



They co-operate to  
accomplish what they  
can't do alone

#### David Clarke and Tracey Rowledge *Room : Collect Open 2019*

The identity of a place does not derive from some internalized history. It derives, in large part, precisely from the specificity of its interactions with 'the outside'. – *Doreen Massey*<sup>1</sup>

David Clarke and Tracey Rowledge's work *Room* (2019) asks us to consider the fundamental limits of a room as space. What defines a room? What defines space? For most of us a room is defined by its function: the dining room, the sitting room; others by their contents such as the bed-room, the bath-room. In galleries, we are accustomed to think in terms of spaces. Where rooms have names, they are either dedicated to an artist or benefactor. Clarke and Rowledge, however, have produced a room that unsettles these established norms. Both a room and a space, it creates a site for encounters and the imagination, but as an installation, it also takes on the qualities of the transitory and the nomadic.

The word 'room' is of Germanic origin encompassing a range of meanings that include dimensional space both open and closed, the significance of quantifiable space: 'sufficient space for something', or the opportunity that renders something possible and achievable. We also talk of 'the room' to indicate the people present. It can also imply communal generosity: we give room, or make room for others.<sup>2</sup>

As well as creating and providing space, rooms create a habitat for things. The impact of architectural settings is something that Clarke and Rowledge have explored in previous works, most notably in *Shelved* (2018) where they reconfigured museum and secondhand objects 'giving objects a new opportunity' as Clarke has succinctly put it; giving an object 'room' to be other than itself. The liquid pewter invades the hollows of the abandoned second-hand ceramic figures that are reborn not imitating

their hosts but uncannily re-formed, awkward and glowing. Unlike Henry Moore who chipped away everything that didn't look like an elephant, Clarke and Rowledge chipped and smashed away the pottery figure to reveal an inner, alternative, glowing other.

Originally used to protect wax craft and natural foliage assemblages, the Victorians drew on the scientific qualities of the vacuum bell jars to display their amateur crafts.<sup>3</sup> The figures in *Room* don't require protection from the elements, nor are they made from a delicate material. The domes instead function as ironic indicators of the special status of the gallery space where objects play a different role to the one they will perform once they leave the gallery for someone's actual room, where the domes will return to signifying the spectacular of craft invention and imagination.

Objects alone don't make a room, although we are always tempted on entering a new room to examine its contents, surreptitiously if we are visiting someone's home, but openly if we are in a gallery. Etiquette defines our behaviours and practices. In neither gallery nor home would it be appropriate to pick up objects to examine them; we are there to view. Look but don't touch. The bell jars define the limits of the objects' space: a room existing within a room.

Decorated ceilings date back to Roman times. During the Renaissance and into the Victorian period ceilings continued to be used for ornamental and aesthetic display. The sky and worlds beyond were often the artfully depicted themes, skillfully enlarging the space of the chambers over which they were built. Modernist architecture introduced the suspended ceiling, which was, and is still, often used to hide electrical and other industrial components of the building. The ceiling in *Room* alludes to both these historical precedents. Constructed out of

#### *Room* resonates as a site of co-operation



found historical postcards of Europe, perforated to illuminate the space below, it eloquently depicts the world beyond the confines of the room. Another significance of the postcard is that it implies communication: a postcard is always sent to someone with a message however brief. It is transitory in its passage from one space to another.

In a lecture entitled 'The Room, The Street, and Human Agreement', the American architect Louis Kahn suggested that rooms were the beginning of architecture, the importance of which are not so much their functions as the human interactions made possible within them.<sup>4</sup> Rooms are spaces inhabited not just by things, but by people. Whether they are visitors or inhabitants, they make the architecture meaningful and live, an idea in sympathy with Massey's concept of space as fluid and made. *Room* also retains the presences of its makers Clarke and Rowledge, resonant with the many dialogues and physical interactions that led to its creation as well as the kind of thinking out loud that involves the physical labour of object making.

