

Looking up at the Library – an interview with Ruth Beale

The day after the opening of Ruth Beale's exhibition *Bookbed* at Peckham Platform the gallery is busy, the door swinging open and shut almost constantly. Beale is sitting opposite me on the eponymous bed explaining how the previous week has involved a lot of late night sewing. A stripy green mattress re-fashioned into the shape of an open book that curves gently away from its central 'spine', the *Bookbed* is wonderfully soft, a perfect place to sit, lie or curl up with a good book. Positioned in front of the gallery's shop-window it is presented as a first taste of the exhibition to the passers-by of Peckham High Street. The situation is at once intimate – it's not everyday an artist invites you into their bed – and performative: we are something of a spectacle, to those looking through the window, but also to the gallery visitor, who may never have dreamed of clambering onto an artwork.

Beale is an artist, local to Peckham, whose works are informed by cultural expression and the reordering of political and social ideas. With the exhibition *Bookbed* she has turned her attention to the library as a place in which education, culture and public space meet. Previous subjects have included the practices of archiving, the pageant play, the polemic pamphlet and the possibility of understanding economics. Rather than being medium specific her projects are typified by the way in which she activates ideas, by publishing, performing, dramatizing and even singing. Of major concern to Beale is the collection, preservation and distribution of knowledge, and she doesn't mind dressing-up or lounging on a giant book to get people to talk about it.

Over the last four years Beale has chaired a series of salons under the pseudonym Miss B., which have tackled topics as diverse as Totalitarian Architecture and the history of cycling. Hosting these discussions has developed her sense of generosity towards the audience: 'In the act of inviting someone to talk on a subject it is as much about others' contributions as mine. I'm not trying to be didactic but to keep things open.' Miss B. will also offer her audiences food and drink, and in a series of one-to-one salons a haircut, as part of the experience of entering into a discussion. I put to her the two qualities I find strongest in her work: earnestness and playfulness. She considers this and responds, 'I do want to talk about serious issues but to draw people in with things that are playful and fun. Like the *Bookbed*, I wanted it to be something you could climb into and have to take your shoes off first. It shifts the way that people are compelled to engage with it.'

Around the *Bookbed* the carpet is plush and blue and there are fluffy-cloud cushions strewn about. It is a dream-like space, ideal for toddler exploration. Technician David Fryer and his partner, set designer Lorna Ritchie, assisted Beale to translate her ideas for a dreamscape into the exhibition design. There are two other elements within the gallery, and like the bed they are pieces of furniture given over to flights of imagination. There is a large table, a 'low-fi self-publishing station', which offers a typewriter and all the stationary necessary to make an ad-hoc pamphlet. The clatter of the typewriter's keys and the thrum of conversation around it provide the backdrop to the exhibition. Then there is the 'autodidact library': around 50 books presented on a display system, which through some creative woodworking has been made to look like another open book, this one standing up with its pages spread open towards you. The selection, although a relatively small sample, gives a reader the opportunity to learn practical skills, delve into a fantasy or explore the universe. As a collection it reflects the way in which the local library has the specific requirement of being as general as possible to cater for its users' needs.

The exhibition has developed out of Beale's collaboration with Peckham Library to deliver a series of creative writing workshops for young people. Alongside poet and storyteller Sandra Agard, the group explored the subject of dreams over five weekly sessions. Dreams were a useful way for Beale to encourage conversation about aspirations and imagination. The *Bookbed* has been appliqued with snippets produced during these workshops as if they are chapters within the book: 'Fly to Africa', 'Score the Winning Goal', 'Fast and Furious', and the wonderfully evocative 'Hot Tub Full of Dosh'. Some of them are taken from poems the participants wrote about their dreams, others were about their ambitions; it was important for Beale to mix these up. During the exhibition the workshops will continue but they will move from Peckham Library into the gallery.

It is perhaps important here to give some context about the relationship between Peckham Library and Peckham Platform. Although they occupy the same civic square, which also has a leisure centre, a wide-open space covered by an arched canopy and a green-link up towards a nearby park, this is their first formal collaboration. 'As a civic offer Peckham Square is like some kind of sixties town-planning utopia,' Beale explains, 'but all these things are slightly dysfunctional because of the realities of public space.' This is true of a lack of interaction between the spaces but also within the sometimes-ill-conceived design of the buildings themselves. The Library is an excellent example of these strange quirks: architecturally, it is iconic and arresting, clad in pastel green copper, with the library itself raised from ground-level by helter-skelter struts, its roof topped off by a giant lolling orange tongue. But a first-time visitor is faced with the unusual challenge of locating exactly how to gain access to it, needing to travel up an elevator to enter its public areas. In spite of this perhaps unnecessary stumbling block the Library is hugely popular, continually attracting numbers that far exceed national averages.

Beale has positioned the exhibition as a celebration of Peckham Library. It is a rare success story at a time when local libraries nationally are under threat of closure and reductions to services. 'A few years ago I had the concept of local libraries being slightly sad and underused places. Now I think that there should be more in the City. It's amazing how many different people are using them and what sort of things they do. In Peckham Library kids do their homework, people use computers, fill in job applications and get advice on interviews. They borrow books about practical things but also novels, and then there's the children's library. The more I go there, work there, the more I see.' This activity, the embracing of the opportunities for self-betterment in all its forms that goes on within the library, is what she wants to draw attention to by bringing some of it temporarily down from the Library tower and into the ground floor gallery.

