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# Practicing Solidarity

Carla Cruz for Common Practice  
February 2016

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# Practicing Solidarity

This paper reports on ideas addressed at the Common Practice conference *Public Assets: small-scale arts organisations and the production of value*, held at Central Saint Martins in London on 6 February 2015, and discussed at a subsequent meeting at Eastside Projects in Birmingham on 3 June 2015.<sup>1</sup> These discursive events aimed to build on advocacy work regarding evaluation and sustainability as published by Common Practice in the research papers *Size Matters: notes towards a better understanding of the value, operation and potential of small visual arts organisations* (2011) and *Value, Measure, Sustainability: Ideas towards the future of the small-scale visual arts sector* (2012).<sup>2</sup>

Common Practice convened *Public Assets* as a one-day conference to explore the ways in which small-scale arts organisations produce artistic value beyond standard measures and quantifications; provide spaces for public experience beyond the market; and, in so doing, make a vital contribution to cultural wealth. Andrea Phillips was invited to collaborate on the programme and moderate the day. The conference addressed ways of affirming an ethos independent of financial interests within the current landscape of the UK arts sector, and sought to develop a distinct vocabulary through which to argue for this ethos when securing the support of public funding bodies and of the public at large. The conference speakers presented international practices, exhibitions and events that have exemplified how arts institutions can and do operate as essential public assets.<sup>3</sup>

1 Common Practice is an advocacy group working for the recognition and fostering of the small-scale contemporary visual arts sector. The group's London-based founding members are Afterall, Chisenhale Gallery, Electra, Gasworks, LUX, Matt's Gallery, Mute Publishing, The Showroom and Studio Voltaire. *Public Assets: small-scale arts organisations and the production of value* was funded by Arts Council England.

2 The former was authored by Sarah Thelwall and published by Common Practice in July 2011, the latter was authored by Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt and published by Common Practice in December 2012. Common Practice also commissioned this report, and all three papers are available at [www.commonpractice.org](http://www.commonpractice.org).

3 Video documentation of the 6 February 2015 conference is available at <http://www.commonpractice.org.uk/category/news> (last accessed on 26 January 2016).



To further develop the discussions held in London at *Public Assets*, an additional meeting was organised in Birmingham at Eastside Projects with a group of directors of small-scale UK arts organisations. The contributors asserted the necessity of a plurality of values, in opposition to the measuring of fiscal return, and in their discussions considered how small-scale arts organisations' narratives might be told differently and more accurately.

The observations made here are drawn from my direct involvement in the coordination of *Public Assets*; they also reflect my research into critiques of meritocracy and the emergence of cooperation and solidarity as strategies to overcome the increasingly competitive nature of the neo-liberal arts sector.

### Where are we now? Where are we going?

The steady withdrawal of government funding and the simultaneous call for entrepreneurship in the arts, together with the treatment of members of the public as uninformed statistical bodies, leads us to where we are today: a position, as Andrea Phillips attests, where there is a lack of organisation among arts workers when it comes to challenging the conditions of inequality and exploitation that the above circumstances exacerbate.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Andrea Phillips, 'Introduction', presented at *Public Assets*, Central Saint Martins, London, 6 February 2015.



The severe shift away from public commitment to the arts and into the privatisation of culture, through the lens of politicised notions of aspiration at the expense of collaboration, brings about a double bind of competitiveness and demand for growth that presents arts organisations with punishing, precarious working conditions whether or not they choose to comply. In arguing the case for reversing this process and securing ongoing public funding for the small-scale arts sector, I am not undertaking a qualitative evaluation of small arts organisations (this was done extensively and successfully in the previous Common Practice papers), but rather questioning the narrow meritocratic context in which they presently seek to deliver their core missions. Small arts organisations are, and should be, different. They are *different* because they propose alternative ways of doing and making in the art world. As Anthony Huberman notes:

*In the art context, these smaller institutions are proud to be maladjusted: they do not adjust themselves to an art community obsessed with*

*knowledge, power, and scale. Instead, they step onto the smaller and more vulnerable roads and allow learning to replace teaching, camaraderie to replace competition, the homage to replace the explanation, and the dance move to replace the chess move.*<sup>5</sup>

5 Anthony Huberman, 'Take Care', in Mai Abu ElDahab, Binna Choi and Emily Pethick (ed.), *Circular Facts*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011, p.17.

