Punk & Post-Punk
Volume 7 Number 3
 doi: 10.1386/punk.7.3.393_7

INTERVIEWS

RUSS BESTLEY
London College of Communication

More Than a Pony Show: An interview with Matt Stokes

Matt Stokes is an artist based in northeast England. His works usually begin with an immersive research process that explores the history and social structures of the place he is working in, resulting in the production of films, installations and events. These outcomes hold collaboration at the centre of both their formation and philosophy, often being made directly with people from the communities they are celebrating. He has exhibited widely in the United Kingdom and internationally, including recent solo exhibitions at Workplace (London), Matt's Gallery (London), CAAC (Seville, Spain), Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art (Gateshead), Kunsthalle Fridericianum (Kassel, Germany) and De Hallen (Haarlem, the Netherlands).

Stokes' practice has developed from a long-standing enquiry into events and beliefs that shape people's lives and identities. As an artist, he seeks out places and situations where people are brought together through self-organization and the desire for an alternative life. This exploration has included the multi-faceted project *Real Arcadia* (2003–), documenting a series of illegal 'cave raves' that took place in the Lake District, northwest England in the early 1990s, the exhibition *these are the days* (2008–09), in Austin, Texas, based on archive material from the local hardcore punk scene, and *Cantata Profana*, a video and sound installation at Matt's Gallery, South London (2015) that focused on the physicality of extreme metal vocalists and the immersive

Figure 1: More Than a Pony Show. *Location set at Bretonside, Plymouth for Bus Station Loonies, 2017. Photograph by Matt Stokes.*

quality of their voices, created in partnership with British composer Orlando Gough, artist and musician Tim Kerr and six grindcore vocalists.

Music – its history, subcultures and sociopolitical effects often provides the catalyst for Stokes' research and practice, with the artist forming collaborative relationships with musicians, writers, actors, composers and communities, bringing together their interests, knowledge and skills in potentially conflicting situations. By exploring the resulting exchanges of ideas, the final outcomes challenge our assumptions and understanding about specific scenes or chosen ways of living. Between September and November 2017, Stokes worked alongside five other artists and curator Simon Morrissey on a major visual arts project in Plymouth, United Kingdom, *We The People Are The Work*, that explored ideas of power, protest and the public. The exhibition took place in different locations across the city, with Stokes' contribution, *More Than a Pony Show*, reflecting the artist's work with local musicians to celebrate the history of independent punk and post-punk live music venues across the city, many of which have now closed.

Russ Bestley (RB): *You recently took part in an exhibition in Plymouth*, We The People Are The Work, *that explored 'ideas of power, protest and the public' in relation to the city and its residents. Your installation featured videos of local bands – many of them within the punk scene – performing in spaces that were formerly live music venues in Plymouth. Can you give us a bit of background to the project?*

Matt Stokes (MS): *We The People Are The Work* was a citywide exhibition comprised of five shows occupying a variety of spaces in Plymouth, with each

Figure 2: More Than a Pony Show. *Installation at Plymouth College of Art, Plymouth, September 2017. Photograph by Jamie Woodley.*

Figure 3: More Than a Pony Show. *Installation at Plymouth College of Art, Plymouth, September 2017. Photograph by Jamie Woodley.*

show developed by artists who took very different approaches to the themes you mention. *We The People Are The Work* also sought to examine notions of identity and shared experiences, and these aspects were very important to the project that I produced, which was titled *More Than a Pony Show*. This took the form of a five-channel film and sound installation located in the Gallery at Plymouth College of Art, a place with strong links to the city's non-mainstream music scenes over the years – something that is often synonymous with Art Schools.

Before my first visit to Plymouth, I had little idea what subject matter would define the work I'd produce, or the final form this might take. In fact, I thought it best to steer away from music, which has dominated many of my past works. However, during my initial visit I asked people I met what they felt was changing in the city at that specific moment. Many replies related to recent city centre developments quashing independent spaces and activity, which had resulted in the loss of a number of live music venues. This was especially raw due to the closure of Bretonside Bus Station, which housed both White Rabbit and Tramps, two venues with strong associations to the local and wider punk scene over the years.

During further visits I met with more people connected with the Plymouth music scene and gradually they added to the list of venues that had closed down since the '80s, mostly in the wake of commercial or residential developments. Again, many of the venues spoken about passionately had played an important role in the development of the punk scene in the city. So, that was really the start of the idea behind *More Than a Pony Show*. To try and reoccupy some of the sites of former music venues, and whatever was there now, and to momentarily reinvigorate them by working with local bands who would perform to the location. This act would then be documented on film and audio, and provide the basis for the installation.

