

Gestured

Dr Anneke Pettican |

Brass Art

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Project Description



Pinch 2017. 3D resin print, coloured glass. 25cm x 10cm x 10cm
Photo Credit Brass Art

Gestured (2017) comprises a constellation of installed blown glass, cast and 3D printed sculptural pieces, single channel video works, a series of public events and an accompanying publication, created in response to the archive at Chetham's Library, Manchester.

Project Duration:

Chetham's Library Commission, awarded March 2017.
Exhibition, 16 October - 8 December 2017 Chetham's Library, Manchester, UK.

Funder:

Brass Art received £11,500 from Arts & Heritage as part of Meeting Point 2, a year-long project involving ten contemporary art commissions inspired by museums and their collections led by Arts & Heritage and funded through Arts Council England's Museum Resilience Fund. *Gestured* later featured in the solo Brass Art exhibition *that-which-is-not* (2018) at Bury Sculpture Centre and the artists received a £7000 production award to research and generate new neon artworks as part of the *Gestured* series.

Research Partners, consultants, collaborators:

Arts & Heritage, Chetham's Library, Arts Council England (ACE) Museum Resilience Fund, University of Manchester, Manchester Metropolitan University, Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh, University of Huddersfield, Ogle Models Ltd.

Research consultants: Dr Keith Winwood, Dr Fraser Walker, Ed O'Keefe, Chris Charlesworth, Steve Willmott, Ingrid Phillips, Dan Nuttall, David Marshall, Michael Power, Sue McLoughlin.

Collaborators: Established in 1999, Brass Art is the collaborative practice of Chara Lewis, Kristin Mojsiewicz, Anneke Pettican.

Research Aims & Objectives

Research Aims:

- To reanimate Chetham's library spaces through an embodied response to gesture discovered in the archive by developing original approaches to sculptural thinking and making.

Research Objectives:

- To take influence from a range of emphatic hand gestures uncovered in the archive, including the original hand drawn manicules of John Dee to inform a novel approach to the archive.
- To extend Brass Art's engagement with 3D scanning processes to successfully replicate poise and gesture originating from the archive.
- To consider how alchemical approaches might inform sculptural processes to generate embodied sculptural forms.
- To create a constellation of new artefacts within the spaces of Chetham's Library to engage a new audience, by building upon Brass Art's long term engagement with uncanny doubling, metamorphosis and material transformation.
- To explore new approaches to defamiliarisation and encounter by re-presenting images discovered in the Library collection.



Marriage A la Mode (after Hogarth) 2017. 3D SLS print, gold ring, gold chain. 800 x 400 x 300mm; 4800 mm gold chain.

Photo credit Jonathon Turner.

Research Context

The research emerged from Brass Art's invitation and competitive selection for an Arts & Heritage commission to work with Chetham's Library. Art situated in heritage settings is an emerging branch of site specific art practice demanding particular attention to creative and installation processes, as opposed to art placed in unusual/non-gallery spaces.¹ Brass Art were chosen for their sensitivity to sites and ability to create immersive experiences evidenced by earlier projects, using light-based, digital and analogue approaches to embodiment, replication, shadow-play and sculptural making.

The collection is housed in a 15th century medieval building and Chetham's Library is internationally renowned as the oldest surviving public library in the English-speaking world. Founded in the 17th century through Sir Humphrey Chetham's philanthropic legacy, it is famous for its association with John Dee (1527-1609), resident warden, alchemist, polymath, and advisor to Elizabeth I, and visiting readers such as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.² Brass Art's initial archival research focused on the book *De remediis secretis* owned by Dee. It contained marginalia of Dee's original hand-drawn manicules – tiny ink drawings of hands – pointing to key discoveries in the text. This discovery allowed Brass Art to make the first application of sculptural thinking to Dee's original hand-drawn manicules and influenced their approach to the constellation of gesturing artworks.

In contemporary thought, Dee has been resurrected as a talismanic figure of alchemical practice and has been the focus of: an exhibition at The Royal College of Physicians; a short film by artist, writer and curator Jeremy Millar; and an opera, *Doctor Dee*, by musician Damon Albarn.³

Taking their influence from Dee's gestures, and the quiet symbolism of hand gestures evident in paintings hanging in the reading room by Godfrey Kneller (1646-1723), Brass Art sought further visual clues from the collection. Of note was the lack of female presence in the collection. Literary influences during the research and development phase included William Hogarth's (1697-1764) prints; William Cowper's (1666-1709) life-sized anatomy book *The Anatomy*

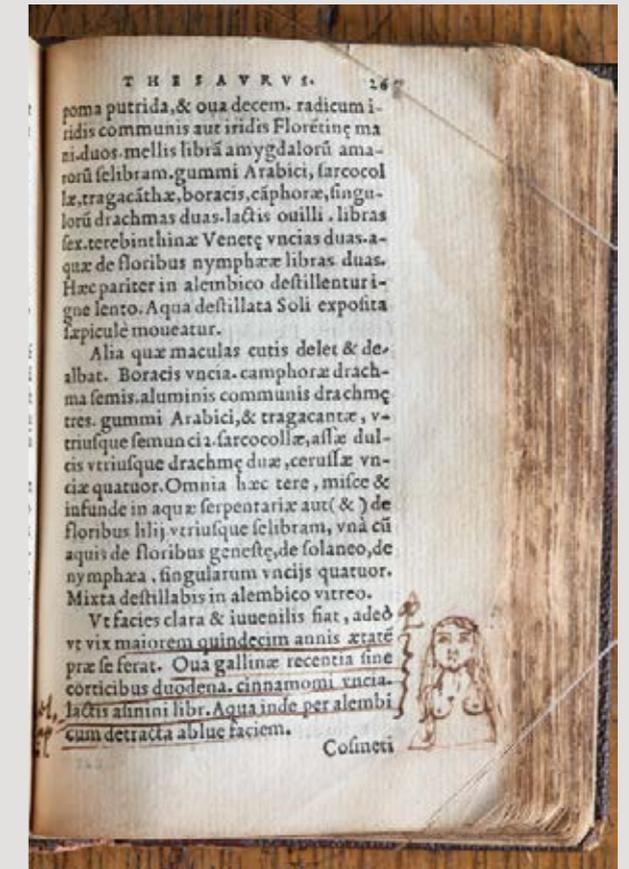
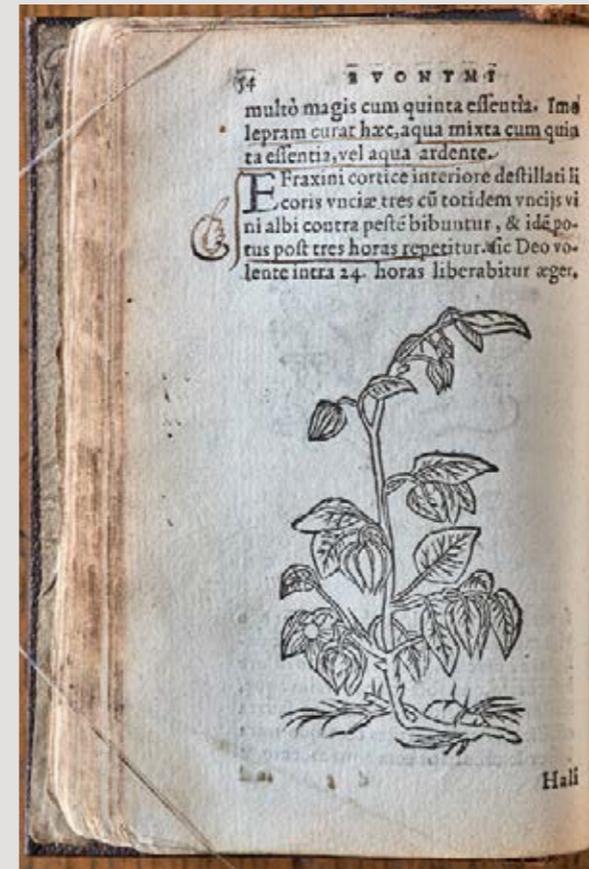
(Top) Chara Lewis and Kristin Mojsiewicz, Reading Room, Chethams Library 2017
Photo Credit Jonathan Turner

(Bottom) Chara Lewis, Kristin Mojsiewicz and Anneke Pettican, Reading Room, Chethams Library 2017
Photo Credit Jonathan Turner



of *Humane Bodies* (1698); and Athanasius Kircher's (1602-1680) *Mundus Subterraneus* (1665) which refocused Brass Art's attention on matter and opened up an undercurrent of instability and volatility at the heart of the collection, also influencing the artwork *Solaris* (2017).⁴ Kircher's diagrams of projected light, *Steganographic Mirror* (1645) and pre-cinematic spectacle, *Lucerna Magica* (1671), presented references synonymous with Brass Art's engagement with the double and 'familiar strangers' and provide cues for the development of specific artworks, including *Pepper's Ghost* (2017).