The public support of small and diverse arts organisations must be sustained because their variety is precisely what maintains an open and nuanced arts sector. However, the decrease of public funding for both arts organisations and artists, as well as the narrowing and levelling of funding criteria, promotes only sameness.

6 My interest on the threat meritocracy poses to representation and diversity in the arts has its origins on Andrea Phillips' work on meritocracy; particularly on her talk at The Showroom on the 9th of December 2014 for the book launch: *Grand Domestic Revolution Handbook and Cluster*.

7 *The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870–2033: An Essay on Education and Equality* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1994) is a satirical text by the British sociologist and politician Michael Young.

### Meritocracy 'from fiction to reality' <sup>6</sup>

Michael Young's *The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870–2033: An Essay on Education and Equality*, published in 1958, envisions a society where authority is conferred on individuals on the basis of merit.<sup>7</sup> Meritocracy, as a sort of Platonian social ideal and a measure of progress – whereby justice, social cohesion, progress, fairness and transparency are defended and fewer decisions are influenced by prejudice – leads, in the book, to social upheaval. Young anticipated the current embodiment of rules and self-policing in British society.

How did such a scenario come to be realised? Why has there been no upheaval, as predicted by Young, if indeed we live in a meritocratic society? Considering his book more than fifty years on, Allen Ansgar claims that we are currently witnessing an encouragement to 'seek personal improvement rather than wait for the state to reward individual effort and assist in the reallocation of social position'.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the state of affairs today 'is closer to the system implied by the rhetoric of Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education [2010–2014], who demanded that the United Kingdom should work towards becoming an "aspiration nation" (House of Commons, 24 November 2010)'.<sup>9</sup> Thus, meritocracy has simultaneously entrenched itself in our society and metamorphosed.

8 Allen Ansgar, 'Michael Young's *The Rise of the Meritocracy: A Philosophical Critique*', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 2011, vol.59 (4), p.368.

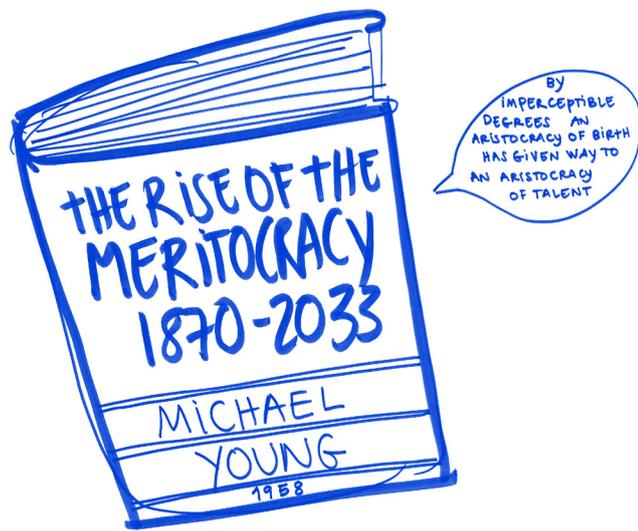
9 *Ibid.* Michael Gove's statement in context: 'the gulf between the opportunities available to the rich and the chances given to the poor has grown wider. [...] Social mobility went backwards under Labour, and it is the mission of this coalition Government to reverse that unhappy trend and to make opportunity more equal. Under this Government, we can become an aspiration nation once more.'

If, in Young's novel, meritocracy requires administrative overview and the distribution of human ability, and the latter is seen as a fixed trait, competition is seen as unnecessary because inequalities match abilities, and society is 'justly unequal'. We have different resources, possessions or advantages because we are deemed *naturally* less 'worthy' than others. For Ansgar, the principles of contemporary meritocracy can be summarised somewhat differently: meritocracy does not require the state's administrative intervention; human ability is seen as malleable; competition within meritocracy, contrary to Young's prediction, is to be encouraged; and finally, 'a perfect distribution of abilities is no longer required'.<sup>10</sup> Nowadays, individual aspiration, lacking in Young's fiction, is the main propeller of social mobility. Society participates in upward mobility based on merit even though systems of exclusion are in place. Social opportunity is in this sense mythologized, as 'citizens are encouraged to take greater responsibility'.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, individuals take up the task of repositioning themselves in the belief that with a combination of merit and effort they will progress. Today, personal ambition, autonomy and competition are essential, and the lack of opposition to this system comes from the double belief that *one can make it and at the same time is responsible for not making it*.

10 *Ibid.*, p.376.

