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## Provinciality and the Art World: The Midland Group 1961-1977

### Abstract

This paper takes as its focus the Midland Group Gallery in order to first, make a case for the consideration of the geographies of art galleries. Second, highlight the importance of galleries in the context of cultural geographies of the sixties. Third, discuss the role of provinciality in the operation of art worlds. In so doing it explicates one set of geographies surrounding the gallery – those of the local, regional and international networks that connected to produce art works and art space. It reveals how the interactions between places and practices outside of metropolitan and regional hierarchies provides a more nuanced insight into how art worlds operated during the sixties, a period of growing internationalism of art, and how contested definitions of the provincial played an integral role in this. The paper charts the operations of the Midland Group Gallery and the spaces that it occupied to demonstrate how it was representative of a post-war discourse of provincialism and a corresponding re-evaluation of regional cultural activity.

### Keywords

Art world; geographies of art; galleries; Britain; provincial



## Provinciality and the Art World: The Midland Group 1961-1977

### Introduction

This paper responds to current calls from within the geographies of art literature 'to attend not only to a 'finished' object, but to the sites, spaces and processes of its production, consumption and circulation' (Hawkins 2010b:808). It takes as its focus the Midland Group Gallery in order to first, make a case for the consideration of the geographies of art galleries; second, highlight the importance of galleries within the context of cultural geographies of the sixties; third, discuss the role of provinciality in the operation of art worlds.

As art historian Lisa Tickner (2007:236) has commented, 'Galleries have been little studied, at least in Britain'. Whilst within geography useful work has been done on public art and urban regeneration (Sharp 2007), landscape and environmental art (Cant and Morris 2006), and reflections on the works of individual artists (Matless and Revill 1995; Vasudevan 2007), the geographies of the gallery have been largely overlooked (Cameron 2007; Hawkins 2010a). This paper begins to address this absence in the cultural geographical literature through the discussion of a specific example, the Midland Group Gallery. In so doing it explicates one set of geographies surrounding the gallery – those of the local, regional and international networks that connected to produce art works and art space. In the conclusion I provide a broader discussion of other geographies of the gallery that merit further investigation.

The Midland Group Gallery was an art space run by an artists' co-operative which provided a forum for progressive and experimental visual arts in Nottingham throughout the sixties (see figure 1). The gallery had an ambitious exhibition programme that covered both work by artist members (e.g. surrealist Marion Adnams, ceramicist Mary Rogers, and multi-media artist Ian



Breakwell) and also a wide range of international artists (e.g. Naum Gabo, Roy Lichtenstein, Jackson Pollock, J R Soto), underpinned by a long-standing commitment to education through art, and a keen sense of the group's position within the art world of sixties Britain. Though founded in 1943 and existing, subject to an evolving organisation, administration and direction until 1987, this paper focuses on the Midland Group in their gallery located in East Circus Street, where the group were based from 1961 to 1977. This was a period when the activities of the group expanded to take on a much more outward looking focus from its original function as a focal point for local professional artists to a gallery that sought to engage with audiences on both national and international scales. The Midland Group Gallery provides the main focus of the paper in order to begin the process of acknowledging the significance of such galleries in the cultural make up of post-war Britain, a history which has remained largely unwritten (Lucas 2001). At a broader conceptual level the gallery serves as a starting point through which to think about notions of art and provinciality/the parochial and how such assumptions can be deployed in different ways by different actors and participants in a particular art world.

### **Figure 1. Former Midland Group Gallery, East Circus Street, Nottingham**

The paper begins with a discussion of literature relating to art worlds and its relevance for understanding the networks and operations of a provincial gallery. This is linked to further literature on provinces and regions, where it is suggested that questioning how, what and why the term 'provincial' is used can provide a means of moving beyond tropes that assume provincial equals parochial. This sets up a discussion of the metropolitan voices and discourses that influenced the Midland Group Gallery before consideration is given to the wider implications of working within a provincial art world. Next, attention is given to the administrative and sociable practices that underlined all of the activities that the Group carried out locally. The paper finishes with a discussion of the national and international art worlds that the gallery participated

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2 in. Methodologically the paper draws on a series of oral history interviews conducted in 2008  
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4 with ex-members and supporters of the Midland Group that supplement archival research.<sup>1</sup>  
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## 8 9 **Art Worlds**

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14 This paper uses the concept of art worlds in its analysis of the geographies of the Midland Group  
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16 Gallery. The term 'art world' is one that is often used in a general way to denote the characteristics  
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18 and activities of artists. Today 'art world' conjures up an evocative image of an exclusive arena  
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20 where artworks are sold for record breaking prices, exhibitions in national art museums take on  
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22 blockbuster status, and these activities are supported by a 'glamorous' cast of artists, dealers, and  
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24 wealthy collectors who gather at openings, international fairs and auction houses (Thornton 2009).  
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26 Within the academic sphere, however, the concept of art worlds was developed into a detailed  
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28 theoretical study by the sociologist Howard Becker (2008). For Becker an art world is defined as a  
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30 'network of people whose co-operative activity [...] produces [...] artworks', this is 'less a logically  
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32 organized sociological theory of art than an exploration of the potential of the idea of an art world  
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34 for increasing our understanding of how people produce and consume art works' (Becker 2008:x).  
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36 Within Becker's art world the 'genius' of the artist is put to one side. Instead emphasis is placed  
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38 upon a whole series of collaborative activities that take place from the initial creative impulse, the  
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40 production of the work, the placing of item in an exhibition and its ultimate sale. In this paper I  
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42 draw on this conception of art worlds in order to reconstruct the networks and connections that  
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44 worked together to both support and also produce a gallery space, that of the Midland Group in  
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46 Nottingham, a city located in the British East Midlands.  
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57 Commenting on what it is that distinguishes art galleries from museums and other municipally  
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59 funded public art spaces, Tickner (2007:236) explains that:  
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Partly because of the special status accorded to art among other commodities, and partly because of the complex and hybrid means through which they operate, galleries are best understood not merely as retail outlets, but as nodal points in the systems of exchange between artists, dealers, critics, curators and collectors; or as sites and catalysts for the translation and consolidation of economic and cultural capital.

