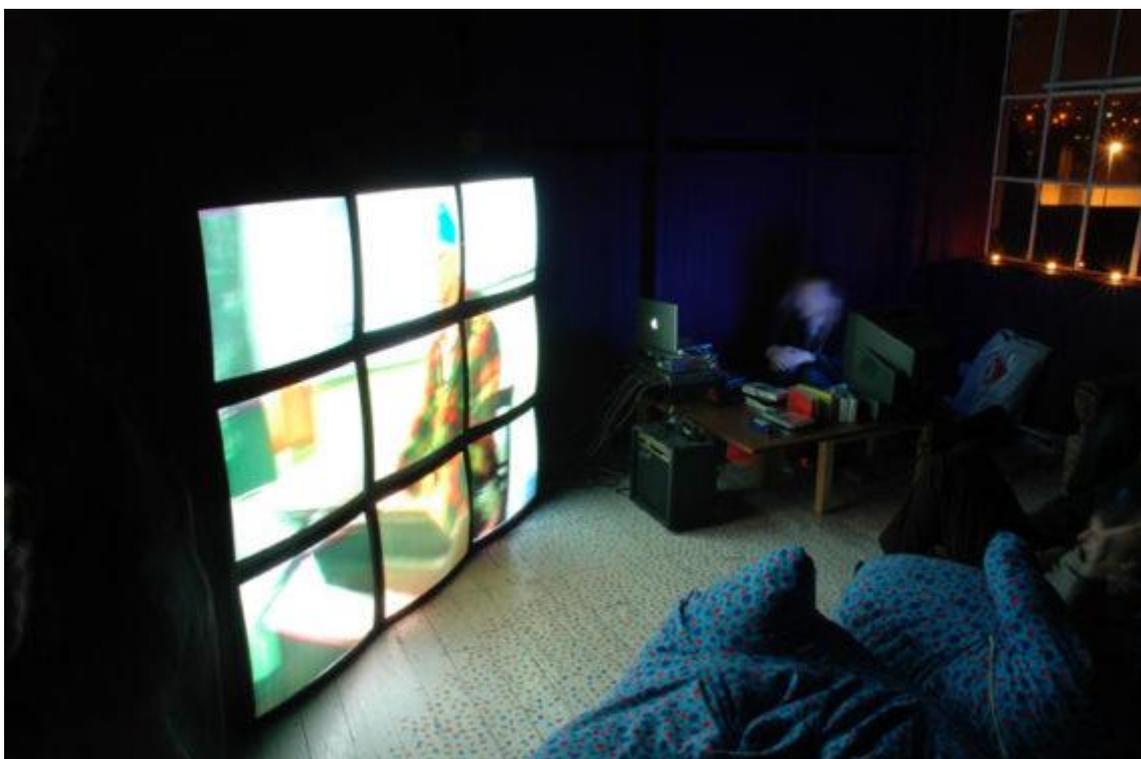


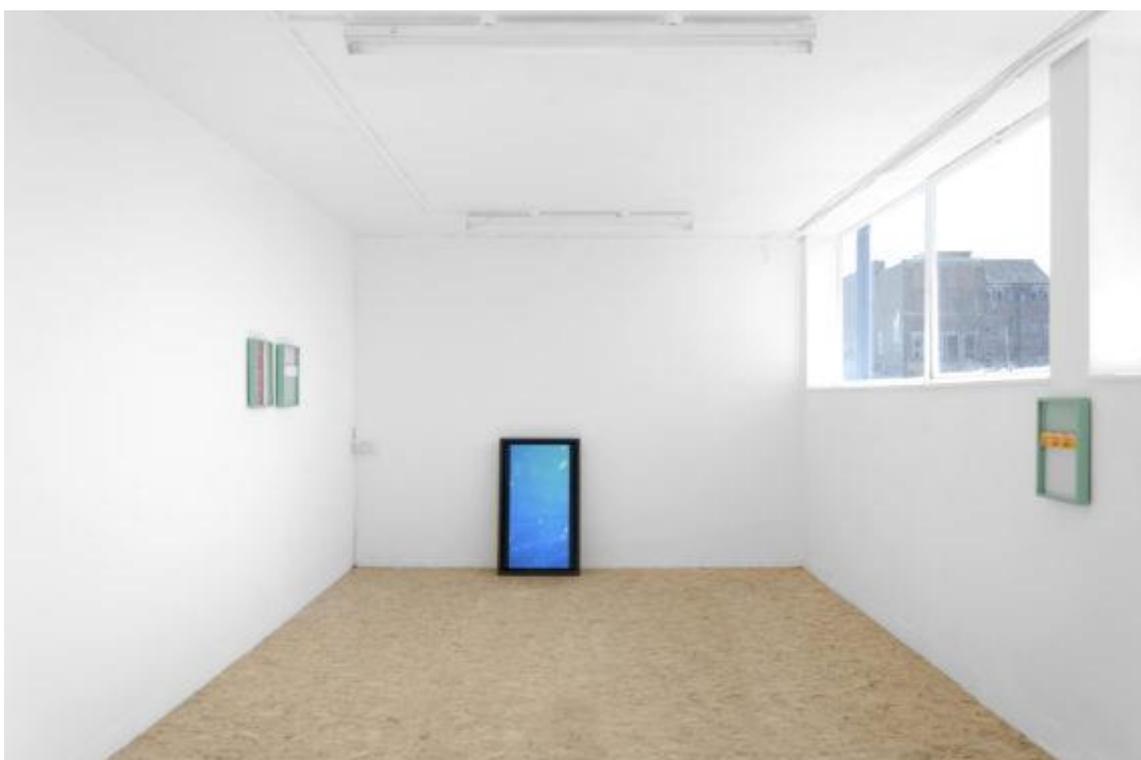
People like us

Kevin Hunt explores the nature of temporariness and expiration, morphing and longevity in artist-led initiatives. Written to coincide with the launch of the [Artist-Led Hot 100 \(version ii\)](#) and Assembly Liverpool, May 2017.

In 1991 when a group of relatively unknown artists came to occupy a vast warehouse space in the middle of London's King's Cross, they couldn't have known that the self-established, self-funded studio and gallery complex they were founding (which eventually came to be known as [Cubitt](#)) would, 26 years later, still exist. Across the country a similar story rings true, with long-running artist organised initiatives in Glasgow ([Transmission](#), est 1983), Belfast ([Catalyst Arts](#), est 1993), Dundee ([Generator Projects](#), est 1996) and Cardiff ([g39](#), est 1998) all still existing today, having ridden and survived the turbulent waves of austerity and gentrification, forcing relocations and organisational restructuring along the way. These figureheads of the UK's artist-led ecology now sit amidst a nationwide landscape of hundreds of younger projects, which irrelevant of their age or geographic location, are all born from a shared desire by artists to make things happen for themselves as opposed to waiting for others to make things happen for them.