11 *Ibid.*

As Ansgar posits, only those who believe they can perpetually improve and make the constant effort to reposition themselves will succeed. So, merit is at play alongside one's dedication to one's own social progression



12 See A. Phillips, 'Remaking the Arts Centre', in Binna Choi, Maria Lind, Emily Pethick and Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez (ed.), *Cluster: Dialectionary*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014, pp.217–18.

13 *Ibid.*, p.220.

or growth. Importantly, Andrea Phillips emphasises that 'this transformation is not only organisational but also subjective'.<sup>12</sup> It is the embodiment of meritocracy that keeps it in place and eliminates any kind of solidarity. In the arts, at the *avant-garde* of this process, meritocracy has ingrained itself and autonomy is championed. 'Meritocracy removes the contextual and historical basis of any individual or collective emergence. It produces a landscape of individuals whose randomised ascent is based on autonomy.'<sup>13</sup> In sum, the shift from public commitment to the arts to the privatisation of culture dovetails with the implementation of meritocracy in Western societies – it makes us believe that one's progression comes from merit alone and not through systemic biases of inclusion/exclusion, racial or sexual favouritism, privileged backgrounds or economic independence. Those who succeed will feel a sense of entitlement whilst underachievers will feel that they *obviously* have less merit – this undermines any form of solidarity.

### Privatisation, Competition and Individualism: Do we really need to be part of this?

The paradox of the contemporary art world, as artist Alana Jelinek argues in her book *This is Not Art: Activism and Other 'Not Art'* (2013), is that it measures the value of art through social or economic impact while promoting maxims such as 'everyone is an artist'.<sup>14</sup> The promotion of a democratic and anti-elitist field disguises the actual values of art-market meritocracy that organisations operate under. This modus operandi reproduces inequality and limits diversity, and is sustained by our practices. Until we organise, cooperate and challenge it, all of us are involved in its reproduction.

Privatisation, competition and individualism are all consequences of the neo-liberal rhetoric that expresses the rejection of a common connection among people. Bifo Berardi states that the 'imperative of competition has become predominant at work, in media, in culture at large, through a systematic transformation of the other into a competitor and therefore an enemy'.<sup>15</sup> Individualism under this neo-liberal frame, as Rosi Braidotti clarifies, 'considers financial success [...] as the sole indicator of status [...]'. Social failure is accordingly perceived as a lack of emancipation as money alone is taken as the means of freedom.'<sup>16</sup>

The resulting loss of solidarity deprives us, as cultural workers, from political force and creates conditions of self-exploitation and precarious labour. Those who do not acknowledge the great necessity of competition will be cut out. Those who choose to play the game will have to accept

14 Alana Jelinek, *This is Not Art: Activism and Other 'Not Art'*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013, p.46.

15 Franco (Bifo) Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (trans. Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia), Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009, p.80.

16 Rosi Braidotti, 'A Critical Cartography of Feminist Post-modernism', *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol.20, no.47, July 2005, p.171.

17 See F. (B.) Berardi, 'Exhaustion and Senile Utopia of the Coming European Insurrection', *e-flux journal* #21, December 2010, p.1.

18 *Ibid.*, pp.6–7.

19 Quoted in Deborah Sielert, 'Commons that Care – Feminist Interventions in the Construction of the Commons', PDF available at <http://unusualbusinessreader.cascoprojects.org/reader/commons-that-care/> (last accessed on 26 January 2016), p.2.

20 Silvia Federici, 'The reproduction of labour-power in the global economy, Marxist theory and the unfinished feminist revolution', paper presented at the seminar 'The Crisis of Social Reproduction and Feminist Struggle', University of California, Santa Cruz, 27 January 2010.

21 Lyn Gardner, 'Love your arts job? It doesn't mean you shouldn't be properly paid', *The Guardian*, 13 July 2015.

any suffering imposed by this great necessity.<sup>17</sup> But do we really need to be part of this? Berardi proposes that one solution might be to resist systems of progression. 'Decline and de-growth imply a divestment in the midst of frenzied competition, and this is the paradox that may bring us out of the neo-liberal double bind.'<sup>18</sup> Can we afford to divest? But on the other hand, can we afford to continue to believe that we can reverse the disinvestment in the arts by the public sector by operating within their prescribed norms?