1. Organisations and museums that focus upon Art situated in heritage settings include: MCAHE (Mapping Contemporary Art in the Heritage Experience) based at Newcastle University, Arts & Heritage Meeting Point commissions, Freud Museum, London, Bronte Parsonage, Haworth.
2. Artists and researchers have tended to focus on the legacy of Marx and Engels, for example Pavel Büchler, *Red Flag* (1997).
3. 'Scholar, Courtier, Magician: The Lost Library of John Dee', Royal College of Physicians, Regent's Park, London, 18 January–29 July 2016; Jeremy Millar, *A Constellation for John Dee* (2016); *Doctor Dee*, directed by Rufus Norris and composed by Damon Albarn, Manchester International Festival, 2011.
4. William Hogarth, *A Harlot's Progress* (1732), *Marriage A-la-Mode* (1745), *The Four Stages of Cruelty* (1751).



Brass Art drew inspiration from John Dee's marginalia found in his personal copy of Conrad Gesner, *De remediis secretis* (Lyon, 1555) held in the Chetham's archive. Photo credit Brass Art and Simon Weldon.

(Top left) Manicule, drawn by Dee's hand, in Conrad Gesner, *De remediis secretis* (Lyon, 1555).

(Top right) The Cinnamon Girl, drawn by Dee's hand, in Conrad Gesner, *De remediis secretis* (Lyon, 1555).

(Left) Illustration from William Cowper's *The Anatomy of Humane Bodies* (Oxford, 1698).

Earth (unfolded), from Althansius Kircher's *Mundus Subterraneus* (Amsterdam: Jansson, 1678).



The Four Stages of Cruelty: Cruelty in Perfection 1 (detail) February 1751.



Research Methods & Process

The role of intuition is pivotal in Brass Art's approach to artistic research in a methodology embracing assertion and hint. Their working methods, sensing bodies, and performative approaches enable a concern with liminality and the uncanny, enhancing the affective dimension of surprise in the construction and reception of the work.¹

Working with Chetham's Library they explored its site as a space in which to insert themselves, and eventually the artworks as substitutes for their presence. Archival research formed a visual encyclopaedia of gestures: pointing, cupping, pinching, rubbing, grasping and entreating. The presence of the artists' hands, posed in symbolic gestures arising from the collection, afforded Brass Art a place amongst the male patrons and writers, pointing towards other narrative possibilities and trajectories within the Library. Replicating the archival gestures at different scales to mimic, multiply, pinch, cradle, caress and direct, the artists worked with experts in their respective fields to develop bespoke sculptural techniques.



Image from Kircher's magnum opus on light, projections, and astronomy, *Ars Magna Lucis Et Umbrae* (trans. the Great Art of Light and Shadows).



Brass Art selected gestures from the series of Hogarth prints, including *Marriage A la Mode*.



Hogarth prints gesture, *A Harlot's Progress* that resonated with contemporary debate.

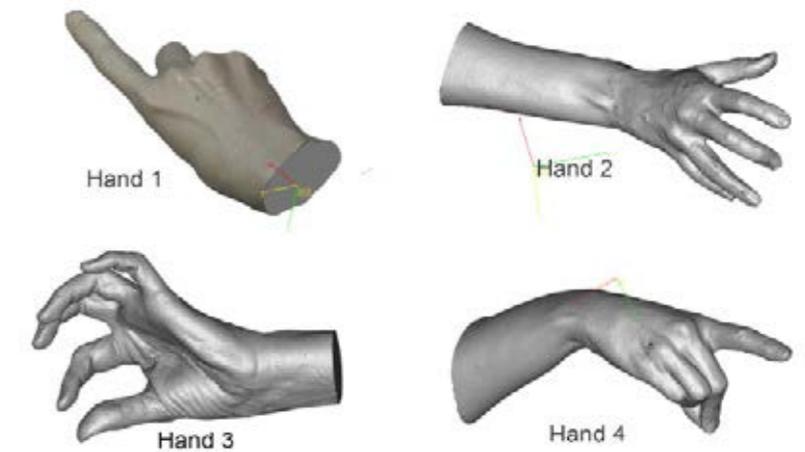
They sought the expertise of Dr. Keith Winwood and Dr. Fraser Walker in the field of Maxillofacial casting for capturing dynamic gestures, testing state-of-the-art 3D scanning technologies at the highest resolution. The final objects were then re-scaled to enhance the uncanny dimension of the gestures, and 3D printed in different resins.

Alchemy can be understood as a slow process of transformation - of materials but also of the individual - through intense durational experiments, a process evidenced in Brass Art's embodied response to the sense of wonder in the encounter with Chetham's building and collection. Brass Art discovered that early efforts to produce gold ore produced surprising discoveries including the creation of ruby glass, later refined by alchemist and glass maker Johannes Kunckel (1637-1703). The introduction of gold flakes dispersed the light and unexpectedly produced a deep red colour that, 'no doubt resembles fine rubies but perhaps resembles nothing so much as blood' (Peter Dear, 2008).

(Below) Testing an unusual application of maxillofacial dental casting materials with Dr Keith Winwood, Reader in Musculoskeletal function (MMU). Photo credit Brass Art.



Specialist 3D printing in resin was undertaken at Manchester Metropolitan University, University of Huddersfield and Ogle Models and Prototypes Ltd. UK (2017).



Eight of the casts from the artist's original, mimicking, hand gestures were selected to be 3D scanned at a very high resolution. This enabled the artist's hands to be re-imagined and re-scaled in the 3D printing process to further enhance the uncanny dimension of the gestures in the final artefacts.

(Right) Brass Art sought the specialist assistance of Ingrid Phillips and Dan Nuttall, for an unusual application of hot glass. Using the artist's hand casts as moulds, they iteratively tested the possibilities for pushing the molten, coloured glass into the arrested gestures to create a sense of touch. Photo credit Brass Art.

The specialist assistance of Ingrid Phillips and Dan Nuttall was employed in an unusual application of hot glass. Using their hand casts as moulds, Brass Art iteratively tested the possibilities for pushing molten, coloured glass into arrested gestures to create a sense of touch. One of the resulting artworks, *Solaris* (2017), appears to contain red glass swirling in a state of flux.