In doing this, there was no intention of resigning Plymouth's punk scene to the past, as it's still a very active and evolving scene. Newer clubs and pubs like the Underground and The Junction have taken up the mantle – both of which are run by people connected with White Rabbit before it closed down. Additionally, finding a variety of Plymouth bands of different generations who are influenced by punk was as important as choosing the sites of the former music venues.

RB: *What practical considerations did you make in selecting the sites that you wanted to revisit?*

MS: Deciding which venue sites to concentrate on was largely moulded by conversations with the people I'd met, alongside practical barriers concerning accessing buildings. Eventually, five venues were chosen. In chronological order: the Metro Club was in a quiet area of Devonport, and evolved from the Van Dike Club. The Van Dike was extraordinary, being a small club that during the 1960s and '70s pulled the likes of Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin amongst many other influential bands. In the late '70s it became Metro Club and the flavour of its line-up shifted to include bands such as Penetration, the Ramones and the Slits. The building, which I think was originally a community hall, was eventually knocked down and replaced by social housing. Woods Club became a punk haven during the 1970s and, through the Van Dike family, hosted one of the few shows of the *Anarchy Tour* in '76. In fact, it hosted two *Anarchy* shows, due to a venue in Torquay

Figure 4: More Than a Pony Show. *Location shoot at Bretonside, Plymouth with the Bus Station Loonies, 2017. Photograph by Vickie Fear.*

Figure 5: More Than a Pony Show. *Location shoot at the former site of the Metro Club with Suck My Culture, 2017. Photograph by Vickie Fear.*

pulling out. The title *More Than a Pony Show* was lifted from a column in a Plymouth newspaper published on the date of the official *Anarchy Tour* gig at Woods Club. This venue has since been consumed by a retail development, and its site is occupied by a Billabong store. The now ramshackle Cooperage was both a pub and live music venue in the historic Barbican area of Plymouth. It was particularly active in the '90s and beyond, catering for quite a mixed scene, but staged bands like the UK Subs. The UK Subs also played in Tramps, an ad hoc club located at one end of Bretonside Bus Station. Tramps was a café by day and live music venue by night, and home to local punk band the Bus Station Loonies. At the other end of Bretonside was White Rabbit, a mid-size venue that pulled in big name bands as well as supporting local bands. Demolition was taking place at Bretonside in preparation for the construction of a cinema and restaurant complex. Finally, there was the Nowhere Inn, which was the only active venue included in the project. This pub has long been a refuge for the Plymouth punk scene, and whilst working on the project its landlord and member of the Bus Station Loonies, Phil Cawse, died. So, it felt fitting to include this as one of the venues, particularly as there was concern over its continued existence.

Finding and matching Plymouth-based bands to the venues again happened as a result of conversations. Bus Station Loonies were excited by the idea of accessing Bretonside to perform there one last time. Suck My Culture, an all female band were into playing in a flat on the site of Metro Club, which was occupied by Debbie, a single mum who had a particular interest in feminist literature. Billy and Jony who make up Piss Midget on guitar/vocals and drums, respectively, were the perfect fit for a small storeroom in the back of the Billabong store, which had been pinpointed as being at the heart of Woods Club. Damerels, a three-piece band that includes the manager of the Underground, took over the Nowhere Inn. Finally, an 'unplugged' version of Crazy Arm played in the alley entrance of The Cooperage. The song played by each band was chosen through dialogues between the bands, occupants of the sites and myself. Within this, it was also important to balance the chosen songs in terms of thinking about the energy of the final work, especially as I envisaged that each band would follow on from another in the final work, mirroring a gig line-up.

RB: *And the filming process itself?*

MS: I filmed on colour 16mm, borrowing an old Arriflex from Plymouth College of Art. The aesthetic of using film not only felt right, but also added an element of pressure due to filming in single, locked takes of each song being performed in its entirety. For each band, playing without an audience to respond to was likely going to change their energy and emotion, so this also helped heighten the situation in a different way. Additionally, the single shot approach allowed each band to perform unhindered, and consequentially for a viewer watching the filmed performances, it has a live feel. Avoiding anything close to music video was essential, whereby edit cuts would have started to introduce a fiction by manipulating time and perspectives. Likewise, the sound recording of each band tried to capture the 'live' acoustics of each site, as much as the dynamics of the bands. The filming and sound recording took place over two days. There were certainly highlights

such as Bus Station Loonies bouncing around whilst playing 'Everyday Bullshit' in the shell of Bretonside at 9am on a Sunday morning. Or, seeing the rapport between Suck My Culture and Debbie, the occupier of the flat the band played in.