Here Tickner is drawing upon Bourdieu's concepts of economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1993). van Maanen (2010) observes that there are similarities between 'art worlds' and Bourdieu's cultural 'field,' as both look to apply organisational structures to creative activities, although these concepts are not readily interchangeable. Where Becker's art world has been drawn upon by geographers it appears often only as footnotes or background concept in work on geographies of art and the formation of particular movements and styles (Dickens 2008; Morris 2005; While 2003). This is perhaps indicative of the lack of an overt spatial imagination within Becker's work.

Whilst Becker's art worlds are intricate in their analysis of different types of interactions, with an emphasis on the sociality and collaboration, the networks and practices that support these are not geographically specified. This is something that contemporary sociologists of art and cultural geographers have begun to address. Here emphasis is placed on processes and assemblages that 'make' artworks (Yeneva 2003), these are complimented by sociable relations and personal networks that support creative communities (Bassett et al. 2002; Coe 2000; Currid 2007; Grodach 2011). Within this paper Becker's concept, which may be dismissed as dated, is used specifically in response to the emphasis that he places on co-operation and collaboration, which in many ways reflects the ethos and working practices that the Midland Group Gallery were actively pursuing. In addition, Becker's work comments upon creative practices and broader regimes of governance that are more in tune with the cultural and social climate that the Midland Group Gallery were operating within in the sixties. As such this paper sees value in historicising arguments relating to

contemporary creative industries debates. This demonstrates that there are valuable contributions to be made to understandings of art geographies by focusing specifically on the fine arts, which have always been a dominant mode of cultural production, and looking to periods outside of the contemporary art world where arguments relating to 'art capitals' all too often still dominate (Currid 2007; Mellor 1993; Thornton 2009).

Becker (2008: 376) underlines how in his work 'The analysis centers on some kind of collective activity, something that people are doing together. Whoever contributes in any way to that activity and its result is part of that world [...] So the world is not a closed unit'. Although this paper focuses on reconstructing the art world of the Midland Group it also touches upon many other overlapping art worlds: from the London scene, the European avant-garde to transnational networks. Becker's art worlds therefore help us to understand a mode of cultural production during a particular time that is polycentric and supported by a range of actors over different spaces and places in a set of co-dependent relationships across informal social networks to the influence of art policy governance.

This type of analytical work is crucial in order to understand the sometimes messy relationships between 'how primary (London, New York, for instance) and secondary nodes (from Milan to Manchester) relate to each other' (While 2003:262). A detailed examination of the artistic practices, sociality and networks of the Midland Group Gallery provides a method of challenging the cultural economy primary/secondary node approach. Instead, what this paper does is reveal how the interactions between places and practices outside of primary/secondary structures provides a more nuanced insight into how art worlds operated in the mid-twentieth century, and how contested definitions of the provincial played an integral role in this.

### Regional or Provincial?

The region has become a dominant scale and discourse through which to address constructions of regional identity and its social and cultural implications (Hudson 2006; MacLeod and Jones 2001). Despite this focus on the region and regionalism the provinces and provincialism have tended to be overlooked, outside of work on the role of local and provincial societies in the production and circulation of geographical knowledge (Elliott 2005; Matless 2003; Withers and Finnegan 2003), and often more gestured to than actually addressed in work on creative industries (Brown et al. 2000; Hall 2000). Whilst this work reminds us of the value of giving voice to otherwise subordinated local outlooks 'the provincial British local [...] has a long history of neglect, having historically been marginalized' (Robinson 2007:237). The provincial is often conflated with the parochial, with both holding connotations of narrow-mindedness, a lack of education or sophistication and positioned as subordinate to dominant metropolitan culture. Tomaney (2007: 370) argues that similar traits are visible within current work on relational regions where he argues:

[T]he tendency is to make large assumptions, upon which are constructed elaborate, if tendentious, general claims about the role played by regional identities in cultural and political development. Such approaches invariably present a concern with local culture and identity as inherently defensive, introverted, and archaic. But to present narratives of regional identity in this fashion is to caricature them.

Building upon Tomaney's criticisms of the generalising tendencies sometimes evident in relational approaches in this paper I would like to show the value of thinking critically about the terms regional and provincial in order to move beyond caricatures and tropes of 'narrow horizons' in order to find space for what might productively be called 'positive provincialism.' The paper, therefore, positions provinciality, and the tensions between it and regional discourse, as a key component in the cultural imaginary that encompassed the Midland Group Gallery.

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4 According to Seabrook (2005), the post-war era in Britain witnessed a tangible shift in provincial  
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6 life, whereby locality and place became usurped by homogeneity in terms of consumer goods and  
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8 the onset of a so-called global culture. Seabrook argues that industrial towns in the British  
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10 Midlands such as Northampton and Nottingham lost their points of historical reference with the  
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12 onset of decline in local industry, resulting in a loss of attachment to the local peculiarities of place.  
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14 It was exactly this awareness of a local distinctiveness amongst towns that acted as an important  
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16 factor when defining provincialism. Such an account certainly has its merits; however,  
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18 globalisation is treated as a negative force, which overlooks how, in the case of an increasingly  
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20 international art world, being provincial could actually be used as an advantage, as I discuss with  
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22 reference to the national and international networks that the Midland Group positioned itself within.  
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30 The 'early part of the twentieth century had seen Paris as a centre of European artistic and  
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32 intellectual innovation, but the wartime flight of many of the individuals involved in these activities  
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34 and the subsequent post-war poverty of France instigated a cultural and spatial shift' (Morris  
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36 2005:436). This shift was a realignment in the focus of international art towards New York,  
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38 particularly with the rise first of Abstract Expressionism and subsequently Pop Art (Guilbaut 1988).  
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40 Although not operating at the same level as New York and Paris as centres for art elites, one  
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42 outcome of the sixties 'cultural revolution' was to align London as a significant place for artistic  
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44 and creative output (Rycroft 2011). The British art scene at this time was still, in many ways,  
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46 dominated by London. This was a time of unprecedented expansion for commercial galleries in the  
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48 capital, such as the Robert Fraser Gallery, Signals, Indica, Kasmin, Grabowski, some of which  
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50 would be firmly associated with 'Swinging London' as they were involved in the production of a  
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52 Pop imagery and lifestyle (Rycroft 2011; Sandbrook 2006). Such art spaces were undeniably  
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54 influential in promoting upcoming artists, but this attention on the capital is often discussed in a  
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56 way that views the gravitational pull of new artists to London as inevitable (Phillipot and Tarsia  
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2000). This effectively overlooks the way that: 'Scales' of activity are [...] socially constructed through [...] complex and overlapping webs of personal relations'(Coe 2000:405). By foregrounding social practices and spatialities this paper moves beyond conceptions of art worlds that tend to approach 'the 'local', 'national' and 'international'' as discrete and separate. Instead they are positioned as 'mutually constitutive of each other' (Coe 2000:405). However, as demonstrated in the next section, it often suited key figures within the metropolitan art world to draw stark and often simplistic distinctions between metropolis and provinces which resulted in a distinctive hierarchical relationship.