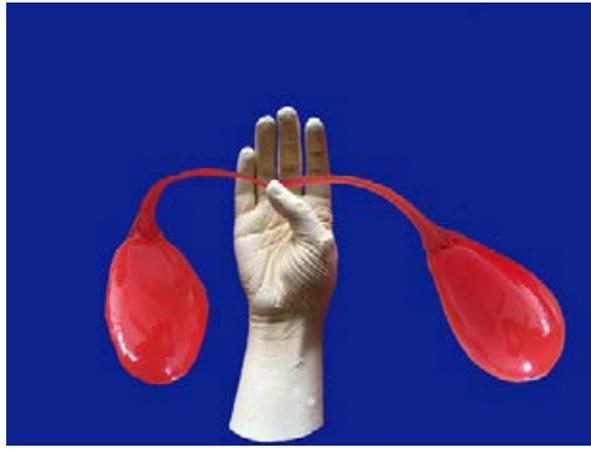
In *Marriage A la Mode* (after Hogarth) (2017), a giant hand – resting on a boxed set of Hogarth prints – pinches a gold ring held aloft by a delicate gold chain, simultaneously evoking the social contract of marriage, the ambitions of alchemy and the Midas touch. In *Pepper's Ghost* (2017) a felt-lined display case houses a blown glass globe, and theatrical illusion is employed to create a double that hovers, held in place by two 3D-printed, white hands, evoking Kircher's diagrams of projected light.

Working with scientific glass blower David Marshall, Brass Art created hand-made alchemical vessels reproduced from historical images of apparatus in the collection. Some of these were used as lenses to film and magnify video works as part of the *Gestured* series reflecting external views around Chetham's (*Transfixed Man*, 2017) and magnifying individual gestures gathered from contemporary sources. For example, in the video *Mooch and Maitlis* (2017), using projection and blown-glass, Brass Art magnified and diffracted the exchange in a TV interview, by turn aggressive and placatory, between Anthony Scaramucci and Emily Maitlis. The work invites the audience to trace the gestural interaction as Scaramucci transgresses the space of the interview to directly touch Maitlis, silently pointing to the #MeToo movement.

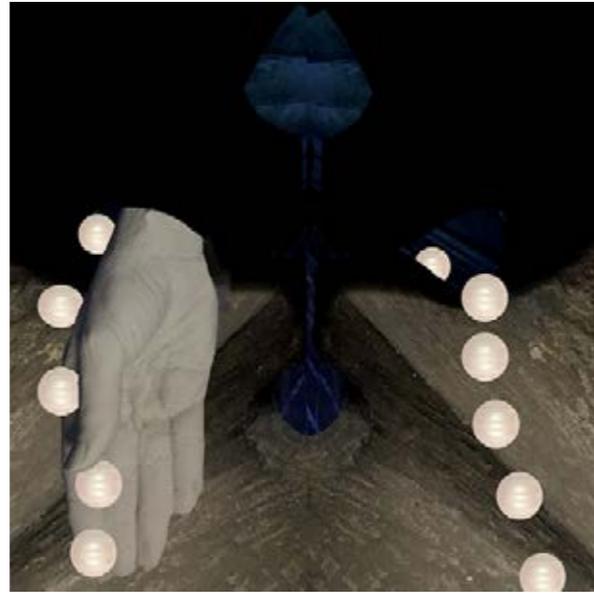
Brass Art's cast and assembled hands, in black and white resin and pale Herculite, mimicked the posed hands of 'men of consequence', hands of criminal corpses from anatomical plates, Dee's manicules, theatrical indexes of gesture, religious blessings and classical orators, their mute communication and presence pointing to the potential for new lines of thought or confluence between the writers, and to the spectral silence of the missing female voices in the canon.

1. Chetham's Library offered Brass Art the opportunity to bring their 'sensing bodies' (the term 'sensing' is deliberately used to foreground movement and the body's encounter with the political (Erin Manning, 2007, pp. xxii-83) to engage with both a resonant space and extensive archive.





Brass Art Red Gall (collage) 2017



Brass Art Cradle (collage) 2017



Brass Art visual research for Click (after Hogarth) 2017



Red glowing hand (test) 2017



Brass Art material research for Marriage A la Mode (after Hogarth) 2017. Miniature 3D SLS print, ring, stack of Hogarth prints foregrounding gilded letters for *The Four Stages of Cruelty*.

Research Outcomes & Dissemination

The project culminated in an exhibition entitled *Gestured* (2017). This was the first commissioned exhibition of contemporary art within Chetham's Library. *Gestured* consisted of fourteen artworks that were the fruit of both archival research, and material testing. These works provided the focus for a series of public events which re-animated the museum site and its archive for new audiences.

The work in the exhibition developed Brass Art's use of medical processes and of 3D scanners and 3D printers. Scanned 3D models of the artists' hands, reproduced with unexpected shifts in scale, provided the centre piece of each sculptural installation. For *Gestured*, Brass Art combined stark disembodied copies of their hands, posed in precise attitudes, with hot blown glass, lenses and gold. The aim was to capture an uncanny and vital quality by juxtaposing suggestions of heat, and breath with the expressive presence of the sculptured hands.

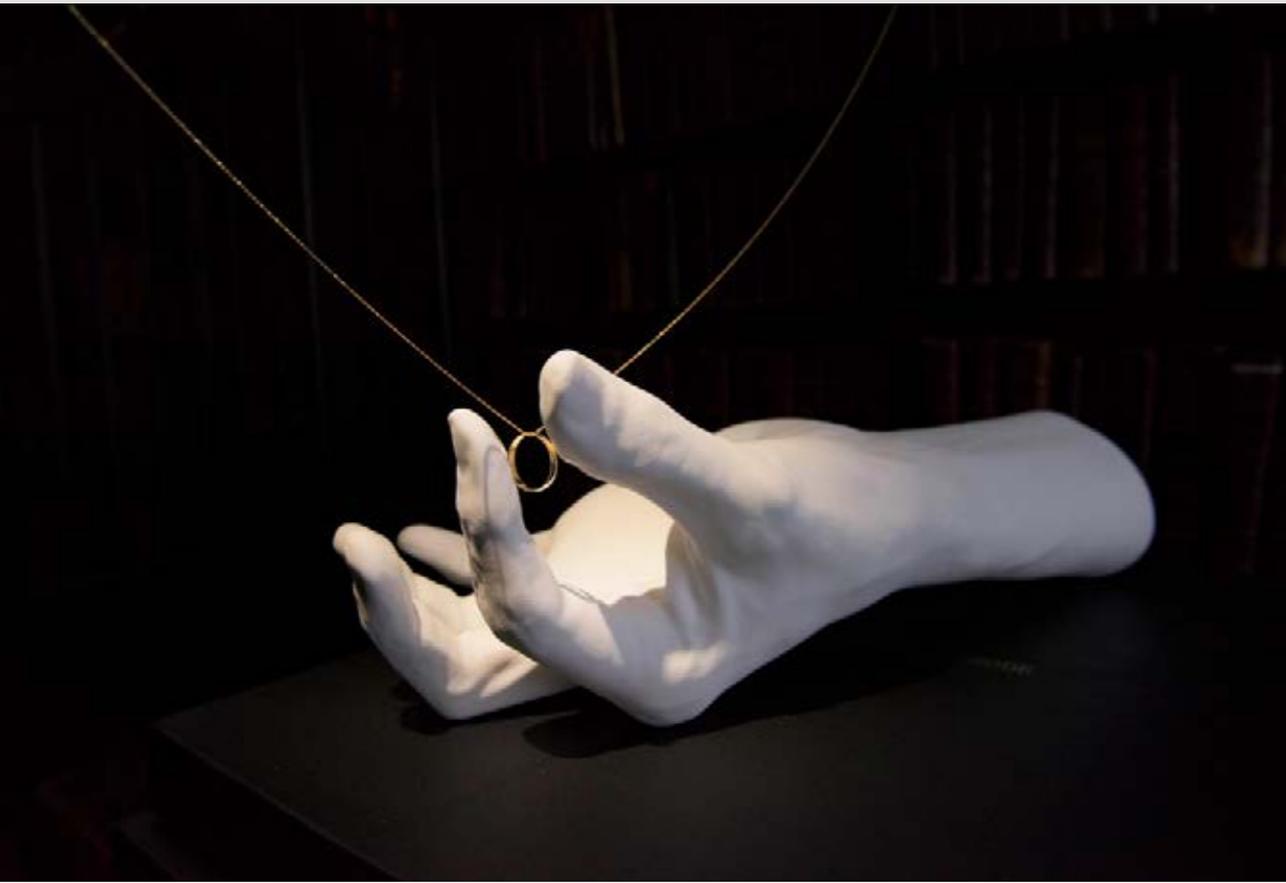
Marginal drawings by the alchemist John Dee provided the inspiration for these installations. The exhibition gave Dee's manicules and other representations of gesturing hands a haunting 21st century presence which supplemented and echoed their erratic appearances within the 17th century library's collection. Brass Art's work conjured Dee's idiosyncratic interventions in the books he read into peculiarly contemporary curios. The installations of sculptured hands were displayed alongside video works which offered slow arresting movements or emphatic gestures and unsolicited touch. By embodying marginalia and prints as eerie objects, the carefully curated exhibition made the variety of gesturing hands depicted in the library's collection become dynamically present within the physical space of the library itself.