The final installation consisted of five projections, with each projection dedicated to one site and band. Similarly, each screen had a dedicated set of speakers. A temporary wall effectively split the gallery in two, so you couldn't see all the screens at one time, but had to navigate the space. The piece starts by showing each site with the band's kit set and ready to be used. During this time, only the ambient audio of each space can be heard, such as street sounds or the hum of a fridge. The first screen then begins to show details of a site, which leads into the first band taking up position, then playing to the venue. Just before they finish playing, on the second screen the next band take their place and wait for the previous band to complete their song before starting. A metaphorical handing of a baton from one band or venue to another, until the final band finishes. The whole cycle lasts twenty minutes.

What surprised me when editing the work to sync the screens was the emotional journey that takes place across the sites and bands. Also, that it created more intimacy than I expected between the viewer, bands and locations. Intentionally, it is celebratory – or at least I hope it is – a celebration of the vitality of the scene, as something changing, morphing but always continuing beyond barriers it might have encountered.

RB: *Did you have a strong connection to Plymouth prior to undertaking this project? How did you track down the bands involved?*

MS: I didn't have a connection to Plymouth before starting the project, although I was born in Helston, Cornwall, and the southwest feels strangely familiar to me. Like many past projects I've worked on, finding the bands happened via numerous meetings with people on the Plymouth punk scene. Certain names kept coming up in conversations about the evolution of the local scene, particularly Chris Willsher of the Bus Station Loonies and Darren Johns of Crazy Arm. Then, whenever I visited Plymouth, I'd also try to get out to see bands if there were any playing. Mostly this meant going to either the Underground or Junction, which is where I saw Suck My Culture and Piss Midget, respectively. One of the first people I met with in Plymouth was Al Gall, vocalist in Damerels, and their drummer, Ben Turner, runs the Underground. So, serendipity also played a role.

RB: *Your work focuses on live performances and community, particularly in relation to 'underground' punk scenes. Where does this personal interest stem from?*

MS: For a long time, I've been interested in how underground scenes, or subcultures, inform and shape people's lives – their outlooks, beliefs and lifestyles – in a way that often stays with them throughout their life. In comparison, mainstream culture is more transient, and personally, I've always felt more comfortable being outside of this. Subcultures, regardless of whether a particular scene remains small or is consumed into a mainstream culture, often start with strong ideals and a shared ethos. Ideas of collectivity and belonging are also key, whether this is in relation to the punk scene, or for example, rave culture, Northern Soul, folk music or many non-music scenes.

Figure 6: More Than a Pony Show. *Matt Stokes interview with Mark McCann, 2017. Photograph by Vickie Fear.*

Figure 7: these are the days. *Archive material collected for exhibition in Austin, Texas 2008. Photograph by Sarah Greene Reed.*

RB: *Have you worked with other punk scenes in other places?*

MS: Yes. In 2008–09 I worked on an exhibition, titled *these are the days*, in Austin, Texas, for Arthouse, which was then the main public contemporary art gallery in the city. I was given the slot that coincided with the South By Southwest music festival taking place, and asked if I might make new work that responded to local music scenes in some way.

In a very similar way to working in Plymouth, I had no preconceived idea of what I was going to produce in Austin, bar that it would relate to music. I began researching scenes that acted as a counter to Country and Blues music, which is the mainstay in the city and Texas. Through this, I came across the Motards, an Austin punk band from the 1990s and a seven-inch cover that showed the band's members pissing on a statue of Stevie Ray Vaughn – and that one image said a lot. Not long after coming across this, I met the city archivist, who happened to be keyed into the early Austin punk scene. By the end of our conversation he'd given me a list of names and contacts for people he thought I should meet, and the project grew from there into a temporary archive reflecting the various waves of Austin punk, hardcore, post-punk and DIY from the late '70s onwards, and a two-channel film.