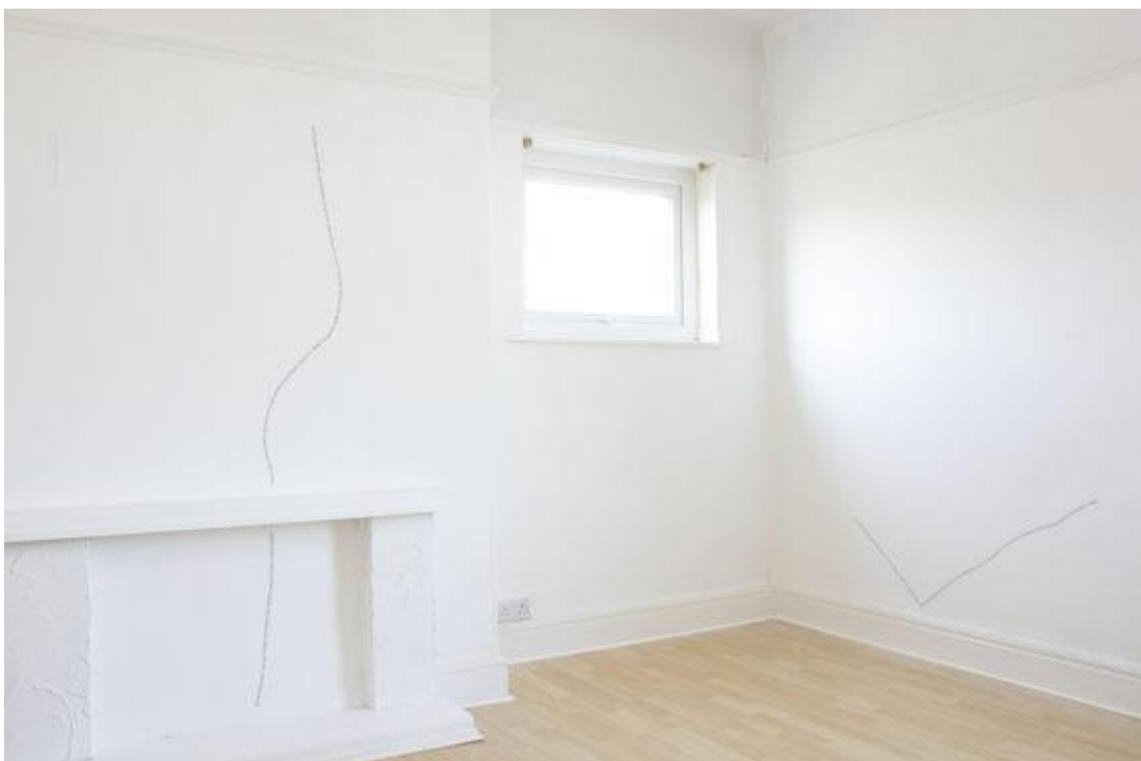


The longevity of our more mature artist-led organisations and the tenacity of those who've been integral to keeping them afloat should of course be applauded. By its very nature, activity that is led by artists is able to respond more immediately to the changing desires and needs of *artists* and over time these organisations have used the elbow grease of learned experience to lubricate a programme of support that many institutional organisations, or those with more commercial inclinations, simply couldn't have. They're quick-paced, providing vital speed to the eco-system and we appreciate them. Yet, such respect for our elder artist-led peers often serves to confuse us, or at least confuse our take on those which have come and gone in the meantime. Just as an organisation like Cubitt has had to adapt to great change over its quarter of a century lifespan, similar artist-founded projects like [MOOT](#) (est 2005 in Nottingham) and more recently [Lionel Dobie Project](#) (est 2012 in Manchester) also adapt. They haven't simply crashed and burned (like some might have you believe), but rather they've decided to stop (MOOT in 2010, Lionel Dobie Project in 2014) and crucially in that process of concluding, each has spawned new activity, leaving room in their wake for further, fresh and different activity to take place. The space for others to step into their shoes and for themselves to go onto new things.



Morphing is a strategy artists know well, and a successful and absorbing practice is arguably maintained by a lifetime of small, bit by bit change; a gradual process of transformation that allows space and time for development. In artist-led terms, project-based activity feels more difficult to morph because of a drowning expectation. Once you give birth to a new gallery space,

commissioning platform – or any kind of situation for content to be presented – your audience ferociously eats it up (in quite a different way to how artwork itself is devoured), and if what you are doing somehow fills a gap or brings a new model to the table (which the artist-led often does) the hunger of expectation feels even more insatiable. You take responsibility for feeding the pack, and no-one likes to go hungry.



In Liverpool a lot has changed recently. [The Royal Standard](#) (TRS), the city's prevailing artist-led vessel is now 11 years old, and swelling with more artists than ever before as it settles into its new former brewery home. Alongside those artists currently practising aboard the 'TRS' ship, a crew of ad-hoc projects also independently intersperse themselves. Some, like [Cactus](#), have gained a notoriety that often outweighs the roof over its head (it feels as if it's merely docked here). Whilst others, like [The Trophy Room](#), [White Wizard](#) or freshly emerging [WE THE NORTH](#) feel more dependent, or rather co-dependent on the support of their umbrella organisation. It's a disorderly harbour, a homecoming to Liverpool 8 (the location TRS was originally founded in 2006) and it feels chaotically great and industrious.