### The Problem with Provincialism

A key example of a dominant voice in London's art world is represented in a 1962 speech given by Sir Kenneth Clark in his capacity as President of the English Association. Clark is most commonly known for the ground-breaking BBC series *Civilisation*, but he established himself as a significant figure within the British art world having previously been Director of the National Gallery (1933-1946), Chairman of the Independent Television Authority (1955-1960) and Chairman of the Arts Council of Great Britain (1955-1960) (Secrest 1984). Clark took this platform as an opportunity to discuss what he referred to as 'the problem of provincialism' notably with regard to the visual arts;

In its simplest form, provincialism is easily recognized and defined. The history of European art has been, to a large extent, the history of a series of centres, from each of which radiated a style [...] A style does not grow up simultaneously over a large area. It is the creation of a centre, a single energizing unit, which may be as small as fifteenth-century Florence, or as large as pre-war Paris, but has the confidence and coherency of a metropolis [...] Examples are obvious enough [...] The Gothic style of the Ile de France in the

thirteenth and fourteenth centuries: we do not need to argue the point that the sculpture of Chartres is metropolitan and Nottingham alabasters are provincial (Clark 1962:3).<sup>2</sup>

Clark assumes that metropolitan art (wherever is it produced) has a quality and purpose that exceeds the local ambitions of provincial art. Although by dismissing Nottingham alabasters as provincial he overlooks the wider influence of this medieval sculpture industry. Such a metropolitan view of the arts, when scrutinised from a non-metropolitan perspective, bears little relation to the ways in which organisations such as the Midland Group went about mobilising notions of 'the provincial.' A dichotomy of metropolitan versus provincial presents a too simplistic picture that assumes the Midland Group wanted to compete with the London art scene, as this paper shows, the reality was more akin to a series of overlapping and interlinked series of discourses, social and cultural practices that effectively worked across any clearly delineated notions of scale.

However, other types of geographical imaginary were still important within the realm of art policy. In contrast to Clark the sensitivity of metropolitan bureaucrats dismissing anywhere outside of London as provincial was a concern of Jennie Lee who was appointed the first Arts Minister in 1965. This is highlighted by the fact that 'no one talked about the 'provinces' in Jennie's presence' (Hollis 1997:250). This obvious move away from the province on the part of Lee was part of a much broader regionalist discourse that became part of wider government strategy throughout the sixties. The years 1964-65 saw the establishment of Britain's Regional Economic Planning Councils, which resulted in the formation of the East Midlands Economic Planning Region, with Nottingham named as its administrative centre. The significance of this for the Midland Group Gallery was that such a conception of the region had impacts outside of economic planning as it also coincided with an expanding regional focus for the Arts Council. Hewison (1986:228) comments that, 'Throughout the 1960s the Arts Council was being urged to become more representative, to democratize its procedures and become less of a metropolitan oligarchy of



interlocking interests'. The sixties were a time when Nottingham was positioned as a regional hub, and the Midland Group Gallery sought to promote itself as important cultural force within the newly created East Midland Region. The funding it received from the Arts Council was an important factor that allowed it to do this, effectively plugging it into a national institution that was attempting to realign its focus from the capital to the regions. Evident here are tensions between government driven regional rhetoric as promoted by the Arts Council and a parochial type of provincialism as defined by Kenneth Clark. However, for the Midland Group asserting both regional and provincial credentials was important, with each being deployed as part of a subtle spatial strategy to forge a place in the art world. Both were effectively used to counteract 'standardized effects of the capital' (Gilbert 1957 in Tomaney 2007: 357).

This is particularly event when reflecting on the title 'Midland Group.' At a rudimentary level it served to indelibly linked the gallery to a particular place, in particular the East Midlands. However, the scope and practices of Midland Group members meant that emphasis was on promoting and exhibiting contemporary visual art rather than attempting to present a unified front or a coherent style that represented a particular regional art. Never seen as an organisation that was merely appealing to Nottingham in terms of membership and visitors, the title Midland Group instead reflects the sustained links of the gallery to other regionally based artistic networks. Figure 2 shows an invitation to a private view dating from 1961. These were regular occasions in the Group's exhibition programme. All of the eight artists featured were locally based and such exhibitions provided an important outlet for them to exhibit their works. Such Group exhibitions remained key features throughout the sixties. The presence of gallery members from art colleges in surrounding towns and cities (particularly Loughborough, Derby and Leicester) was an important factor in the work of the gallery - as was becoming a member of the gallery. Yet by, in 1969 it was noted that although this was indicative of a 'lively and creative membership' it was also increasingly 'scattered throughout the country' (DDMS 1/81/42). In order to become an artist member

individuals were invited to submit work that would be reviewed by the main committee which was mostly other professional artists. Standards were high and membership certainly was not a given, and was an effort on the part of the Group to distinguish themselves from another local art group, Nottingham Society of Artists (NSA).