Artefacts from *Gestured* featured in further exhibitions; *that-which-is-not* (2018) and *A Track of the Light* (2019). The chapter 'Brass Art: *Gestured*' was peer reviewed for 'Intersecting Practices: Contemporary Art in Heritage Spaces' (Routledge, 2020) and consolidated the implications of the work as a seminal intervention in a heritage setting with International reach.



Red Gall (Installation view) 2017. 3D printed polyresin, red blown glass forms, blue velvet cushion, theatrical lighting. Dimensions variable. Photo credit Jonathan Turner.

A constellation of fourteen experimental artefacts (sculpture and video) were placed within Chetham's Library as an installation, alongside a display case of iterative experiments and key archival texts. Accompanying the exhibition *Gestured* were a series of public events, including some additional objects that were inserted into the spaces of the library, an exhibition catalogue and essay, and a gilded ledger for public engagement titled *Gestured*. The total number of international visitors to the exhibition between 16 October - 08 December was in excess of 5600.



Marriage A la Mode (after Hogarth) 2017. 3D SLS print, gold ring, gold chain.
800 x 400 x 300mm; 4800 mm gold chain.
Photo credit Jonathon Turner.





Pepper's Ghost 2017. 3D printed polyresin, pink glass globe, light, map box.
150 x 250 x 150mm; 250 x 250mm; 600 x 250 x 800mm.
Photo credit Brass Art.



Solaris 2017. 3D printed polyresin, blown glass, light. 26cm x 16cm x 06cm.
Photo credit Jonathan Turner.



(Top) *Dowsing* (2017) video, 5mins
Video Still Brass Art.

(Below) *Mooch and Maitlis* 2017, single channel video, 4:47.
Video Still Brass Art.
Mooch and Maitlis (2017) brought found footage of contemporary politicised gesture and touch into dialogue with the 17th century collection. An excerpt is available <https://vimeo.com/360212225>



(Top) *Rött gold* 2017 video, 5mins paired with *Vesuvii* 2017
hanging three-part fabric screen.
Photo credit Jonathon Turner.

(Below) *Felt (after Cowper)* 2017. 3D printed polyresin,
blown glass. Installation dimensions variable.
Photo credit Brass Art.



Cradle (2017) oversized pink satin glove,
3D printed polyresin



Transfixed Man (2017) video, 1min 39 sec

View video: <https://www.soanywaymagazine.org/issue-six>

Full list of Gestured works:

1. Solaris (2017)
3D printed polyresin, blown glass, light
2. Sensus (after Kircher) (2017)
cast arm, scientific lens, red cellophane
3. Marriage A la Mode (after Hogarth) (2017)
3D printed polyresin, gold ring and chain
4. Red Gall (2017)
3D printed polyresin, red blown glass forms, blue velvet cushion
5. Pepper's Ghost (after Chetham) (2017)
3D printed polyresin, pink glass globe, light, map box
6. Edge of Dreaming (after Chetham) (2017)
3D printed polyresin, pink glass globe
7. Felt (after Cowper) (2018)
3D printed polyresin, blown glass
8. Rött-gold (2017)
video, 5mins
9. Transfixed Man (2017)
video, 1min 39 sec
10. Dowsing (2017)
video, 5mins
11. Mooch and Maitlis (2017)
video, 4min 47sec
12. Pinch (2017)
3D printed polyresin, red blown glass
13. Cradle (2017)
oversized pink satin glove, 3D printed polyresin
14. Lover's limb (after Hogarth) (2017)
cast arm, draped fabric and book

The other assembled pieces:

15. Manicule (2017)
3D printed polyresin
16. Antlers (2017)
3D printed polyresin
17. Gestured (2017)
Display Case: Chetham's Library
18. Manifesto (2017)
cast hand, miniature version of Marx's manifesto
19. The Chymical Collection (2017)
hot and cold worked clear glass instruments and forms
20. Dill (2017)
Stone head, 3D printed polyresin
21. Vesuvii (2017)
three-part fabric screen
22. Stretched (2017)
3D printed polyresin, glass

Solo Exhibitions:	2018	<i>that-which-is-not</i> Bury Sculpture Centre Bury Art Museum, Manchester
	2017	<i>GESTURED</i> Chetham's Library, Manchester
Group Exhibitions:	2019	<i>A Trick of the Light: Magic, Mystery and Illusion</i> Grundy Gallery, Blackpool
Commissions:	2018	<i>Click (after Hogarth)</i> , two part argon sign, Bury Sculpture Centre Bury Art Museum, Manchester.
	2017	<i>GESTURED</i> Meeting Point2 Arts & Heritage ACE Commission, Chetham's Library, Manchester
Catalogues:	2017	<i>Brass Art: GESTURED</i> authors: Rowan Bailey ISBN: 978 1 910029 34 3
Magazines:	2020	<i>Soanyway</i> (Volume 2, Issue Six, June 2020) ISSN 2043-6408, featured Transfixed Man (2017) from the Gestured collection: https://www.soanywaymagazine.org/issue-six
Book Chapters:	2019	<i>Gestured by Brass Art: Gestures, Ambiguity and Material Transformation at Chetham's Library - chapter in Intersecting Practices Contemporary Art in Heritage Spaces. (eds).Cass, Park, Powell. Routledge: London.</i>
Selected Essays:	2019	Ferris, N. Sleight of Hand
	2018	Kivland, S. LA PAGODE
	2017	Bailey, R. Ways of Reading Gestured
Conference Presentations:	2018	<i>Brass Art: The uncanny reforming sculptural thinking</i> , at the Association for Art History Symposium (RE)FORMING SCULPTURE, University of Leeds and The Hepworth Wakefield (26-27 June 2018). <i>Arts & Heritage: Contemporary Arts Practice in Heritage Sites</i> , Manchester Metropolitan University. (23 February 2018) Supported by ACE.

Selected Reviews:	2019	<i>A Trick of the Light</i> review - Derek Horton - Corridor8 - 24th Nov https://corridor8.co.uk/article/a-trick-of-the-light/
	2018	<i>that-which-is-not</i> review - Beth Dawson - Corridor8 - 16th April http://www.corridor8.co.uk/article/brass-art-that-which-is-not-at-bury-art-museum-and-sculpture-centre/
	2017	<i>GESTURED</i> review - Catriona McAra - Corridor8 - 12th Dec http://corridor8.co.uk/article/brass-art-gestured/ xCoAx review - Victoria Bradbury - Neural - issue 58 / Autumn 2017
Selected Public Media Coverage:	2020	The Chetham's Library commission is archived on the Arts & Heritage website: https://www.artsandheritage.org.uk/projects/chethams-library/
	2018	<i>Macdonald, A.I., that-which-is-not</i> trailer: https://vimeo.com/267371994
	2017	Gestured, Edinburgh College of Art, The University of Edinburgh https://www.eca.ed.ac.uk/research/gestured Elizabethan alchemist's notebook inspires magical artwork at Chetham's Library, Manchester Metropolitan University: https://www2.mmu.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/story/6427/ Elizabethan alchemist's notebook inspires magical artwork at Chetham's Library: http://aboutmanchester.co.uk/elizabethan-chemists-notebook-inspires-magical-artwork-at-chethams-library/
		The Brass Art collective reworked the drawings of Queen Elizabeth I's alchemist and magician John Dee: https://www.hud.ac.uk/news/2017/november/elizabethanalchemistinspiresartworkatchethamslibrary/



The Gestured exhibition 14 October – 08 December 2017 included a series of bespoke events designed to engage new audiences. The Torch-lit tour on Saturday 28 October 2017 was conceived to accompany the International Art Fair *Manchester Contemporary* and was sponsored by the Alchemist. 400 people (capacity) toured through the exhibition by torchlight. In total more than 5600 visitors saw the Gestured exhibition.