The library as an integral part of civic society, is for Beale something that should be celebrated more often: 'Libraries are just one of these brilliant things. You can come and borrow books for free! There is such generosity in that offer, but that access is a right as well.' However, she also feels that it is worth thinking critically about our relationship to them, 'What is so interesting and exceptional about libraries is the relationship between public and private within them, because they are a public space, which we have ownership over. The public library is a Council service but in a way we own the Council, so they are the peoples'. Quoted in the press release for Bookbed she argues: 'However mediated, [libraries] represent more than the sum of their parts because they offer us both practical services and the potential for educational and cultural development on our own terms.' While at present the value of the library is predominantly being measured in financial terms she wants to ask questions about their symbolic value within our collective imagination, as one of the rare meeting point between the individual and society.

One thing Beale sees as lacking in the direction some libraries are taking is the possibility for people to self-organise their own activities. 'Everything is delivered. It's free but it has to be put on by somebody that works in library services. There's not that sense of "I can start my own reading group here."' This is something that she has tried to address by opening Peckham Platform up to the public as a bookable space. Throughout the exhibition there will be talks and workshops planned by Beale but on days when the gallery is open and nothing is scheduled she is inviting specific local groups and the general public to host their own events. 'Saying this space is free to use opens up the discussion about [public spaces], it suggests you should be able to use it in that way. I often think about organisational structures, and the relationship between governance and grassroots culture. What is the link between them? Here I can say, "Here's the space, you can do what you want", which is just a version of what is happening in [Peckham Library] already.'

This open door policy aims to highlight the differences between what is delivered and what is self-generated. 'The library is a space that enables self-education but it is not individualistic. It's not about everyone being in isolation because you need a body of books that everyone can borrow to make the system work. That is how civic society works. It's political. How we think about the position of the individual is part of where you position yourself on the political spectrum.' The library is symbolic of this for Beale, a place where you can signpost the politics within everyday life and take it apart for discussion. 'Sometimes these things are quite confusing because you think, "I believe in liberty and being able to do what I want", but then you amble into libertarian territory with the Tories. People want services and free health care but then they don't want to pay for them. I suppose I'm talking about all those systems and how they work.'

This is not the first time that Beale has addressed the library. An on-going piece *All the Libraries in London* is a compendium of London's publicly accessible libraries first shown as a five-metre long vinyl wall text at Cell Project Space in 2011. 'I worked with the designer Simon Elvins to categorise the libraries typographically, so there's a difference between, say, libraries run by the NHS, government agencies and universities. It gives you a way into this monolithic list.' Since 2011 Beale has continued to work with Elvins to develop the project into a book, which will be launched during the *Bookbed* exhibition. 'What's taken the longest amount of time is working out its function, how can it be more than just a directory? Right now there is not a directory of all the libraries in London but that's a very straight thing to do. So, in an attempt to think beyond this we are launching a 'blank' book, with all the names and addresses of the libraries, which can then be populated with peoples' stories, photographs, drawings and ephemera relating to libraries. We're setting up a website where anyone can submit their responses.' The plan is to eventually publish a second book filled with everything they receive.

The list, like the *Bookbed*, is a symbol. 'It is designed to encourage people to think about these individual and collective resources, to try to imagine all of those books in all of those libraries. It being this massive body, the list can't represent all those books but it suggests them.' Beale conducted another playful experiment with the symbolism of books by taking out over sixty utopian novels from public libraries to present alongside *All the Libraries in London*. Based on the idea that if libraries were looking to reduce the number of books they hold to cut costs – and considering that statistics on loans would be used to make these decisions – by keeping all these novels in circulation she could help to ensure their place in the library, itself one of the great utopian projects.

Self-education, in its many guises, has been a running theme throughout Beale's practice. Her salons are a space for free knowledge exchange between experts and enthusiasts and her passion for the hobbyist has led her to organise a Festival of Amateurs in their honour. There is a generosity in her acts of hosting in the imagination and playfulness she brings to activate complex but crucial ideas. A new initiative, *The Alternative School of Economics*, co-founded with artist Amy Feneck, for example, is as much a refusal to accept that the language of neoliberal capitalism could prevent anyone from understanding something as fundamental in today's society as money, as it is a serious effort to encourage radical responses and approaches to a hermetic finance industry. The exhibition *Bookbed* offers a small library, spaces to read and write, and talks and discussions about why these things are important. It celebrates and support the activity of Peckham's local library, because of its always present but sometimes forgotten educational and cultural aims: to be a collective resource for the curious, the ambitious, for the amateur and the soon-to-be-expert, and for the people of Peckham and beyond.

My last question to Beale before we rolled out of bed was about what she felt we – the societal we – should be talking about now. She took a long pause before she answered. 'I think we should be talking about culture in civic society. We went through New Labour where people tried to put a value on culture in order to justify it, and now with the Tories it's all about saying that culture is an industry which has to make money, and the reason you get an education is to get a job.' Here she grows more animated, 'So we are being told that education is an investment in your career, rather than what we all get out of it as a society if we educate people and allow them to continue to broaden their horizons and be creative. I think it is important to talk about all of these things collectively as culture, because isn't that the point of everything?' She came to a halt to catch my eye and we laugh briefly at the absurd simplicity and sincerity in her question. Aware that she was now metaphorically standing on a soapbox but not cowed by it she concluded firmly, 'The point of society isn't to have an economy, the economy serves the people, and the people are the culture. That is what I want to talk about.'