## Figure 2. Private View Invitation for 'Eight Midland Artists', Midland Group Gallery 1961

Founded in 1880, NSA held a vital position in Nottingham's art world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (MacMillan 1980). Whereas the Midland Group was a collective of professional artists, by the sixties NSA was an outlet for amateur enthusiasts. Whilst the Midland Group were happy to align themselves as a provincial gallery, important at a regional scale, there also existed a certain amount of snobbishness that sought to distinguish them as 'cutting-edge' in comparison to the perceived *parochial* nature of Nottingham Society of Artists. As one ex-member of the Group explained, 'it wasn't just a narrow, parochial, group as so many of these societies are' (Interview with ex-Group member). Even though much of this paper is devoted to charting the many and varied elements that made up the art world of the Midland Group, these did not always stretch to making connections with those in closest geographical proximity. This points to the merits of understanding provincialism from *within* rather than working with given assumptions imposed from *outside*. For the Midland Group being provincial was acceptable but to be parochial was not as evidenced by their position within the local arts scene in Nottingham.

## Art in 'little big-cities'

The Midland Group's commitment to resisting a secondary status assigned by metropolitan culture was a sentiment held widely by other cultural producers in Nottingham. For example, the implications of being part of a provincial art world are made explicit in an editorial that appeared in

the first edition of local arts magazine *Platform*, published in Nottingham in 1971. In many ways this magazine represented a culmination of the attitudes of people involved with the arts and culture in Nottingham throughout the sixties and a shared drive to resist accepting a secondary status in the art world's hierarchy:

Regional radio, regional arts centre, regional theatre have lately become fashionable topics in the national media. Perhaps disillusioned with the transience or tiredness of the London "scene" the commentators look towards the provinces for inspiration. But meanwhile the regions still struggle to gain some of the cultural riches that London takes for granted and the standards by which the provinces are judged are still London standards. Only when the provinces have some of London's basic endowments can the word "provincial" completely lose its connexions with a world of mean opportunities, narrow horizons, the Provinces forget their struggle to prove quite simply that London does not have the monopoly of the talent; and the judgments of the capital become irrelevant [...] For *already* there *are* ways in which the provinces can offer a real alternative to the established London arts without either "apeing the grown-ups" or trying to create little big-cities (Gleadowe 1971:3).

This editorial laid out the intentions of *Platform* as a magazine focused on representing local arts. It was keen to remove itself from accusations of being 'a parish magazine' with small town mentalities. Indeed, *Platform* was to 'set the issues of the region in a wider context' (Gleadowe 1971:3). The implications of being 'provincial' remained something that should be contested, being associated with 'mean opportunities and narrow horizons,' whilst being regional suggested an importance, even relevance outside of provincial city life. Instead what they promoted was a positive provincialism. What this editorial successfully managed to do was frame Nottingham as a provincial city with a regional significance thereby counteracting Clark's perceived 'problem with provincialism' whilst simultaneously fitting into the Arts Council's vision for progressive

1 regionalism. Both province and region here are used as co-constituted cultural constructs that shape  
2 a potent geographical imaginary that provided an expansive conception of the place the Midland  
3 Group Gallery held within the art world. Nottingham was positioned as a city with an established  
4 arts scene driven by the Midland Group Gallery which stood as a 'real alternative' to London.  
5 Central to this positioning were the cultural and social functions that the gallery performed.  
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### 16 **Inside the Gallery**

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20 In terms of how it operated the gallery was novel in Britain, functioning as an artist-run co-  
21 operative administered through an elected main committee and designated sub-committees. With  
22 exhibitions changing on an almost monthly basis, the regular rounds of openings were important  
23 fixtures for the gallery. These are remembered as 'glittering occasions' and 'exceptional times'  
24 which validated a lot of the hard work which went into putting on an exhibition – the outcome of  
25 months of planning followed by a last minute rush (Interview with ex-Group member; Gosling  
26 (1980:114)). This was, however, a place for more than just the artworks, as summed up by an artist  
27 member of the Group:  
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42 It was a marvellous centre because there was a sociable side...it certainly made a wonderful  
43 focal point, you'd go along and see the exhibitions and meet people. It seemed to fulfil a lot  
44 of cultural needs...it was marvellous if you were a practicing artist and it was also very good  
45 for people who were interested in art but were not themselves practitioners. You could all  
46 meet, I remember meeting all sorts of people who I knew simply through the Midland Group  
47 – not painters, or sculptors, or printmakers – but just people who were interested (Interview  
48 with ex-Group member).  
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This sociable side to the gallery was key to how it was run, indicative of the informal networks and spaces that were used by the Group that arguably formed the most significant element of their art world. A real focus for such activities was the loosely named 'coffee bar', which despite its mundane set up managed to be an essential part of the workings of the gallery:

Probably the most interesting aspect was that upstairs at one end of the gallery was a little kitchenette – which was seen to be a coffee bar, but I would call it a kitchenette. This coffee bar played quite an important part in the running of the place because of how it was set up, cooperatively run by artists...at least until the end of its days in that building [East Circus Street]. It was run by a main committee and a series of sub-committees which seemed to work reasonably well, even though it was very time consuming, they used to meet, particularly the small sub-committees in the coffee bar [...] It wasn't anything like an art centre, art gallery would be now, but it attempted to perform many of the same functions (Interview with ex-Group staff).

For a gallery that was run on the spare time of members which required 'installing exhibitions, painting, re-painting the gallery, helping to hang shows', it is perhaps understandable that a focal point which encouraged a social side to the hard graft would resonate in people's memories (Interviews with ex-Group members). Yet, it was exactly this type of activity that kept the gallery going, all of which was carried out voluntarily by members of the Group who dedicated a lot of time to administrative work and attending to its more mundane day-to-day running.

### **From Argentina to Nottingham via Paris**

In addition to these internal activities links with other provincial contemporary art spaces would become increasingly important to the Midland Group Gallery throughout the sixties. With the

opening of the Arnolfini in Bristol in 1961 and the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham in 1965, two galleries with which the Midland Group would work closely, a network that operated outside of the London art world began to form (Interviews with ex-Group members). This network also included other examples of notable galleries in provincial cities such as the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford and the Demarco Gallery in Edinburgh. The cultivation of such working relationships were essential to the Midland Group, with Director's reports frequently mentioning how 'Excellent contacts were made' underlining the importance of informal networks typical to other types of creative practice (DDMA 1/91/12; Becker 2008).

