

AnimalResearchNexus.org

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The Work

Materials: Locally sourced reclaimed pre-war Chester red bricks; red clay mice.

This work asks the viewer to look closer at the materials used to build and sustain an industrial city. What does it mean to be part of the city's community, to be shaped out of and work for that city? As citizens, how do we define who or what works for us and what work do we allow to become visible? How do our levels of comfort and understanding of particular work and workers shape how we value and acknowledge contributions to our city and our lives?

This installation is a collaboration between artists Bentley Crudgington and Rob Hopper with historians Rob Kirk and Dmitriy Myelnikov for the Animal Research Nexus Project.



Visibility

Most people's experience of seeing a mouse is of an uninvited pest; others may have encountered them as convenient pets. But few have encountered the mouse as a vital contributor to medical research. In 2018, over 1 million scientific procedures were carried out with mice across the UK, over 80,000 of which were here, in Manchester. But we hear very little of these little murine workers who live in our city contributing to medicine and our future health. Much like the Manchester clay mice here who fade into the background of the local red bricks, these mice are invisible. But should we see more of them? Or do we prefer to let them get on with their work safeguarding our health outside of our vision?

Work

Marx and Engels, the great philosophers of labour, described work as purposeful activities appropriating nature for the benefit of man. Work was a human practice that distinguished our species from the rest of nature. More recently, however, some have suggested that animals also transform nature for their own benefit. One might think of how a bird builds a nest or a beaver a dam. But what about animals who contribute to human society? Should they be considered as workers? And what might scientific work mean for a mouse? While animals don't work for money, they do seem to be motivated by other forms of reward, such as food and expressions of affection and care. If laboratory mice are workers, how does that change how we think about them? Where might they fit in the wider history of labour relations in great industrial cities like Manchester?

Respect

If mice are workers how should we respond? Laboratory mice have little control over their working environments but people who work with them believe the highly artificial world of the laboratory to be much less stressful to life in the wild. Like human workers, mice are protected by a raft of laws and regulations which protect their welfare and wellbeing whilst working within medical research. Researchers are keen to properly care for mice because they know unhappy mice produce poor experimental results. However, many believe much more needs to be done to protect and promote the welfare of laboratory animals.

Representation

Culturally, where does the research animal belong? Visitors to Natural History Museums are used to viewing animal remains while museums dedicated to history of medicine or science and industry display technologies and material objects that have contributed to human health and wellbeing. The research animal, however, appears to be missing from both. What is different about these animals that makes their inclusion difficult? An encounter with a research animal may also make us consider the responsibilities that come from having, and caring for, a body that is vulnerable. Do we need to frame them as victims, surrogates, or sacrifices in order to relate to their suffering in human terms? Or is it that, as consumers and beneficiaries of scientific and medical advancements, we are complicit in and uncomfortable with their labour? Or, perhaps, it is that we currently lack the shared vocabulary with which to talk about these experiences, hesitations and expectations?