**Brass Art:
Gestured**

**An Evening Event
Chetham's Library**

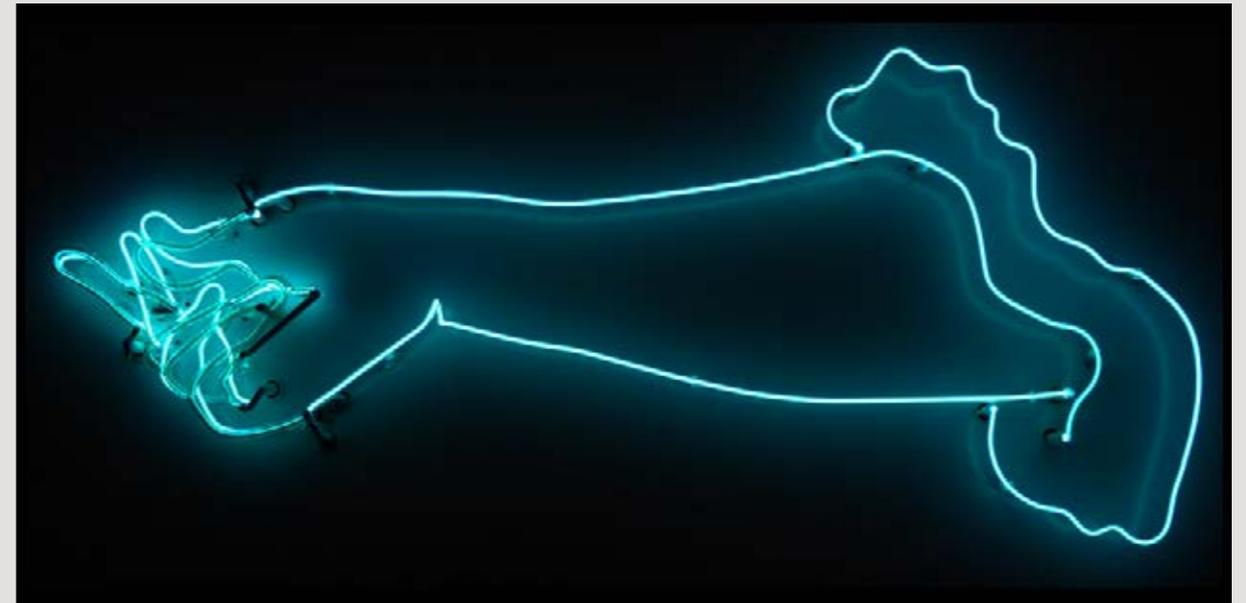
Sat 28 Oct 2017
6.00PM-8.00PM

Join Brass Art for an intimate torchlit tour of the Medieval Museum's public and hidden spaces. See the artist's installation 'Gestured' illuminated at dusk, accompanied by a live performance from world renowned theremin musician Lydia Kavina. Enjoy a smoking, red cocktail created and served by 'The Alchemist' in the building forever associated with 16th century scientist and alchemist John Dee.

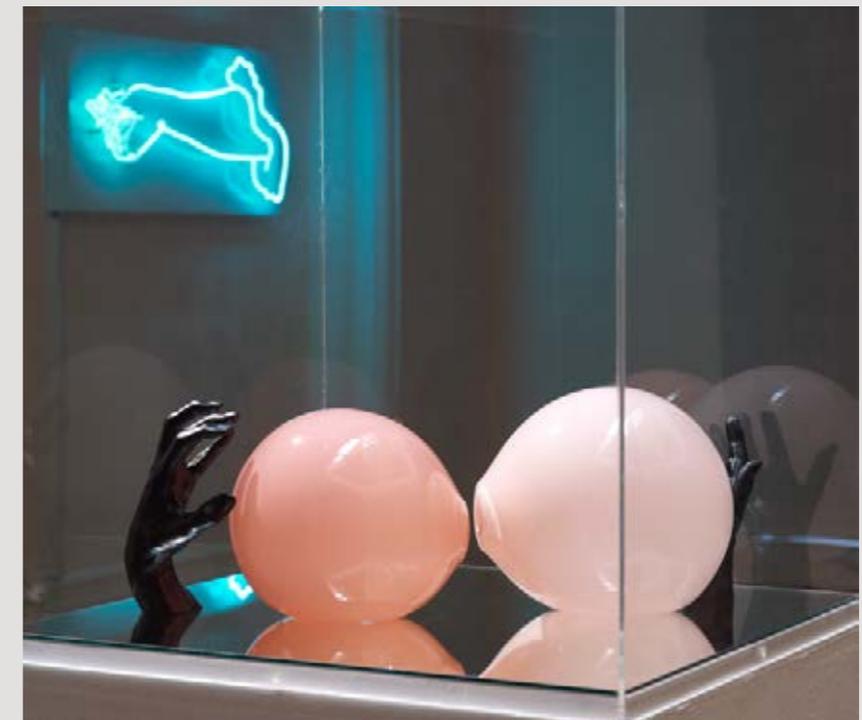
Mixing Point Arts & Heritage Arts Council Manchester University of Manchester University of Salford



Kissing Pinks 2018. Blown pink glass, 3D printed objects in black resin, mirror. Photo credit Michael Pollard



Click (after Hogarth) [colour] 2018 two part argon and glass. 800 x 400 x 50mm.
Photo credit Michael Pollard



Artefacts from Gestured (2017) were exhibited in *that-which-is-not*, a solo exhibition by Brass Art curated by Kat Au in Bury Sculpture Centre, 17 February - 2 June 2018. Brass Art received a £7000 production award to research and generate new neon artworks as part of the Gestured series. An essay: *La Pagode* by Sharon Kivland accompanied the exhibition.



Still Life No.3 (installation view) 2019. 3D objects in SLA resin, polypropylene, PLA, mixed media, table and light source. Table 2m diameter. Installation dimensions variable.
Photo credit Michael Pollard

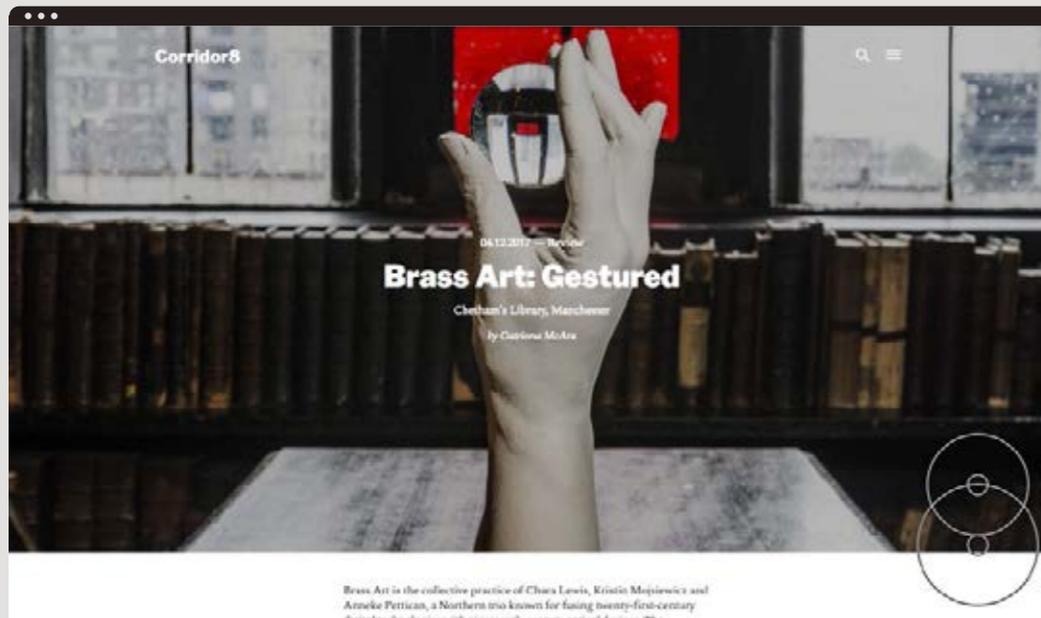


A Trick of the Light (installation view).
Image courtesy Grundy Art Gallery, Blackpool © Jonathan Lynch.