However, these connections were also subject to a particular provincial discourse. An in-depth feature in a 1971 edition of *Platform* compared the Midland Group with its Edinburgh-based counterpart noting how:

The Demarco Gallery in Edinburgh and the Midland Group are both, in a non-derogatory sense, "*provincial*"; both have to be concerned with developments that challenge the continued relevance of the gallery situation as well as with the immediate problems of running a gallery that represents in a provincial situation all that is happening locally, nationally, internationally [...] both in their non-commercial, non-civic constitution offer an alternative to London's commercial gallery world or to the civic museum (Anon. 1971:9).

Highlighted here are the perceived challenges faced by galleries in provincial locations, especially for galleries such as the Midland Group and Demarco who were neither commercially driven nor holding that status of the civically funded arts museum. It is telling that the Demarco Gallery and the Midland Group were both designated as provincial in a 'non-derogatory sense,' indicating what was earlier described as a type of positive provincialism. Rather than being cut off from other art worlds, both galleries actively sought to be involved in wider networks. In order to find their own niche such galleries were required to develop an outlook that worked across a range of scales - from

the local to the international - which often involved by-passing London altogether for reasons of economy, efficiency, not to mention a certain cultural kudos

Although in receipt of Arts Council funding, the Midland Group Gallery was certainly not overflowing with spare cash, annual accounts reveal, that until 1968, income from gallery sales were greater than Arts Council subsidies (DDMA 2/1/1-13). It was common for the work of the gallery to be supported by business sponsorship (DDMA 1/91/12). No precise evidence of who purchased art works from the Midland Group Gallery exists in archival materials; however, interviews indicated that in the sixties most income came from Group member shows, which were popular local events. In addition, their picture-lending library and the occasional auction were used by the Gallery to boost income. However, this was by no means a commercial gallery, with the Midland Group operating under the status of a charitable organization from 1963 (DDMA 1/92/8). The sixties was a period of expansion for the Arts Council, although the Midland Group Gallery was something of a regional anomaly as it pre-dated other regional centres such as the Midland Arts Centre in Birmingham which only came into existence in the 1960s. Indeed, the Midland Group had been receiving Arts Council grants since the foundation of the Group in 1943 and as such were one of the first artist-run groups in the country to do so (Midland Group Gallery 1952).

The Midland Group Gallery can be understood as part of a self-serving circuit of provincial galleries that shared practices and affiliations. A good example of this was an exhibition of works by famed sixties artist Bridget Riley which was organised by the Midland Group, along with Bear Lane Gallery in Oxford and the Arnolfini in Bristol in May 1969 and was toured between these three galleries via direct connections with the artist (see figure 3). This was described in a Director's report as 'an experiment...to organise an exhibition that would not have been possible for one alone' (DDMA 1/91/42). Such activities were commented on by then Midland Group Secretary Sylvia Cooper as early as 1965, when, in an end of year report, she highlighted that there



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2 was 'every indication that the Gallery is becoming an important administrative centre for the visual  
3 arts' (DDMA 1/92/19).  
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9 **Figure 3. Catalogue for 'Bridge Riley Working Drawings' Midland Group Gallery 1969.**  
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14 In 1966 Sylvia Cooper was appointed the first Director of the Group and this was to be a full-time  
15 position that she held until well into the 1970s. The creation of such a position was indicative of  
16 how the Midland Group Gallery had undergone successive years of expansion in terms of the  
17 activities it would take on and services it would provide. Cooper's desire to bring in the most  
18 stimulating new works is something that was achieved by actively looking to and participating in  
19 wider artistic circles. As a Group member explains:  
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30 Sylvia was exceptional in her wish to go out there in the country and keep her ear to the  
31 ground and look for work that was interesting...this has quite a lot to do with the  
32 involvement of art school staff in the gallery and through them contacts with other art  
33 schools, so it wasn't incestuous, it wasn't parochial at all and you felt that there was a kind  
34 of network. Sylvia went to quite a lot of trouble to identify what was going on (Interview  
35 with ex-Group member).  
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47 Asserting that the Midland Group was not parochial or insular effectively draws a distinction  
48 between art that is locally based in terms of production and outlook and a gallery that actively  
49 sought to bring a local area into contact with broader art worlds. The wider outlook that the  
50 Midland Group increasingly adopted is demonstrated in their aim of 'bringing to the region major  
51 exhibitions of anything that is vital, progressive and interesting, whether it be British, American or  
52 continental; to help young artists by giving them space, time and possible financial backing and to  
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provide an atmosphere in which their ideas can develop, lastly to encourage general, local and regional involvement in the activities of the gallery' (Anon 1971:7).

These intentions were best expressed via a number of exhibitions that the gallery held that showcased work by Latin American artists which led to the Midland Group becoming an unofficial centre for Kinetic Art (Whitelegg 2010). In particular the 1968 'Six Latin American Countries' exhibition shows the intricate assembly of artists, mediators and administrators that collaborated in order to pull together paintings, drawings, constructions and prints from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Uruguay and Venezuela. This was an exhibition of an unprecedented size for the Midland Group (Overy 1968), which involved occupying two other sites outside the Gallery, testing the permeability of boundaries that were drawn around the gallery and the spaces that it would physically and symbolically occupy. Figure 4 shows what one reviewer described as 'The wide elegant sweep of of the Playhouse's upper foyer...an almost ideal setting for the large Argentinean sculpture...Not quite ideal because Cesar Cofone's "Yellow Line", all thirty feet of it, has had to be stretched out on the carpet rather than hung vertically, as the artist intended' (Waterhouse 1968). Sometimes physical limits would place unintended boundaries on the Midland Group's aspirations.