## Wages for Cultural Workers

*No struggle is sustainable that ignores the needs, experiences and practices that reproducing ourselves entails.*

– Silvia Federici<sup>19</sup>

Care, or reproduction, is an important capitalist tool for the exploitation of workers' labour; or more precisely, the unpaid labour that supports the status quo. Reproduction, in a broad sense, consists of the multiple activities and relations that daily reconstitute life and labour, that is, everything that makes life possible and everything that continues to sustain it. The reproduction of labour-power, according to Federici, involves a larger range of activities than just the consumption of commodities, 'as food must be cooked, clothes have to be washed, bodies have to be stroked and made love to'.<sup>20</sup>

Alana Jelinek emphasises that our practices in the art world – creative, managerial and organisational – promote and reinforce exploitative procedures and values that we might politically be against. In this sense, we are self-policing our own embodiment of the 'biopolitics' of merit, competition and individualisation, and thereby placing ourselves in precarity. This concern is echoed in the broadsheet press. In 'Love your arts job? It doesn't mean you shouldn't be properly paid', Lyn Gardner questions the lack of payment for cultural workers, focussing on the performing arts arena and stating that it is common knowledge 'that the biggest subsidisers of the arts are those who work in the arts. Very little work would ever make it to the stage if it was not for people giving their labour away for free, or being paid very poorly for what they do.'<sup>21</sup>

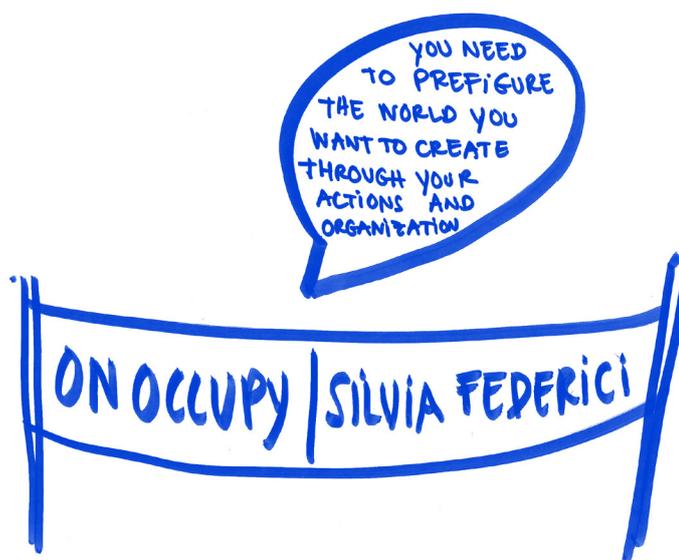
Addressing the need to reverse this situation, Kodwo Eshun points out that the care involved in Federici's notion of reproduction can be applied to the small arts organisation's devotion to 'forms of attention, to the nurturing of ideas, in the building of interpretative communities, to the forming of plots and the plotting of forms, to new forms of disappointment, which are



22 Eshun paraphrased Federici's 'Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle' (Oakland, CA: PM Press/ Common Notions/Autonomedia, 2012) at *Public Assets*, Central Saint Martins, London, 15 February 2015.

23 See also Angela McRobbie, 'Everyone is Creative: artists as new economy pioneers?', *openDemocracy*, 29 August 2001, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/node/652>.

inseparable from new forms of satisfaction'.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, applying Federici's reproductive labour notion to the working conditions of artists and cultural workers makes it evident that competition, individualism and meritocracy go hand in hand with self-exploitation and precarious labour, destroying the social democratic ethos of workplace protection and job security.<sup>23</sup> Federici states that marginalising the arguments of an unfinished feminist revolution around care and reproductive work is a serious mistake. The same can be said about dismissing the care and reproductive work inherent in small arts organisations. If the arts sector wants to contest the meritocratic system it is stuck in, it needs to address the material conditions of the workers who prop it up.



24 S. Federici, 'The reproduction of labour-power in the global economy, Marxist theory and the unfinished feminist revolution', *op. cit.*

If the notion of reproductive labour clarifies how capitalism relies on 'the production of a particular type of worker, and therefore a particular type of family, sexuality, procreation',<sup>24</sup> then examining the conditions of arts workers offers insight into the particular types of arts organisations the sector produces and the limitations within a meritocratic system of its managerial and organisational relations. In this sense, our politics need to be prefigurative, and our practice should be our mouthpiece. That is, we need to advance equality and social justice at the core of each of our organisations; to prefigure the future of the arts sector through the practice of being in different kinds of relationships; and to experience our capacities for cooperation, solidarity and democracy. As Rebecca Atkinson-Lord suggests, we can start by 'considering the withdrawal of our free labour as an act of resistance; as industrial action; as political activism'.<sup>25</sup> It is a daunting strategy, but a necessary one.