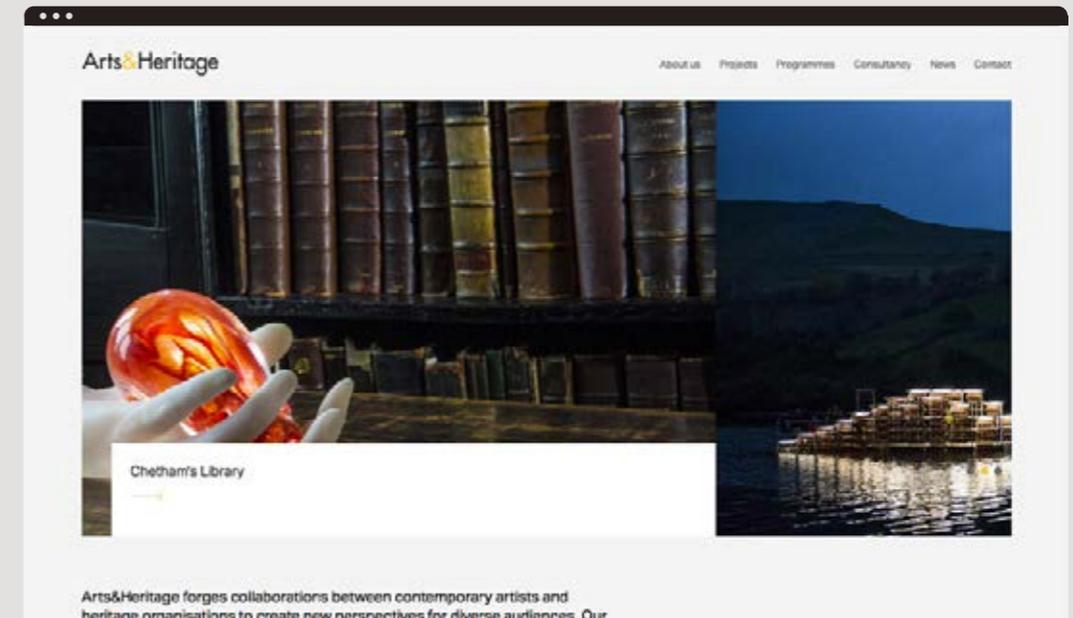
Trick of the Light: Magic, Mystery and Illusion, Grundy Art Gallery, Blackpool.
28 September - 14 December 2019
Curated by Paulette Terry Brien, Trick of the Light featured International artists Brass Art, Mat Collishaw, Rachel Goodyear, Helen Maurer, Tim Noble and Sue Webster alongside selected items on loan from The Bill Douglas Cinema Museum, University of Exeter.



Still Life No.3 (detail) 2019.
Photo Credit Michael Pollard

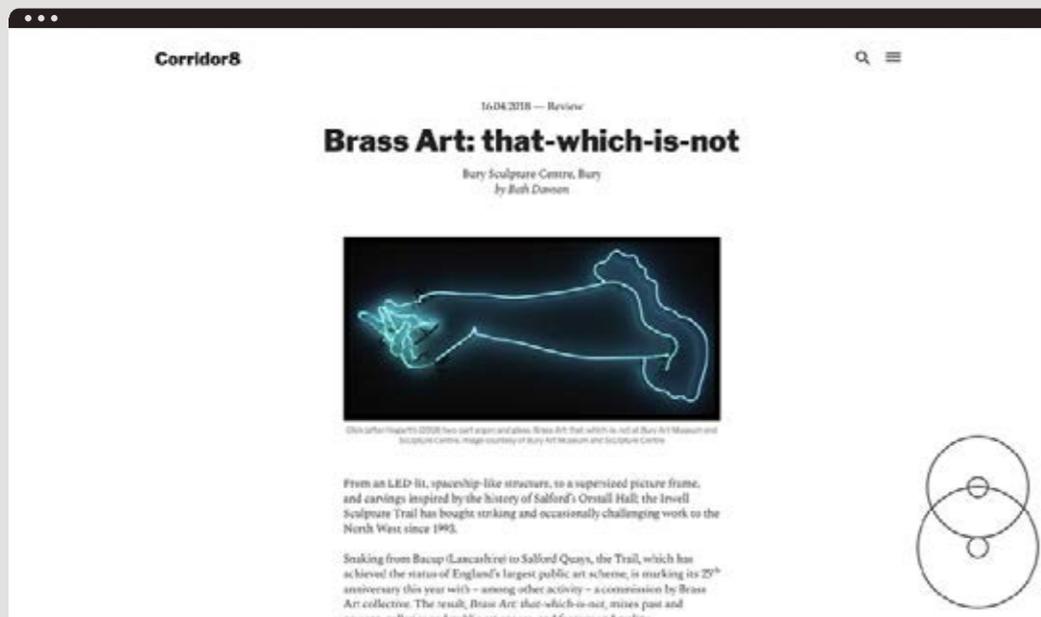


Dr Catriona McAra (curator at Leeds Arts University) review of 'Gestured' in Corridor8 magazine (online). <http://www.corridor8.co.uk/article/brass-art-gestured/>



Arts & Heritage website. The Chetham's Library commission is archived on Arts & Heritage <https://www.artsandheritage.org.uk/projects/chethams-library/>
Arts & Heritage is an Arts Council England (ACE) National Portfolio Organisation (NPO).