#### **Figure 4. Installation of work in Nottingham Playhouse for 'Six Latin American Countries' 1968**

At the early planning stage Cuba was pencilled as another possible participant until the organising committee was 'quietly told by Chile that this would cause a diplomatic incident and no other Latin American country would hang in the same gallery' (DDMA 1/91/28). Figure 5 shows the ground floor gallery with work by the Brazilian artists Sergio Carmargo (white reliefs on walls) and Helio Oiticica (*bolides* on plinth and floor). In the case of this exhibition it wasn't just the literal position of the art works that mattered but also its origin. It is therefore possible to view the gallery not just

as a backdrop for the exhibition of artworks but also as a space firmly embedded within and reflecting to wider cultural (geo)politics of the era. An extract from another Director's report from 1969 hints at the often chaotic nature of one provincial gallery attempting to represent the art of another geographical region:

[I]t is impossible to describe the endless incidents, crises, worries, meetings – often amusing – that resulted in the largest exhibition that the Group has ever staged. Meetings with various diplomatic characters resulted in helpful co-operation with four of the Six Countries – Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Mexico [...] mostly the work came through the embassies, who brought work here specially for the exhibition – Chile five crates of paintings from the other side of America. Argentina flew eight enormous crates over from Paris. Finally the composition of the exhibition was that Argentina showed mostly kinetic work, Brazil prints and sculpture, Chile and Mexico paintings. Venezuela was only represented by three Cruz Diez works from Denise Rene [...] but they disappeared for 7 weeks on the way from Paris. The Uruguayan Embassy suggested we contacted a number of young men who were working in London under the collective name of Taller de Montevideo. Three Carmargos had been promised by the artist himself, but nothing was heard from him so we borrowed one large one from the Tate and eventually we had six examples. This typifies this Exhibition (DDMA 1/91/28).

#### Figure 5. Midland Group Gallery 'Six Latin American Countries' 1968

'Six Latin American Countries' demonstrates the extent and expanse of the Midland Group's art world: from individual artists, commercial galleries in London, international embassies, to national institutions. All were involved in the coordination and circulation of artworks, sometimes across continents, in order to reach their destination for exhibition in the British Midlands. Although on

reception this internationalism was sometimes left lacking. According to one commentator it amounted to 'a faceless exhibition of international art. Works from the very good to the bad which could have been produced anywhere in the world at this moment'(Anon. 1968:31). Nevertheless, the exhibition went on to be shown in six other locations, and was seen by 29,000 people, providing further impetus for the gallery to position itself as an administrative centre for the visual arts.

At one level such an exhibition highlights the cosmopolitan nature of the art world in the sixties, and the Group 'did as much as it could to latch on to international currents in contemporary art' (Interview with ex-Group staff). Yet, it also speaks to some broader themes relating to the globalisation of art, which began to take a more internationally focused outlook in the second half of the twentieth century, when the possibility of a global art market began to take form. In this way, Nottingham was feeding into a wider European avant-garde, rather than directly competing with a London scene. The Midland Group's particular affiliation with Latin American artists exemplifies this. The sixties was a period when many artists from Latin America, mainly working within Kinetic Art, were living in Paris not just in order to tap into the city's longer history as a global art capital, but also as a consequence of the political upheavals that impacted the status and reception of artists within these countries at the time (Camnitzer 2007; Giunta 2007). The multiple affiliations, collaborations, and places that coincided to create 'Six Latin American Countries' speaks not only of the international outlook of one gallery in Nottingham but also of the transnational nature of much art production and consumption at a time when the given assumption is that New York and Paris, and to a lesser extent London, were focal points of a global art world.

## Conclusion

The sixties was a time when, in Britain, provinciality was being taken over by government-driven regional rhetoric. Under these auspices the newly reinvigorated regional arts funding was seen to

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2 be empowering areas of the country that for many years had been overlooked in favour of  
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4 traditional metropolitan-based performing arts. The kind of references to 'the region,' which from  
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6 the mid-60s increasingly appear in reports from the Gallery, fit in with a wider shift in terms of arts  
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8 funding. The sixties was a decade where the possibilities of devolving powers to newly designated  
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10 Economic Planning Regions was still being explored, and the Midland Group Gallery easily fell  
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12 into this regionalist rhetoric which became a driving force behind arts funding. Yet this  
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14 government-driven shift in focus at a national scale was not the only influencing factor in the  
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16 success of the gallery at this time. Equally, if not more important, were the related art worlds that  
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18 the gallery was part of. These can be traced across a number of overlapping scales and sites. A  
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20 locally based core of members and supporters acted as the foundation of the gallery, as did links to  
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22 art colleges which served an important role in connecting the Group with the fast-changing  
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24 landscape of artistic practices and outputs that characterised mid- late-twentieth century art. These  
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26 were people with a belief in the value and purpose of art, although this was not necessarily in terms  
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28 of its monetary value, as evidenced in the very sociable nature of many of the practices that fed into  
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30 the literal and symbolic constitution of the gallery. Therefore, the sense of charting the operations  
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32 of the Midland Group and the spaces that it occupied is representative of a post-war discourse of  
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34 provincialism and a corresponding re-evaluation of regional cultural activity.