For years the city has had a top heavy, institutionally dominant arts ecology, giving rise to a complicated moral ambivalence its artists continually grapple with ("should I be working for Liverpool Biennial or reacting against it?" And how do you successfully do both without biting the hand that feeds you?). But Liverpool has recently exploded with an unprecedented burst of DIY activity, pop-up project spaces, interdisciplinary live-art platforms and artist-run residency

programmes – so many that it's difficult to keep a handle on what is currently going on in the artist-led world here. It is perhaps The Royal Standard's own semi-institutionalisation (a perception that seems to come with age) that is being kicked against, and the Liverpool art-scene whirlpool currently spins quite fast, as do the artists that make it happen.



Artist-led culture in its purest form does just this, it kicks against, it reacts, it proposes an alternative. Yes, at times DIY activity can mutate and institutional organisations (like [The Tetley](#), an evolution of [PSL](#) in Leeds) or commercial ventures ([Limoncello](#) essentially stemmed from year-long Ryan Gander/Rebecca May-Marston non-profit collaboration [Associates](#)) rise from their ashes, but it is important here for us to understand the difference in these genre changing leaps. A mutation is different to morphing, it's more abrupt and definitive, it's a one-way decision. Back in 2013 I compiled a list of 100 independent artist-led projects that I felt (as an artist myself) were, specifically at that time, doing something really exciting, useful and significant. [Artist-Led Hot 100](#) was highly subjective and served as both resource (originally intended for graduating students – a who's who of understanding the UK art scene as they stepped into it), and

provocation, a firecracker for debate from my biased point of view. My motives for generating this list were, in part, to join the dots, connecting many of those operating out on a limb or with little exposure to those more well-known faces. But through both personal and peer experience I knew well of the fragility of initiating DIY activity and was increasingly aware of the common occurrence of starting and stopping and starting again, an activity cycle of change. Artist's and their output were morphing, but nobody wanted to talk about an artist-led lifespan.



Now, 4 years on, the UK's artist-led landscape is a more amorphous and less defined place. The 'motherships' still exist of course, but traditional bricks and mortar ideas of occupying space to allow activity to occur are increasingly outdated. Looking back at the original 'Hot 100', just under half of those platforms and projects on the list do not exist in the same way anymore. Some have successfully managed to morph (fending off ravenous audience expectation to emerge as something new), but most of those projects absent today have simply stopped altogether. Notable organisations founded by artists in Leeds ([MEXICO](#)), Glasgow ([The Duchy](#)), Edinburgh ([Superclub gallery](#)) and Bristol ([Bristol Diving School](#)), to name a few, have all now closed and their unique models of operating lay embedded forever in artist-led history. Each were refreshing and fantastically gregarious examples of what was vitally needed in their specific regional contexts at that specific time, and in some ways it's a shame that they closed, but we need to begin to see these discontinuations with a more positive eye, as opposed to greeting them again and again with disappointment.