25 Rebecca Atkinson-Lord, 'Work in the arts? Then please reconsider all those unpaid hours', *The Guardian*, 11 May 2015.

### Repossessing the Language of Solidarity

*Visual arts are disappearing from schools, art criticism is being marginalized in media and art history is on academic probation. Artists themselves are regarded as profitable investment vehicles in the best-case scenario and annoying welfare recipients in the worst.*  
– Mikael Löfgren<sup>26</sup>

26 Mikael Löfgren, *No exceptions: Value creation in small and mid-sized galleries of contemporary art*, Stockholm: Kilster Group, 2014, PDF available at <http://www.parainstitution.ie/relevant-articles/no-exceptions/> (last accessed on 26 January 2016), p.3.

We know how important it is to make a strong case for public funding of the arts because without it there is only the vagary of the market. We need to

secure places where alternative ideas can be rehearsed and nurtured. As Andrea Phillips puts it: 'Neo-liberal culture is so hard. People's bodies need to find places to take care of themselves and their communities in this hard culture; arts centres should be these places.'<sup>27</sup>

27 A. Phillips, 'Remaking the Arts Centre', *op. cit.*, p.230.

If neo-liberalism within the arts produces only the exceptional artist – just as its post-feminist narrative reintroduced 'the exceptional woman' in the face of the women's movement's effort to introduce 'more egalitarian principles of interconnection, solidarity and teamwork'<sup>28</sup> – then the meritorious arts system fosters a widespread sense of isolation within the sector, and thus new forms of vulnerability. To counter this, workers within the small-scale arts sector need to construct new forms of mutuality and accountability, recognising our common interests as the basis for relations between diverse individuals and organisations. Difference is a central value here, to be both respected and celebrated. Solidarity should be our goal; and, as Paulo Freire puts it, true solidarity is found only in a plenitude of communication and understanding; in love, in its 'praxis'; in action and reflection.<sup>29</sup>

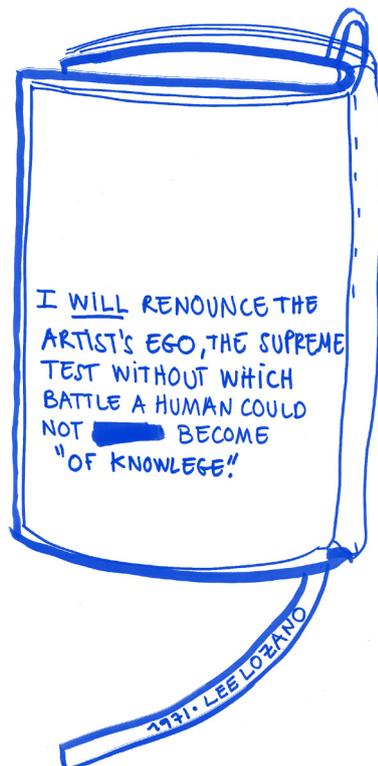
28 Braidotti, 'A Critical Cartography of Feminist Post-modernism', p.172.

29 See Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968; trans. Myra Bergman Ramos), London: Penguin Books, 1996.

In our current context, solidarity is, of course, an extremely difficult idea to put into practice. Individualism and neo-capitalist forms of subjectification are as deeply embedded in the public sector as in the private. We must collectively ask: How to achieve diversity without creating division? How can variation and dissidence be present in equal measure to excellence and loyalty? Can there be a form of solidarity beyond the oppositional model of 'us' versus 'them', small-scale arts organisations versus large ones, private versus public funding bodies? Solidarity, in its reflective model, refers to a mutual expectation, a responsible orientation to relationships; it is aware of the potential of 'we' and how it can be constituted in relation to inclusion and exclusion without solidifying its limits and scope.<sup>30</sup>

30 See Jodi Dean, *Solidarity of Strangers: Feminism after Identity Politics*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, p.29.

We need to develop new forms of solidarity and explore our capacity to work together to articulate what arts organisations provide and need – to propose new ways of doing and being.



# Public Assets: small-scale arts organisations and the production of value

Central Saint Martins, London, 6 February 2015

Speakers: Jesús Carrillo, Kodwo Eshun, Charlotte Higgins, Maria Lind, Andrea Phillips and Lise Soskolne (W.A.G.E.)