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44 Beyond the local scale the Midland Group Gallery held the status as one of a series of provincial  
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46 galleries that were actively setting the agenda for various burgeoning art movements, such as the  
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48 interest in Kinetic Art from Latin America in Nottingham. The very international nature of these  
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50 activities and the national notoriety that it awarded such provincially based galleries complicates  
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52 standard assumptions about the dominance of particular art capitals. The eclectic geographies of  
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54 the Midland Group demonstrates that 'art worlds have their own distinctive spatialities' which  
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56 always privilege artworks as a central and driving force but are heavily implicated in much wider  
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58 cultural politics (While 2003:262). The sixties is often characterised as a distinct time period when  
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1 consumerism became widespread and corresponding increases in affluence resulted in a general  
2 public becoming increasingly exposed to a burgeoning global culture (Marwick 1998; Sandbrook  
3 2005, 2006; Seabrook 2005). It would be easy to suggest that homogeneity in terms of consumer  
4 goods and increasing internationalism would undermine the local particularities of place that forms  
5 such an important basis for provincialism.  
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16 Contrary to Seabrook this paper shows that the vitality of provincial life, as something distinct from  
17 metropolitan culture, was still being asserted in different ways by people involved with producing  
18 an art world in a British city in the sixties. This was a distinctly positive provincialism. By  
19 positioning themselves as part of an art world that was both polycentric and international, the  
20 Midland Group Gallery used their provincial status as an effective mechanism for keeping hold of a  
21 recognisable identity as a provincial gallery with a formidable reputation for cutting edge  
22 exhibitions. This was a type of non-derogatory provincialism, a knowing tactic for negotiating pre-  
23 supposed hierarchical judgments relating to primary and secondary nodes. Marwick (1998:329)  
24 points to a complex cultural geography and politics of the sixties, one where 'The "rise" of the  
25 provinces, of remote regions and minor nationalities, involving the emergence of new purchasers  
26 and new, insistent voices, was an important factor behind the turbulent interactions between the new  
27 intellectual and cultural movements'. The Midland Group therefore helps point towards an  
28 understanding of a provincial art world that moves beyond hierarchies of centre and periphery,  
29 instead suggesting the importance of co-constituted spaces of art production and consumption that  
30 work across multiple sites and scales.  
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54 By taking a historical focus this paper draws attention to an, as yet, poorly charted pre-history of  
55 cultural economies, revealing the rich and complex geographies that existed before creative  
56 practices became positioned as a core indicator of the potential economic vitality of urban areas. As  
57 such it moves beyond reductive readings of art worlds that too easily collapse place, site and  
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creativity as magic ingredients for cultural vibrancy (Currid 2007). Attention to provincial galleries, such as the Midland Group, that operated outside of municipal funding, but were not formal commercial businesses, reminds us that cities have always been creative. Therefore it is productive to understand art worlds as contingent and subject to influence from a range of creative and social practices in addition to art policy and discourse. Whilst this paper has been concerned with putting galleries in their place, and draws attention to the spatial possibilities within Becker's concept of art worlds in order to frame the collaborative efforts that create art works and spaces, further work remains on the geographies of galleries and art. One aspect of this would be acknowledging links with the growing area of museum geography, where cultures of display and exhibition content are already open to critical debate (Geoghegan 2010). As Douglas Crimp (1993:17) points out the national museum can be understood 'as a representation of the institutional system of circulation that also comprises the artist's studio, the commercial gallery, the collector's home, the sculpture garden, the public plaza, the corporate headquarters lobby, the bank vault' thus echoing the multiple geographies and networks of the gallery that this paper has set out. Within the context of the art gallery there is room for further work on different types of gallery space from those run as a small private business to the now ubiquitous regional arts centres (e.g. Tate Liverpool or Nottingham Contemporary) with greater attention to how these function as part of a broader art world. An important element in an expanded geography of the gallery will therefore involve getting inside the art worlds that this paper alludes to: from artists studios, the educational and infrastructural role of art colleges, the ideologies and materialities of gallery space, to the diverse social life of artworks themselves (Banes 2004; Daniels 2011; Hawkins 2010a). Only then will we begin to understand how these elements connect to produce artworks and the spaces they occupy.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Interviewees are anonymous throughout. Where direct quotations are used these are drawn from twelve oral history interviews that were conducted with members and supporters of the Midland Group between November 2007 and April



2008. Quotations have been selected to demonstrate overarching rather than individual viewpoints.. Archival material is drawn from Nottinghamshire County Archives Midland Group Collection (DDMA) in addition to other contemporary newsprint. This paper draws on research that originally formed part of an AHRC funded doctoral award.

<sup>2</sup> An exhibition, "Medieval English Alabaster Carvings, Nottingham", took place at the Castle Museum in Nottingham in 1963 and represented an important review of Nottingham alabaster carvings.