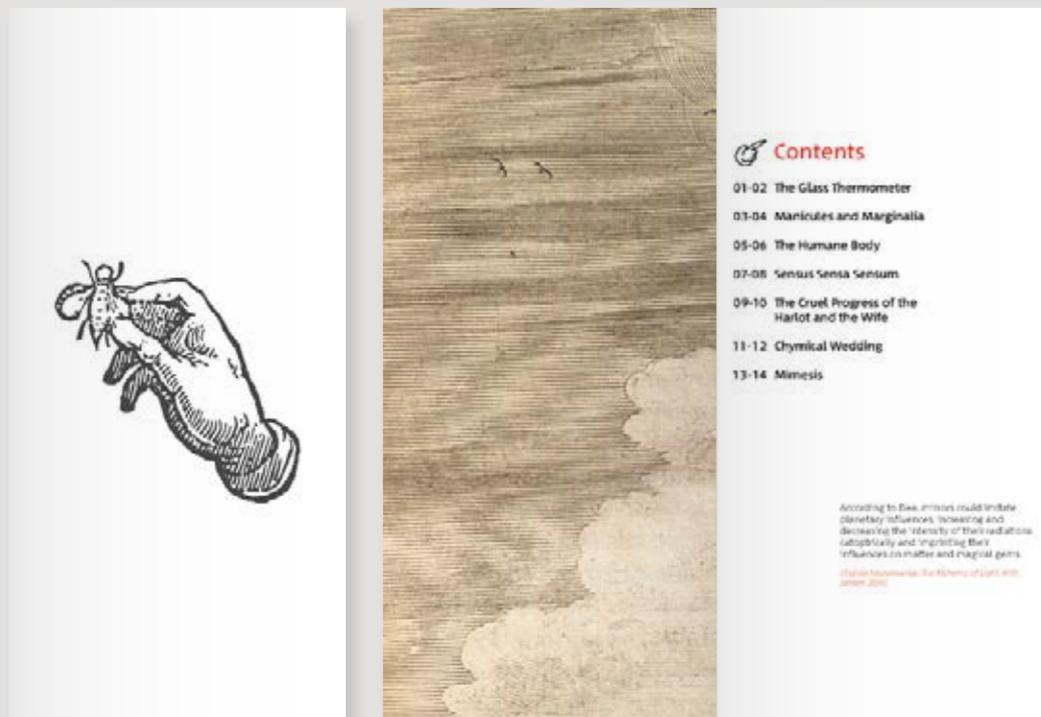
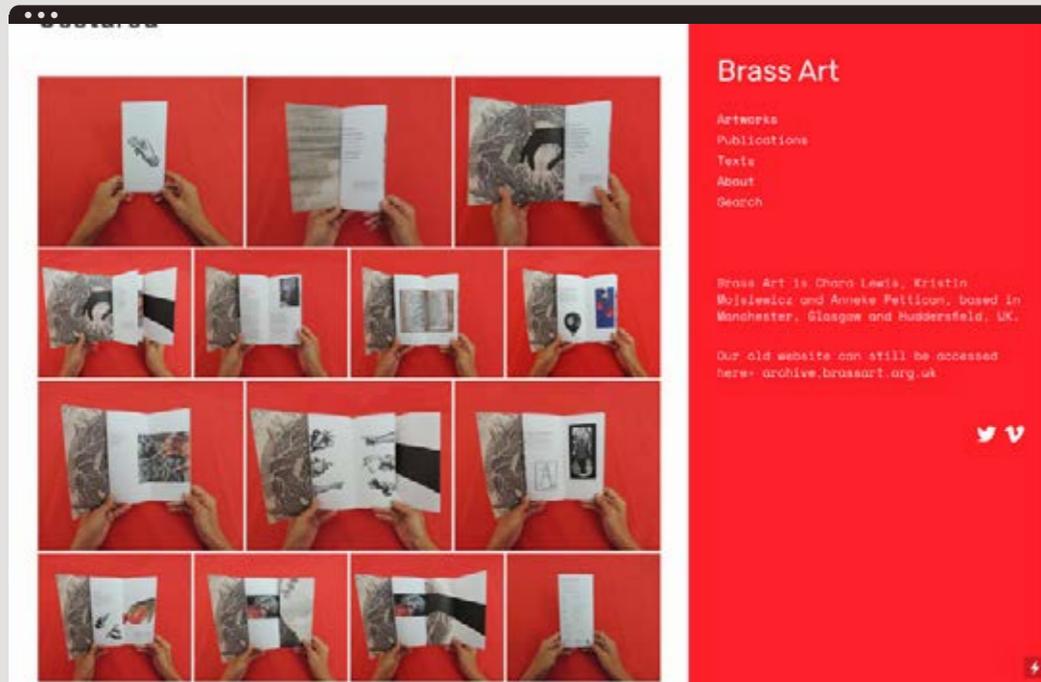
A trailer for Gestured by Arts & Heritage is available: <https://vimeo.com/256275645>



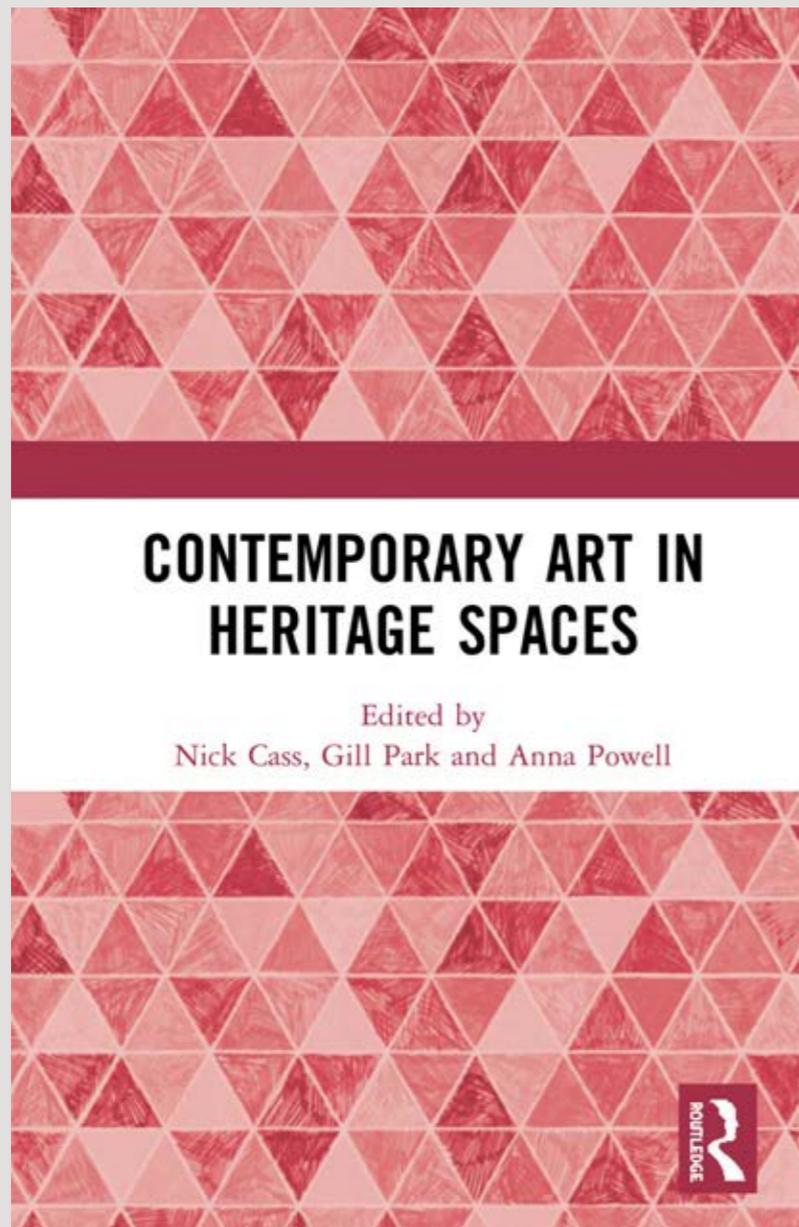
Beth Dawson's review of the exhibition 'that-which-is-not' in Corridor 8 magazine (online). <http://www.corridor8.co.uk/article/brass-art-that-which-is-not-at-bury-art-museum-and-sculpture-centre/>



Derek Horton's review of the exhibition 'A Trick of the Light' in Corridor 8 magazine (online). <https://corridor8.co.uk/article/a-trick-of-the-light/>



Brass Art: *GESTURED* catalogue. Authors: Rowan Bailey ISBN: 978 1 910029 34 3
Design: Jack Hodgson & Brass Art (2017)



Brass Art's paper 'Brass Art: The Uncanny Reforming Sculptural Thinking' was presented in *Sculpture Across Borders* (chair Martina Droth - Deputy Director of Research | Curator of Sculpture, Yale Centre for British Art) at (Re) Forming Sculpture, The Hepworth Wakefield and the School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies, University of Leeds (26-27 June 2018). Attendance 120
 Gestured by Brass Art: Gestures Ambiguity and Material Transformation at Chetham's Library - chapter in *Contemporary Art in Heritage Spaces*. (Eds) Cass, Park, Powell. Routledge: London..