Fig. 1 Breakout Session, Central Saint Martins, London, 6 February 2015

<sup>31</sup> Phillips is currently Professor of Art and Head of Research at the Valand Academy, University of Gothenburg.

The main goal of the *Public Assets* conference, devised by **Andrea Phillips**, at that time Professor of Fine Art and Director of PhD programmes in the Art Department at Goldsmiths University of London,<sup>31</sup> was to find forms of solidarity in the current conditions of arts provisions in the UK. In an era that explicitly encourages competition and meritocratic ascent by artists and art institutions, Phillips called for a return to the language that has been taken away from cultural producers and repurposed by capital – the language of autonomy, creativity, cultural richness, public participation and involvement – in order to create much-needed market-exempt spaces of contemplation and discussion. Guest panelists and participants put forward many terms and concepts to be repurposed.

**Charlotte Higgins**, chief culture writer of *The Guardian*, challenged the use of the term ‘small’ to discuss the value and position of small-scale arts organisations in the arts sector. Higgins outlined the particular virtues of such organisations in enabling unique spaces for experimentation, and showed how they stand alongside, rather than simply supporting, larger organisations.

Likewise, **Kodwo Eshun**, an artist, academic and member of the artistic duo The Otolith Group, stated that the value of small-scale arts organisations is not a matter of size but rather of ‘nested capacity’, of ‘platforming’ or ‘plotforming’

(holding durational conversations that form plots which solidify over time while simultaneously questioning themselves). Eshun proposed the use of the concepts of ‘care’ and ‘reproduction’ as Silvia Federici understands them – as the activities and relations by which life and labour are reconstituted.

**Maria Lind**, director of the Tensta Konsthall, a center for contemporary art in the Stockholm suburb of Tensta, elaborated on the notion of deferred value, whereby, as previously discussed in *Size Matters*, small-scale and mainstream institutions are connected through the former’s nurturing of artists and artworks and the latter’s capitalising on those very artists and artworks. Lind advanced Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s notion of ‘becoming minor’ as an ethical choice, connected not to size but to the relational difference between the ‘majors’ and the ‘minors’; or as Lind put it, ‘between those who have resources and therefore are able to reach wider circles, dominate and decide the overall rules of the game, and those who actually invent the new games and find the settings for them, but do not have the power to become widely influential’.

**Lise Soskolne** represented Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.), a New York–based activist organisation advocating for the regulation of the payment of artist fees by non-profit institutions, and demonstrated the precarious relation between arts institutions and artists, arguing that the struggle for public funding cannot be divorced from the working conditions of cultural producers. Soskolne sought to highlight the conditions of cultural production in the age of speculative capitalism, and made a specific call to artists to resist operating in the ways set up by the system, namely by refusing to work with institutions that do not pay them fees.

**Jesús Carrillo**, former head of Cultural Programmes at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, traced the multiple ways in which the museum recently underwent a process of introspection and experimentation during a period of local and global social and economic crisis. He asked how the institution can respond to and include the voice of a new kind of contemporary subject, one defined by desires that go beyond the scope of contemporary capitalist society.

### Breakout Sessions

To open up discussion, Common Practice members, the above contributors and invited arts organisations’ representatives led a series of Breakout Sessions:

- ‘Explanation and discussion of W.A.G.E. certification of artists payment system’, led by Lise Soskolne (W.A.G.E.) and Pauline van Mourik Broekman (Mute Publishing)
- ‘What is the media’s role in creating value in small-scale arts?’, led by Charlotte Higgins (*The Guardian*) and Polly Staple (Chisenhale Gallery)
- ‘The value of the artist’s studio’, led by Anna Harding (Space Studios)
- ‘Diversifying income streams in small-scale arts organisations’, led by Charlotte Nourse (The Showroom) and Victoria Lupton (How To Work Together)
- ‘How to balance and measure the values of localism versus internationalism?’, led by Kwong Lee (Castlefield Gallery) and Alessio Antonioli (Gasworks)
- ‘Publishing, distribution and partnership’, led by Caroline Woodley (Afterall) and Benjamin Cook (LUX)

- ‘Networks – as tools, communities and as forms of elitism and power’, led by Kodwo Eshun (The Otolith Group) and Irene Revell (Electra)
- ‘How does an institution negotiate and work with emerging and temporary communities?’, led by Jesús Carrillo (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid) and Emily Pethick (The Showroom)
- ‘Rural perspectives on small-scale arts organisations’, led by Ian Hunter (Littoral)