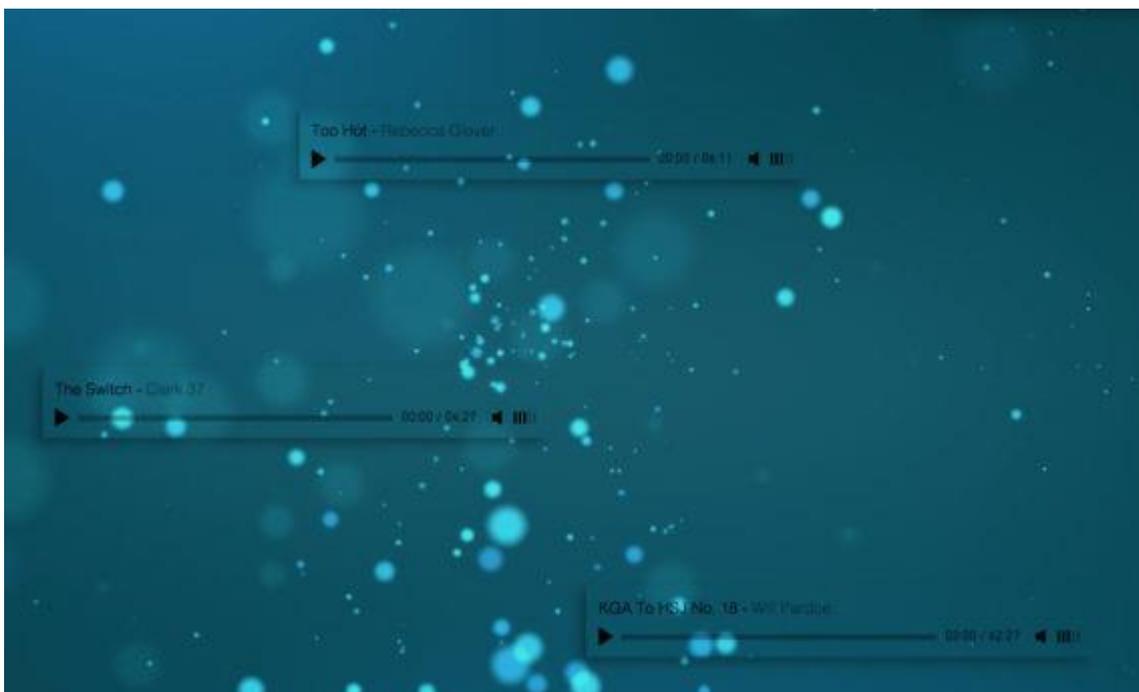
It's unhealthy to conform to a point of view that everything should last forever, that we should always keep activity going as its main agenda and that a project's success is measured by its ability to continue – over its commitment to supporting practice happening in the moment in the right kind of way. Burning bright and fading fast really can be a beneficial methodology in the artist-led process because as the world we live in changes so rapidly, so do the desires and needs of artists and their audience. At times, the best way of reacting is to stop what you are doing and do something else that may suddenly be more relevant.



A new updated **Artist-Led Hot 100** has been published for 2017, again, comprised of an eclectic array of exciting exhibiting spaces, pressing publishing platforms and captivating curatorial projects et al, all founded by artists or independent curators. Each have emerged since the last list was released and all, I feel, are vitally important to highlight right now; they are the ones to watch, the ones who are currently doing great things. Like in Liverpool, the artist-led is rapidly changing throughout every part of the UK and I hope a fresh 100-strong list will again map those important activity-makers working today, linking up the names and piecing together the puzzles, whilst provoking much needed debate about the purpose of such contemporary activity and its ever-changing nature.

By choosing to chart only those still operational at the time of going to print (May 2017), the updated list does inevitably miss out key projects that have come and gone in the preceding 4 years, and given my case in point, it's important to reference here notable examples of the recent

artist-led now deceased or on permanent hiatus. York's curatorial duo [SALT + POWELL](#), Peckham's domestic show space [38b](#), Glasgow's provocative arena for display, [It's Friday](#), nomadic and exuberant collective ([It's all](#)) [Tropical](#) and various online, location-less platforms including [Desktop Residency](#), [The iPhone Residency](#) and [Virtual Verbs](#) are all no more, but their legacies are strong and significant and this legacy making list goes on...



Today there is a distinct increase in nomadic, or fluctuant organisations and even those that have a location to call home (like [ebc](#) in Bristol) are finding novel ways of operating in today's problematic financial climate. (Interestingly, [ebc](#) programme the crux of their activity – exhibitions, openings and associated events – to run during the first weekend of every month, and after that their space is used for other purposes until they return to it again the following month). Virtual, digital, and screen-based activity is also on the up and a plethora of our artist-led output is these days streamed, screened and scrolled through instead of visited in a more conventional 'footfall' sense. We can engage in artist-led activity like never before, its challenging and exhilarating, if unwieldy and at times difficult to fathom (txt spk ne1?).