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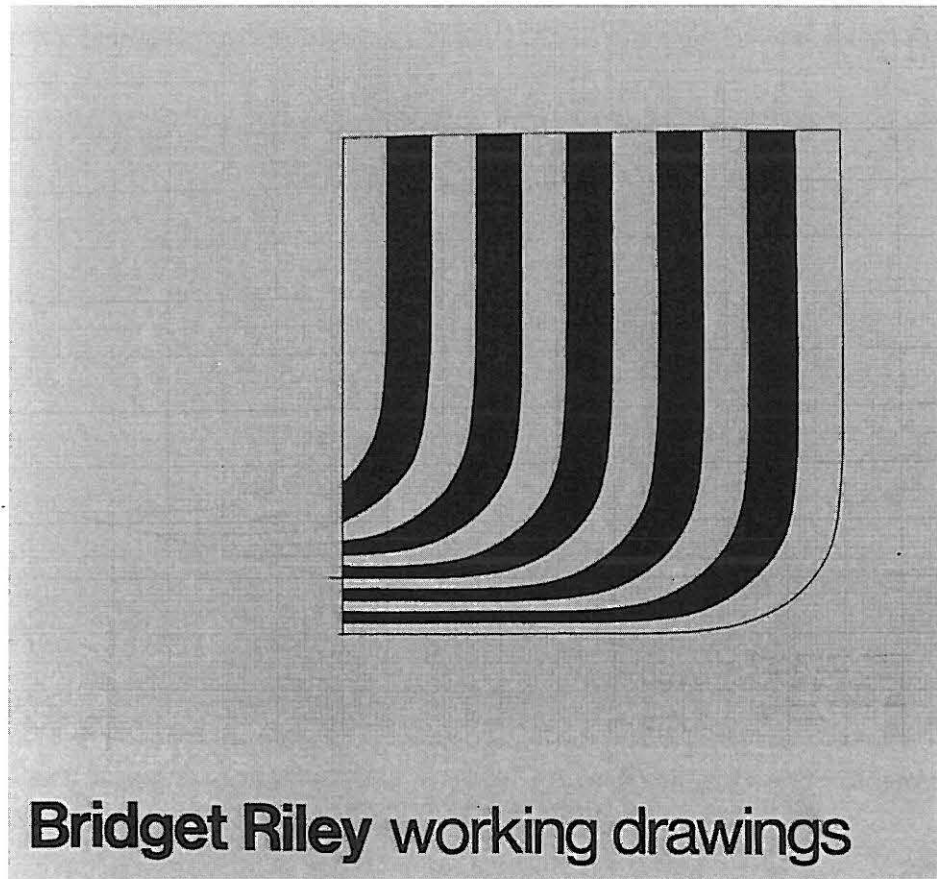
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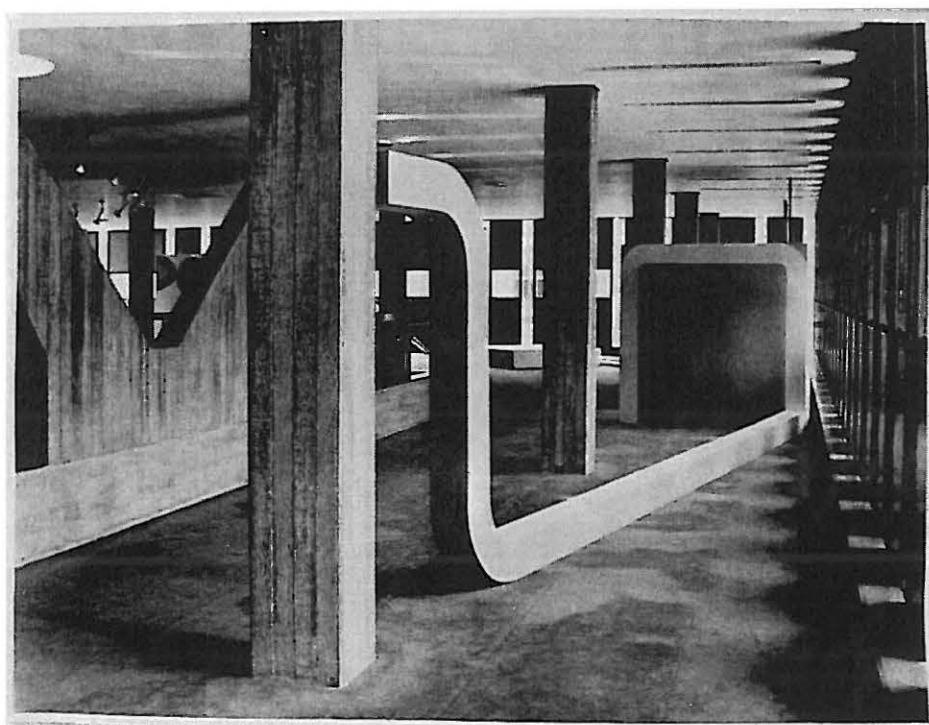
Former Midland Group Gallery, East Circus Street, Nottingham (Author's photograph)  
227x303mm (300 x 300 DPI)



Private View Invitation for 'Eight Midland Artists', Midland Group Gallery 1961 (Nottinghamshire Archives)  
151x123mm (300 x 300 DPI)

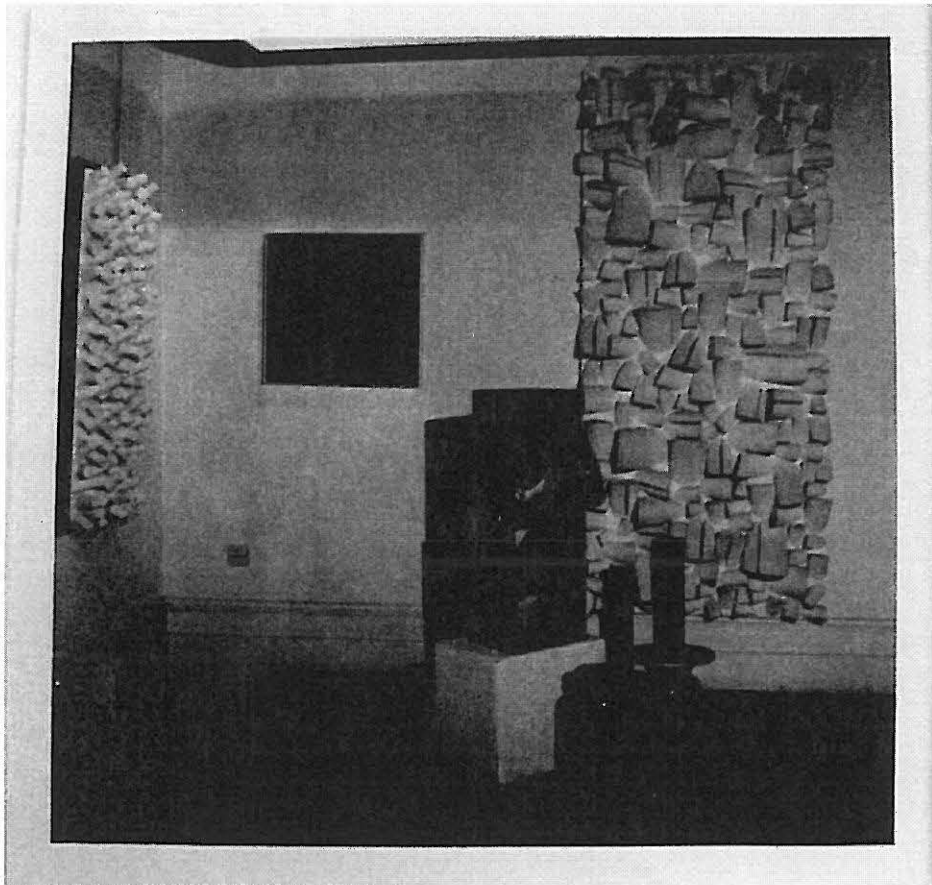


Catalogue for 'Bridget Riley Working Drawings' Midland Group Gallery 1969 (Nottinghamshire Archives)  
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Installation of work in Nottingham Playhouse for 'Six Latin American Countries' 1968  
(Nottinghamshire Archives)  
149x115mm (300 x 300 DPI)





Midland Group Gallery 'Six Latin American Countries' 1968 (Nottinghamshire Archives)  
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