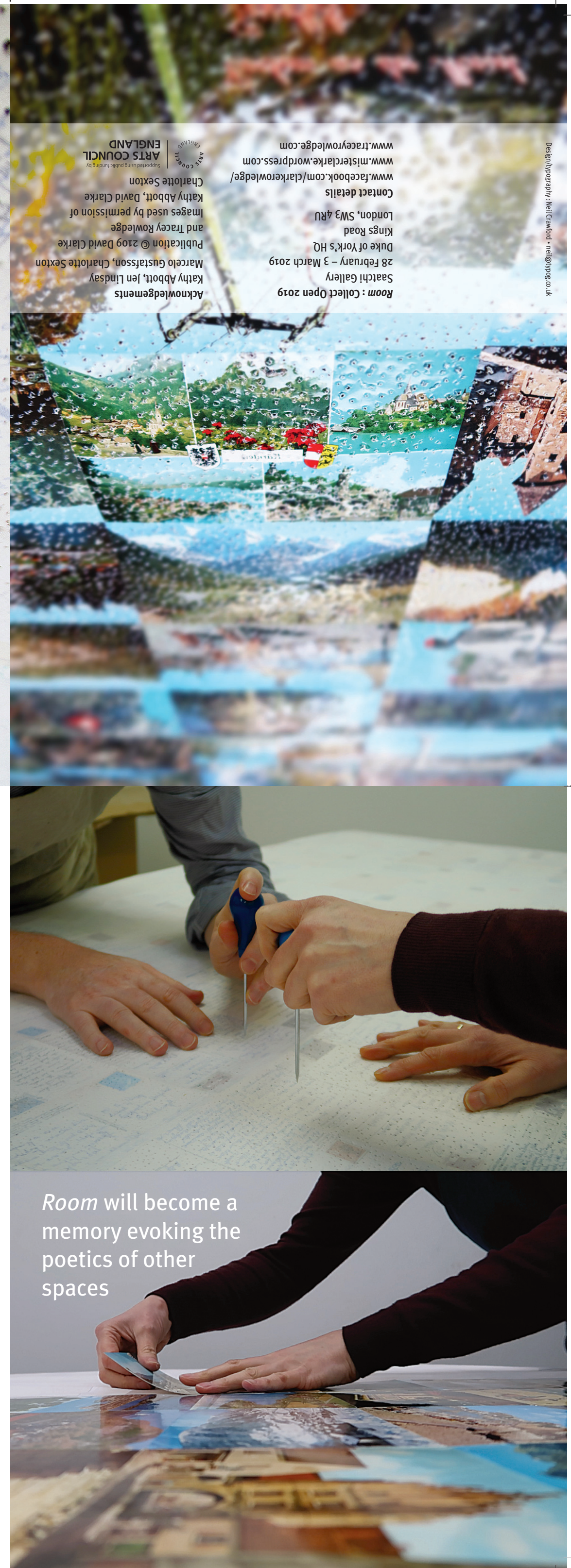
Clarke and Rowledge began working together on projects in 2008 while also retaining their independent practices as artists: Clarke in metals, Rowledge as bookbinder and markmaker. They have commented on the importance of the collaboration to their independent works. Discussions over the years have created a unique kind of trust that fosters their laboratory of risk. One could argue that *Room* encapsulates the qualities of working together. Although collaboration has now entered the conventional vocabulary of artspeak, usually a shorthand for a work created by more than one maker, *Room* resonates as a site of co-operation, defined by the sociologist Richard Sennett as 'an exchange in which participants benefit from the encounter [...]. Instantly recognizable,

because mutual support is built into the genes of all social animals: they co-operate to accomplish what they can't do alone.'<sup>5</sup> However, the co-operation involved in the production of *Room* comes out of dialogue and interaction: it could not have been conceived nor exist except through collaboration.

*Room* doesn't claim a specific identity or function. It establishes its transient identity through its siting within the context of an exhibition destined to be dismantled. Equally significant is the absence of walls or boundaries. Consequently the space is always remade depending on its visitors who pass through but also inhabit it. The fixity of the glass jar figures is illusory as they too are destined to be rehoused elsewhere once the exhibition is over. *Room* will become a memory evoking the poetics of other spaces. Gaston Bachelard eloquently described rooms as sites for daydreaming and recollection.<sup>6</sup> Once we have left Clarke and Rowledge's *Room* it will remain in our memory as a place where things happened, where people came together to marvel and ponder on the meaning of stuff and its making.

Linda Sandino

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4. Kahn, Louis. *The Room, The Street and Human Agreement* [1971], cited in 'Louis Kahn: The Making of a Room'. Exhibition cat. Arthur Ross Gallery, University of Pennsylvania, 2009. [www.arthistory.upenn.edu/themakingofaroom/catalogue.htm](http://www.arthistory.upenn.edu/themakingofaroom/catalogue.htm)
5. Sennett, Richard. *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*. London: Penguin Books, 2012. p.5
6. Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space* [1958]. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992



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**Room : Collect Open 2019**  
Saatchi Gallery  
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