4 years from now many on the new 'Hot 100' list will have also disappeared and it's not telepathic guesswork needed to understand this, it's basic fact. History does repeat itself. Some activity will morph or mutate (for better or for worse) and as nature takes its course other activity will grow old, embedding itself as an elder. But a portion of this new cohort will vanish, seemingly without a trace, and it's important that they do this, bequeathing experience behind them for us all to learn from. My thoughts on this are simple. Whether fortuitous or entirely pre-planned, if a project has

inherent within its methodology a life-span, an end point, or at least the ability to end, then its conclusion enables a kind of ‘artist-led learning’ – a vocational education of successes and mistakes that I propose as fundamentally pivotal to the continued instigation of fresh, independent, enriching artist-led activity – the horizontal platforms needed to support the early stages of every career. Stopping is always a springboard for starting, it merely paves the way for others, “**for people like us**”.*

*Quote from: *City Racing: the life and times of an artist-run gallery, 1988-1998* (2002: pg 67)

Kevin Hunt is an artist, curator and lecturer based in Liverpool.

He was a director of the Royal Standard, an artist-led gallery, studios and social workspace in the city (2007-11), co-founded CAVE, and artist-led art fair that coincided with the opening of Liverpool Biennial (2012) and co-curated MODEL, a flexible, experimental research-based platform for artist-led activity programmed to run concurrently with Liverpool Biennial (2014). In the summer of 2017 he will launch fs, a free school running for 12 months in Liverpool.

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Images:

1. *MOOT members bar – Thursday 8th March*: featuring a 9-screen video wall by Rob Flint at MOOT, Nottingham, 2006. Courtesy: MOOT
2. Charlie Godet Thomas: *In comes the good air...* installation view at CACTUS’ former Vauxhall business estate home, 2015. Courtesy: Cactus
3. Lucy Vann: *I don’t always do all of this*, installation view at Spare Room residency, Liverpool, 2017. Courtesy: Kevin Hunt
4. The Bristol Diving School building: active between 2009 – 2013, the project continued without a building until 2015. Courtesy: Kevin Hunt
5. School of the Damned (Class of 2017) workshop: part of *EBC006*, their exhibition at ebc, Bristol, 2016. Courtesy: Kevin Hunt
6. *Slide Night #3*: part of a series of nomadic slide projector performance evenings organised by Thomas Whittle. Courtesy: Kevin Hunt
7. *you did make her happy, but then she changed into someone you couldn’t make happy*, curated by Bob Bicknell-Knight for isthisit?, 2017. Courtesy: Kevin Hunt

‘People like us’ and the ‘Artist-Led Hot 100 (version ii)’ were commissioned for [a-n Resources](#) to coincide with Assembly Liverpool (May 2017).

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More on a-n Resources:

Artist-Led Hot 100 (version ii): Kevin Hunt’s new Artist-Led Hot 100 celebrating some of the most exciting artist-led activity that has emerged during the past four years, since his original Hot 100 long-list was produced in Summer 2013. Focusing on projects that are “by artists, for artists”, the list highlights artist-led initiatives around the UK that are visibly active right now.

Artist-Led Hot 100: the original Hot 100, created by Kevin Hunt as part of [Signpost](#) in Summer 2013. It aimed to draw attention to some of the most superb activity being facilitated by emerging independent artists and curators at that time in the UK.

Artist-led: further reading: Kevin Hunt compiles a list of both online and in print reading material about the artist-led sector, as a supplement to his essay People like us and the new Artist-Led Hot 100 (version ii).

Cubitt 25 years: an artist-led history: Morgan Quaintance’s documentary explores Cubitt studios, Cubitt gallery and Cubitt education, taking a look at the history and present of the London-based organisation, its previous curators, artists and others who have been involved, as well as glimpsing into its possible future.

TAT: The Liverpool edition: a psychogeographic opening up of the city through an aural tour of artist-led venues and other listening points of historical and cultural interest, also commissioned for Assembly Liverpool, May 2017.

As well as many other [Practical Guides](#) including [Paying Artists support](#), [Toolkits](#) and materials around [Studios](#), [Self-employment](#), [Residencies](#), [Prizes and awards](#), [Commissions](#), [Good practice](#), [Curatorial practice](#).

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