Throughout the day participants discussed the missions and values of small-scale arts organisations; questioned the usefulness of scale and smallness as categories imposed by funding bodies; and considered resisting the pressure to grow in size and to develop in quantitative terms. There was a common interest in more transparency, cooperation and solidarity among peers, and in the creation of mechanisms to work together and potentially renegotiate the forms of collectivity already in operation in the UK and across Europe. A general call was made to join already existing bodies and networks, and to ensure arts organisations are properly valued in terms of their egalitarian and aesthetic purposes within broader contemporary culture.

### **Eastside Projects, Birmingham, 3 June 2015**

Special guest respondents representing arts organisations: Rebecca Shatwell (AV Festival), Kwong Lee (Castlefield Gallery), Kate Gray (Collective Gallery), Julia Bell (CVAN), Trevor Horsewood and Matthew Shaul (The Departure Lounge), Gavin Wade and Ruth Claxton (Eastside Projects), Maurice Carlin (Islington Mill), Ben Cook (LUX), Bryony Beynon and Pauline van Mourik Broekman (Mayday Rooms), Julie Crawshaw (Midwest), Gill Park (Pavilion), Ben Borthwick (Plymouth Arts Centre), Niki Russell (Primary), Nick Slater (Radar), Matthew Parkin (Set The Controls For The Heart Of The Sun), Emily Pethick (The Showroom), Laura Sillars (Site Gallery), Helen Legg (Spike Island) and Carla Cruz (Walthamstow Performing Arts Collective).



Fig. 2 Eastside Projects, Birmingham, 3 June 2015

The Eastside Projects meeting was divided into four sections: ‘What are our assets?’, ‘Can we work together?’, ‘Alternative financial and organisational models’ and ‘Setting the terms of policy’. After an introduction by Andrea Phillips, who moderated the day, discussion opened with this question:

*How can we shape policy, our futures and strategies of survival beyond public funding?*

Drawing upon Kodwo Eshun’s talk about care at the *Public Assets* conference at Central Saint Martins, Amanda Ravetz (Manchester School of Art) proposed looking at alternative ways of positioning small arts organisations, starting from the assumption that we are *dividuals*, a Melanesian concept put forward by Ravetz, before we are *individuals*. Challenging the possessive notion of individualism,<sup>32</sup> she asked:

*How can we create spaces of reverie and time to think laterally?*

In the subsequent conversation it was agreed that the arts sector should value the relational rather than the individual; support the different desires and motivations of small-scale organisations in contrast to larger ones; and acknowledge that organisations want to do what they already do better but not necessarily bigger. Notions of energy and longevity were discussed, as well as the tension between the risks of transition and stagnation. The problem of hidden labour was also approached, and de-growth was considered as a strategy.

The group identified a set of common needs: to be more transparent regarding organisational strategies and know-how; to share resources through methods such as time banking;<sup>33</sup> to shape and reappropriate language co-opted by funding bodies; and to build communities of users.

These pressing questions prompt future discussion: Is there a common horizon that small-scale arts organisations are looking for in terms of their common future? And could it be shaped by reclaiming the language of solidarity and cooperation to assert different ways of measuring impact?

<sup>32</sup> *Dividuals*, as opposed to *individuals*, is a concept put forward by the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern in *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). According to Ravetz, Strathern’s argument is that Melanesians do not think in terms of the individual versus society. Rather, as *dividuals*, Melanesians see themselves as always already made up of others in terms of substance, actions, gifts, etc. This is very different from the notion of the individual, who is understood to be in sole possession of her own labour, personal attributes, substances, etc. For Ravetz and Lucy Wright’s work on value and artists’ validation, see ‘Validation beyond the gallery’, available at <http://www.axisweb.org/features/news-and-views/beyond-the-gallery/validation-beyond-the-gallery> (last accessed on 26 January 2016).

<sup>33</sup> ‘Time banking is a tool by which a group of people can create an alternative economic model where they exchange their time and skills, rather than acquire goods and services through the use of money or any other state-backed value.’ Time/bank website, <http://www.e-flux.com/timebank/> (last accessed on 16 January 2016).

**Practicing Solidarity**

by Carla Cruz

**Commissioned and published by**

Common Practice, London, February 2016

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**Design**

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