Gestured by Brass Art

Gestures, ambiguity, and material transformation at Chetham's Library

Brass Art: Chara Lewis, Kristin Mojsiewicz, and Annekè Pettican

Introduction

Located in the heart of Manchester, on a sandstone bluff next to Victoria Station, sits the Chetham's College complex, overlooking the river boundary between Manchester and Salford, two cities forever in redevelopment. To set foot in Chetham's Library, the oldest surviving public library in the English-speaking world, is to step into a fifteenth-century medieval building housing a collection begun in the seventeenth century via Sir Humphrey Chetham's philanthropic legacy.¹ It is famous for its association with John Doe (1527-1609), resident warden, alchemist, polymath, and advisor to Elizabeth I, and visiting readers such as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who developed the habit of studying together at the table in the alcove of the Reading Room in the summer of 1845.² Chetham's remains open to readers and writers alike and often hosts events that reference the collection. The rich archive attracts thousands of visitors from across the world who climb the tilting stairs to peer through the gates to the book presses and touch the scorch mark reportedly left by the devil's hood.³

Dr Rowan Bailey writes of Chetham's, 'It is a space full of material inscriptions. It is a space of and for reading and writing' (our emphasis).⁴ The collection spans five editions, original print series, historic photographs, glass lantern slides, manuscripts, diaries, maps, and letters through to local, civic oddities. It encompasses theology, history, philosophy, anatomy, languages, sciences, natural history, arts, social and economic history, and literature. It is also a site for what can be read (into), and what may be written (on).

Brass Art is the collaborative practice of Lewis, Mojsiewicz, and Pettican. Our installation *Gestured* was supported by Arts&Heritage - one of ten 'Meeting Point 2' commissions inviting contemporary artists to respond to museum collections and historical narratives, financed by the ACE Museum Resilience Fund.⁵ Judith King, Director at Arts&Heritage, states:

The potential benefits of placing new and exciting artworks in museum and heritage venues are huge, not only for the artists and the venues but

for the museum visitors, who will encounter a new way of experiencing history and their collections.⁶

The selection panel at Chetham's trusted us to bring our practice to their collection and occupy the public and hidden spaces in ways that were both visible and invisible. Sue McLoughlin, Heritage Manager at Chetham's Library, comments, 'Brass Art' understood how important the collections were, they understood the history of the building, and they have a real sensitivity to how people respond to old buildings, and to that sense of magic.'⁷

The medieval interior of original wood and flagstone at Chetham's contains the main library, a hidden scriptorium, adjoining baronial hall, audit room, courtyard, hidden passageways, heavy historic furniture, and paintings of patres alongside the shelves and chained cases of leather-bound books. The atmosphere is palpable; its history densely layered and present in the aroma and creak of time-worn surfaces. Although the Library occupies a central location, it remains hidden to many, nested in the cloisters of Chetham's School of Music with visits restricted to week-day tours and special events. *Gestured* was to be the first contemporary art intervention in the museum spaces.

McLoughlin notes the tension for curators between the need to bring energy and life to heritage sites, and their responsibility as custodians to protect the collection and 'spirit of place'.⁸ Mindful of this duality, we began to feel our way, aware of the challenge entailed in bringing our practice to, and making interventions into, such a resonant space. The open remit came with a weight of expectation that our artwork would be able to raise the cultural profile of the museum and draw in a new audience. *Gestured* presented the first application of sculptural thinking to John Doe's original hand-drawn manticules, and comprised a constellation of installed blown glass, cast and 3D printed sculptural pieces, single channel video works, a series of public events, and an accompanying publication.

An embodied approach to the archive

Our proposal included references to the alchemical transformation of materials, the interior architecture of the building itself, and the quiet symbolism of hand gestures evident in the paintings hanging in the reading room.⁹ We applied for the Chetham's commission because of our fascination with its history and atmospheric spaces, and our deep interest in reanimating collections with fresh perspective, revealing hidden aspects and proposing new narratives. Following visits to the site, we were particularly drawn to representations of gesture and saw the opportunity to replicate the expressive hands - noted in the reading room portraits and Hogarth prints - as 3D printed sculptural objects.¹⁰ The historical connection with alchemy and the detailed illustrations of apparatus offered the possibility of revisiting



Figure 4.3 *Manage A-la-Made* (after Hogarth), 2017. Oversized 3D SLG print, gold ring and chain, image courtesy of Brass Art. Photo: Jonathan Turner.

Kiecher's fascinating diagrams of projected light, *Steganographic Mirror* (1645) and pre-cinematic spectacle, *Lacrima magica* (1671), references synonymous with our engagement with the double and 'familiar strangers'.¹¹ The sculptural still lives, sited in the library book presses, pose surprising juxtapositions, which McArts states, 'enables us to dwell on the unfixing of meaning-making, and to question what secret messages our own body language may be imparting'.¹²

Re-presenting the space

As a communicative tool, a carrier of meaning and a marker of the practices of reading and thinking, these hands engage and ignite the library as an environment filled with many stories of political power, patronage and secrets of the universe.¹³

In order to bring a different audience into the library outside the official tour hours, we created two special evening events. The first was a private view of the installation where visitors could wander freely through the library and discover sculptural artefacts placed in spaces normally inaccessible to the public. The audience could also view additional moving image works in the Baronial Hall in which projected vessels were held aloft as if scrying for past and future visions of the two cities, and contemporary gestures were refracted through

glass apparatus in *Mosul and Matruh* (2017). A halo of diffracted light frames the interaction as Scarasucci (the Mocha) - mimicking President Trump's expansive gestures - transgresses the neutral space of a BBC Newsnight interview to directly touch Maitlis. To further extend the repertoire of live gestures captured in the exhibition, the audience shadows were photographed as they performed and communicated with each other behind a spatially constructed shadow-play screen.

The second evening occasion was planned to coincide with Manchester Contemporary Art Fair to draw upon the presence of international art visitors, curators, galleries, and collectors in the city. It embodied us to develop ambitious plans for our *Gestured* torch-lit tour with live music and performance. This intimate experience was designed to draw the audience into an affective act. The visitors joined choreographed and scripted tours, led by actors, who skillfully wove through the building illuminated by small hand-held torches. Starting amongst dark cloisters, with unexpected routes through hidden corridors, the encounter with the building was one of total disorientation. An enormous bell, printing presses, a casement of chained books - objects that seemed conceivable in the daylight took on impossible aspects and scale in the dark, as corridor distances extended into darkness. Sordid encounters with the building and artworks were drawn into sharper focus, and the view from the library windows of the conjoined cities of Manchester and Salford at night began a new and more insistent dialogue with the dark interior. The actors played their part - performing improvised instructions on gesture, gleaned from eighteenth-century playwright John Waver, silently illuminating and guiding, reciting Keats' poem *The Living Hand*, using mirrors to reflect a divine eye on the ceiling with one hand while uncovering the devil's footprint on the table with the other.¹⁴

The constraints associated with working in any heritage site require a creative approach to balance issues of protection and access. We envisioned bringing together elements that seemed live and pertinent to us during our exploration of the site and engagement with the themes we followed through the collection. From experience we knew the value of bringing an audience into a space that was usually inaccessible, or defamiliarising a known space in a one-off, out-of-hours event. Turning the guided tour on its head, the actors led audiences on a performative experience echoing Curtis and Pajazowski's description of 'a form in which the "outer" journey of physical and spatial mobility can function as a metaphor for the "inner" journey of the soul, the mind or consciousness'.¹⁵

In previous projects, using our own voices, field recordings, and the inherent sounds of objects being 'activated', we have tried to address how a soundscape can apprehend aspects of spatial awareness, and have worked repeatedly with electroacoustic composers to capture a sense of place, most recently in our *Shadow Worlds | #Visor | Rooms* projects (2011-).¹⁶ We can attest that touring medieval and Tudor buildings in the darkness amplifies an awareness of the

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Output Type:

Original artistic works, solo exhibition,
curation of exhibitions, creative body of enquiry,
chapters in edited books, journal articles