The archive developed out of many dialogues with people involved in the scene. As I met with them, they'd often pull out boxes and carrier bags from garages and attics filled with amazing posters, flyers and fanzines. The more I saw, the more the idea of gathering it together in one place seemed like an important thing to do. Partly this was because of the volume of material I was seeing, but also that some of it was getting neglected. The act of establishing the archive also directly led to, and contextualized, the film work, which focused on how the ideals of the older scene had effected younger generations.

People were very generous giving up their time and digging-out ephemera. From members of bands such as the Big Boys, Huns, Re*Cords, Offenders, Hickoids, Buffalo Gals to gig-goers, roadies and creators of fanzines like *Sluggo!*, *Contempo Culture*, *Xiphoid Process* and *Geek Weekly*. As a consequence, I got to know Tim Kerr, artist and former guitarist in the Big Boys and Poison13. Tim and his wife Beth were an important sounding-board whilst I was working on the project, especially in terms of grappling with the views of some sections of the early Austin punk and hardcore scene who derided the younger scene as a formulaic, unoriginal re-hash of what had already passed. Even the local newspaper, the *Austin Chronicle*, was asking these questions in 1982:

> Locally punk has been proclaimed dead many times […] and each time it reappears, like the crabgrass on your lawn that just won't go away […] people have evaluated the state of the punk scene in Austin as anything from 'dead' to 'healthier than ever'. Clearly there are elements of both.

In response to such views, the archive randomized materials from the distinct waves of Austin punk, in an aim to challenge notions of originality, tribute and circularity. These ideas were also furthered through the two-channel film installation, which was made by organizing a free, all-ages gig at Broken Neck, an ad hoc skateboarding cum gig venue. Filming at the gig

Figure 8: these are the days. *Archive exhibition, Austin, Texas 2008. Photograph by Sarah Greene Reed.*

Figure 9: these are the days. *Punk performance response to first gig footage, 2008. Photograph by Hailey Kiesewetter.*

solely focused on the audience's reaction to the bands that played. This was then edited into a silent film and given to a one-off group formed of various members of young Austin punk and hardcore bands. They had 24 hours to respond to the footage, before going into a studio to record a soundtrack for the silent gig film. In turn, they were filmed whilst playing the track in one take. The two films were then presented side-by-side alongside the archive.

RB: *Can you give some more specifics on your research process (both conceptual and gathering material/making contacts), and, I think importantly, your process as an artist in choosing media, materials or aesthetics in order to visualize your response? For Austin, you chose to construct an archive/exhibition of artefacts, coupled with a film and a book, whereas for Plymouth you chose to construct an installation where the viewer could experience a multi-faceted sequence of short films in a darkened space […]. As a visual communicator, I'm curious to hear a little more about the choices you made to arrive at those points?*

MS: The research processes I employ include accessing formal collections such as archives, local studies, libraries and museums, alongside information gathered by meeting and talking with people connected to a particular locale or scene. I treat a conversation held in a pub or cafe with equal weight to an archival document – and conceptually, it's interesting to compare and balance what's held in 'official' heritage collections of a specific place with the thoughts of the people currently occupying that place and moment.

Identifying collections to access is usually fairly straightforward. Finding people to talk with, especially at the start of a project, and setting up meetings takes time and often happens through word-of-mouth with one person suggesting another. Generally, my initial research is open ended, in that I might have no idea or only a vague idea of subject matter to focus on. I also try not to start with a preconceived idea of what form a project might take, but let the research mould the final content, medium and aesthetics.

This was very much the case in Austin for *these are the days*. Archival and online research led me to start looking at the evolution of punk in the city, but it was through meeting with people from the scene that the project took shape – developing into an archive, which then informed a two-channel film and prompted a book. The book was also a way of revealing elements of the research process, which often get pushed into the background by the final work that is produced. In Plymouth, it was slightly different. At the start I had ideas of working on something performance or event based. But, chatting with people sparked my interest in the loss of live music venues, since this point cropped up in numerous conversations. Further meetings with people on the local music scene were then vital in concentrating on the punk scene and linked venues. After visiting the sites of some of these venues, that's where notions of producing a multi-channel film arose, how the sites would come into play and of how I might work with local bands. The final layout within the gallery came later, and changed a few times. The gallery space was going to be populated with more temporary looking screens, but this wasn't working conceptually or visually. Also, there were technical considerations around fitting five projections into the gallery and keeping light levels low. As the structure of using the five linked films became clearer, the layout became paired back and instead used the screens to divide the space, which coaxes a viewer to journey around the space in order to see each film and band.

