting in the embodied experience of the whole space – *Seizure* allows such an experience only through a performative destruction of that very space. This is the very characteristic that might establish *Seizure* as an epitome of installation art, understood in its initial meaning as potentially resisting capitalistic appropriation: the material of the installation disappears with its experience and the production of the work consists in its destruction, thus finally creating the work of art as non portable and fundamentally non reproducible. Second, *Seizure* seems to somehow strategically eschew the discourse of site specificity, thus defying a potential packaging of the installation as ‘alternative culture,’ for the choice of the site was determined by an aesthetic concern, rather than by a social commitment of the artist. In creating *Seizure*, Hiorns was particularly interested in the composition of the rational and the irrational, for “crystal growth – occult, liquid and unpredictable – usurps the ‘governing rationality’ of such modernist housing schemes, making *Seizure* just that, a taking over by the non rational and non human, a mineral squatting.”⁶⁶ In ‘making *Seizure* just that,’ perhaps the installation *explicitly* stretches itself towards the more ‘creative’ rather than ‘cultural’ end of the spectrum in the artistic discourse. In the artist’s view, the installation never meant to engage with social or political issues, but it consisted of an aesthetic celebration of materiality. In this sense, the work can precisely be seen as a seizure, a dispossessing and repossessing of the setting by the work of art and by the uncanny, almost a violent and physical intrusion into the hosting environment. While it can be tempting to apply this rhetoric of confiscation to the work as hosted in a council flat, I have argued that such a reading of the work can be misleading as it might deny certain performative strategies of resistance to dominant discourses within the arts market. Instead, I purport an understanding of Hiorns’s piece almost as a material seizure, performed by chemical agents onto the walls, a radical – and chemically actual – transformation and repossession of the space. Devoid of a deliberate social engagement, *Seizure* is almost pure form without content, “a chemistry experiment on a grand scale,”⁶⁷ or a pure aesthetic anathema without explicit social reference. By being ‘creative’ before being ‘cultural,’ *Seizure* is perhaps barely acceptable for the logic inherent in the ‘creative industry,’ that which reframes ‘cultural’ with

⁶⁶ James Wilkes, “Roger Hiorns: Seizure,” *Studio International*, 22 December 2008, <http://www.studio-international.co.uk> (accessed December 15, 2009).

⁶⁷ Johanna Agerman, “Roger Hiorns: Seizure,” *Icon Eye: Icon Magazine Online* (11 September 2008 Newsletter), <http://www.iconeye.com> (accessed December 15, 2009).

‘creative,’ in order to sex it up for a public eager and hungry for socially engaged art. In this sense, it was only through firstly assigning a ‘cultural’ status to *Seizure* – by promoting it as a critique of social housing policies – that the installation could finally be rendered ‘creative’ in the capitalist sense of the term, and thus subsumed to the profit-inclined ‘creative industries.’ *Seizure* had to be made ‘cultural,’ in order to be made ‘creative.’ This paradigmatic shift was necessarily implemented by the intervention of a number of agents that contributed to the publicly dominant understanding of the piece as a socially engaged product, such as Southwark Council, who contributed in the ‘spectacularization’ of the work by the media and – not least – the Turner Prize Committee.

In this paper, I have framed Roger Hiorns’s *Seizure* as an artwork that offers strategies of resistance against appropriation by the capitalist logic of the British ‘creative industries.’ Firstly, it complicates the notion of ‘installation art’ – consisting in a process of destruction rather than production – and secondly, it partially escapes the category of ‘site specific work’ – the choice of the site being dictated by its aesthetics, rather than by an interest in social critique. In this context, revealing *Seizure* as a ‘non intentionally’ site oriented installation might unveil certain capitalistic strategies at work in ascribing the status of ‘site specificity’ to an artwork. This is likely to add a rather artificial social layer to the work of art, so that it can be rendered visible and packaged as ‘cultural’ – thus deserving a nomination for the Turner Prize – but only *through* the term ‘creative’, which is quickly becoming a trademark of much contemporary art. *Seizure* might indeed escape several ‘appropriative’ discourses, for even the material of the work is not fully containable in traditional aesthetic terms: the autogenetic crystals constitute an anti-systemic, almost anarchic “toxic, ever-expanding chemical sculpture,”⁶⁸ which partly invades the field of the artist’s labour. Perhaps, then, a different and less populist promotion of *Seizure* is desirable: one which highlights the artist’s intentions, and which underlines the work as an aesthetic creation, rather than attempting to inscribe convenient politico-economic interpretation to it. This would establish *Seizure* as a work that offers “strategies of counterhegemonic resistance by exposing processes of cultural control and emphasizing the traces of nonhegemonic discourses within the dominant without claiming to transcend its terms.”⁶⁹ In mid November 2010, the setting in Harper Road is slightly different. Wooden fences surround the block of flats that is still awaiting demolition, concealing guard dogs that prevent any squatting attempts, while purple signs on the fences insistently read “REVITALISE¹⁷” over an inescapably desolate background. This scenario, this new ‘installation’ has not attracted much attention and, at least for now, is quietly laying there in stillness waiting for the seizure that will finally take it down.

⁶⁸ Maddocks, “Crystal Method,” 39.

⁶⁹ Philip Auslander, *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006 [1997]), 61.

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