Figure 10: these are the days. *Filming the audience at a punk gig at Broken Neck, Austin, Texas 2008. Photograph by Autumn Spadaro.*

Figure 11: these are the days. *Final exhibition installation, Austin, Texas 2008. Photograph by Sarah Greene Reed.*

RB: *Do you think that local punk subcultures embody a sense of regional identity or locality? How do you think that fits with recent 'punk anniversary' events centred around London?*

MS: Yes, I think there are differences in identity between many regions within the UK, even though the community – and I use that term in the loosest sense – is essentially bound by very similar ideals and desires. Sometimes these can be slight, sometimes more defined. Outside of London, I think there can often be an element of contempt towards the capital or at least a desire to create a local scene that doesn't have to look outward to the dominant urban centres. On a simple level this can be prompted by geographical isolation. During conversations with people in the punk scene in Plymouth this was often referred to. People talked about being off the beaten track from usual band gig routes, that they were proud to be Plymouthian and how this drove them to make the scene their own. Having lived most of my life in regions distant from London, I think this sentiment is common.

RB: *Did you make a distinction between the subcultural groups you worked with and the wider community of Plymouth? I was curious to see the installation set alongside other artist's work that engaged with other sectors of the community, of all ages – the We The People Are The Work exhibition introduction by its curator, Simon Morrissey, suggests that work was commissioned from the six participating artists in order to 'explore our engagement with politics and identity'. How do you think your work fitted with the other exhibitions and installations across the city?*

MS: Not all of the exhibitions had a broad, engaged approach to the wider community of Plymouth. Antonio Vega Macotela and Eduardo Thomas produced a quiet film featuring two residents of Plymouth who appeared as extras in Tim Burton's 2010 *Alice in Wonderland*. And, Claire Fontaine's show recycled recent global political quotes. In contrast, Peter Liversidge and Ciara Phillips actively invited the public to create slogans within the making of works. So, in many ways, I felt that *More Than a Pony Show* sat between these exhibitions in terms of how it attempted to engage with people and politics.

RB: *Do you think punk scenes embody a sense of 'community' that is distinct from, or perhaps in reflection of, the wider local community? I'm rather curious about this, since many 'punk' participants have grown up and become embedded within their wider community, often as active citizens. Sometimes that feels like a bit of a paradox.*

MS: Dividing a subcultural group from the wider community is tricky. Where do you start to draw markers, or compartmentalize aspects of that subculture in relation to the wider community? Being around for over 40 years, punk has influenced almost the full gamut of generations, and that was reflected in the age range of people I met with in Plymouth who'd played a role in the local scene. Many of these people fitted with the norms of having day jobs, from being care-workers, journalists, university lecturers, factory workers and so on. Within this there's likely a leaning towards particular professions or fields. Certainly this was the case with politics, which often came into conversations due to the 2017 general election and Brexit vote, Plymouth having voted to leave the EU. But underlying this I do think there is a commonality between all of the people I met and worked with, in terms of how they wanted to

Figure 12: More Than a Pony Show. *Installation at Plymouth College of Art, Plymouth, September 2017. Photograph by Jamie Woodley.*

Figure 13: More Than a Pony Show. *Installation at Plymouth College of Art, Plymouth, September 2017. Photograph by Jamie Woodley.*

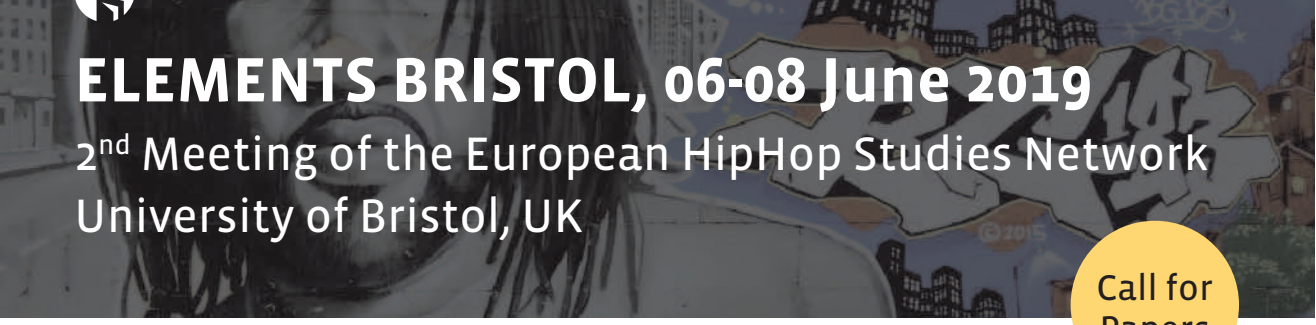
live their lives, a desire to shout louder about injustices. This was especially the case when thinking about Suck My Culture, Crazy Arm and Bus Station Loonies.

For older generations, as they've grown up, possibly had families, the parameters they once operated within as a youth is likely to have changed. As you mention, many might have become embedded into wider community. Is that a paradox? Perhaps. But, for many I think punk is likely to have had a lasting impact, and still lingers in the way they think, react to and relate to others and the world around them. For a younger generation who come across punk for the first time, who are excited and influenced by it, and who might start borrowing from it and eventually mutating it, that to me seems like a great legacy and not something to be knocked.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Russ Bestley is a graphic designer and writer. He has co-authored a number of publications, including *Action Time Vision: Punk & Post-Punk 7" Record Sleeves* (2016), *The Art of Punk* (2012), *Visual Research* (2004, 2011, 2015), *Up Against the Wall* (2002) and *Experimental Layout* (2001). He has contributed articles to *Punk & Post-Punk*, *Eye*, *Zed*, *Emigré*, *Street Sounds* and *Vive Le Rock*, curated exhibitions on punk graphic design in London, Southampton, Blackpool, Leeds, Birmingham and Newcastle, and designed books, posters, pamphlets, programmes and other material for the Punk Scholars Network, Active Distribution, PM Press, Viral Age Records and other independent labels, publishers and producers. He is editor of the journal *Punk and Post-Punk* and leads the *Graphic Subcultures Research Hub* at the London College of Communication.

Contact: Reader in Graphic Design, London College of Communication, University of the Arts London, Elephant & Castle, London SE1 6SB, UK.
E-mail: r.bestley@lcc.arts.ac.uk



ELEMENTS BRISTOL, 06-08 June 2019

2nd Meeting of the European HipHop Studies Network
University of Bristol, UK

Call for Papers

Network Organizing Committee
Séverin Guillard
University Paris Est Créteil

Sergey Ivanov (aka Grand PaP)
DA EXIT NGO

James McNally
University of Bristol

Sina Nitzsche
Ruhr University Bochum/
TU Dortmund University

J. Griffith Rollefson
University College Cork

Venla Sykäri
University of Helsinki

Justin Williams
University of Bristol

Contact
Justin Williams
justin.williams@bristol.ac.uk

Network Website
https://
europeanhiphopstudiesnetwork.
wordpress.com/

Emceeing. DJing. Breaking. Graffiti. Hip-hop is commonly understood to consist of these four elements. The idea of four elements is one of hip-hop culture's core narrative and most pervasive founding myth since its beginnings in the Bronx in the 1970s. Yet, the idea of four core elements has been highly contested since the beginning of the culture as there is no unified definition of how many elements exist, who defined them, and how they came together.

The second meeting of the European HipHop Studies Network therefore explores one of hip-hop's most central ideas, the ideas of elements: Who defines them? What do they tell us about cultural, social, and economic communities and boundaries across Europe? How do these limits vary according to various contexts and practices across Europe? What are their consequences for cultural production and consumption? The objective of the meeting is to trace, interrogate, and expand the notion of elements as central organizing principles in hip-hop culture and their variations across Europe.

We invite papers, panels, performances, and contributions from a wide variety of backgrounds, perspectives, and angles. Scholarly disciplines include but are not limited to art history, cultural studies, black studies, ethnography, geography, graffiti studies, literary studies, musicology, pedagogy, performance studies, philosophy, political science, sociology, and visual culture studies. Artistic contributions include performances, themed panels of any format, lecture-recitals, and philosophies which combine research and praxis (or practice-as-research).

Artistic and scholarly proposals engaging with European hip-hop's elements (those based both in Europe and outside of it) should include a title, 250 word abstract of their contribution and short biographical sketch. This should be submitted to hiphopnetworkeurope@gmail.com no later than **31 January 2019**. **We especially welcome papers that engage with less-academically-visible work, and from artists and practitioners from a wider variety of backgrounds.** We hope to see you in Bristol!