

Escaping the Neoliberal Gallery

Marley Treloar

Acknowledgements:

My deepest gratitude and thanks to Dr Kevin Walker, my director of studies and Prof Mel Jordan head of the Art, Space & The City research strand in the Centre for Postdigital Cultures at Coventry University for their endless support. My sincerest thank you to Jennie Moran for her time, conversation and hospitality extended to me during my time spent in the Café at Toynbee Studios.

Abstract:

This illustrated essay speculates on alternative economic models for embedding social practice within commercial and public spaces in art galleries in the UK's charity sector. Cultural institutions are being asked to 'do more, with less' in a period rife with budget cuts, reduced staffing, zero-hour contracts and redundancies exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The cultural sector is urged to become less reliant on public money, to diversify revenue streams and look towards other, private stakeholders.

All the while, institutions under the Arts Council England's 2020-2030 'Let's Create' strategy are told to prioritise societal challenges, such as 'inequality of wealth and of opportunity, social isolation and mental ill-health' as well as 'the accelerating climate emergency'. Cultural institutions are being asked to make meaningful, impactful and long-lasting relationships with their local communities inclusive of LGBTQIA+, BIPOC, and people with health conditions or impairments, school children and teachers, champi-

oning mental health, diversity, and equity within their programmes. All the while, those working within the sector are struggling due to low pay, barriers to employment and consolidating of multiple jobs into singular positions.

Social and Community art practices of the 1960's-1990's sought to interrogate and democratise art production and address how this production could enact change in society. Socially engaged art practice showed that art can be a useful tool to explore societal issues and give people agency, space and power to make changes. However, I would like to argue that the way social art practice is implemented within arts institutions today does not fully capture the radical potential of societal change, due to the nature of funding structures and institutional workflows. Barriers to embedding social practice within arts institutions are structural and ideological problems, with governance, finance and requirements from funding bodies being the key barriers faced by social practitioners. There are lessons to be learned from artists, communities and other sectors to better embed social practice within arts institutions and offer alternatives to the current models. I explore how artist- and communities-led institutions embed social practices by discussing new models of democratised cultural spaces, places, programmes, highlighting artists and collectives providing examples of cultural alternatives.

Introduction

In this paper I speculate on the capability of social practice to transform commercial and public spaces within arts institutions towards collaborative, cyclical programmes for embedding communities and socially engaged artists. This exploration of space acts as a frame to interrogate the relationships between artists, communities, and art galleries in the UK's charity sector. Transformation and radical rethinking of existing space is crucial for arts institutions future proofing through cultural austerity, allowing evidenced

deep impact through social programming. I will share the practices of artists and organisational economic models placed within the café, the garden, and the gallery as spaces where economic and collective models exist both within artist and institutional practices. These models explore how these three spaces can further embed radical social models now and for the future.

I first would like to define social art practice as understood within this context. Social and Community practices of the 1960's-1990's (Bourriaud, Larson, Bishop) sought to interrogate and democratise art production and address how art could enact change in society. Social practitioners saw art as a useful tool to explore societal issues and give people agency, space, and power to make changes in their lives. These practices often worked with marginalised communities, facilitating exchange between organisational power and communities they serve, and provide ideas, alternatives, and focus toward political and policy changes. As such, contemporary social art practices interrogate the established political, economic, and social spheres in which they are created and problematise the systems which result in social inequities. Through this interrogation, in this paper I focus on social practices which demonstrate alternative ways of being together, through social practice business models, embedding social ethics into healthcare and art market economics, and creating new shared economies of time. These practices support the artists and communities involved by offering different methods of organising in place of the prominent art world systems which perpetuate inequality.

I feel it is pertinent to review how arts organisations have been shaped by neoliberal cultural policies and the effect these policies have on social practices. To provide an overview for this topic, I will refer to the work of Hewitt, Jordan, Bishop, and Jessop to map out the impacts of policy on social art practices and its context within the UK. As a broad definition, neoliber-

alism/ neoliberalization is a political process comprising policies supportive of 'economic liberalization, deregulation, privatization, recommodification, internationalization, reductions in direct taxation, and decriminalization of predatory economic activities' (Jessop). Due to these policy objectives in the UK, neoliberalism promotes uneven development in favour of economic global market competitiveness, and encourages policies that largely neglect its adverse economic, social repercussions. These repercussions, including growing inequalities of income and opportunity, are often linked directly with the reduction of state funding and state monopolies, resulting in greater poverty in favour of free-market, corporate-led initiatives (Jessop). While often associated with right-wing parties (for example Margret Thatcher and the Conservative party) neoliberal shifts have also been initiated, maintained or backed by centre-left parties, under a 'Third Way' label (Jessop, Hewitt).

Thatcher's Conservative government positioned the arts as an industry which needed to evidence its worth to the economy and began the privatisation of the welfare state alongside it. With the introduction of economic market terminology to public arts funding, arts institutions needed to justify that their activities increased tourism, regenerated cities and supported local businesses for continued state support (Holden). The Labour government of 1997– 2010 deployed similar rhetorics to that of social practice to justify public spending on the arts, pushing a 'social exclusion agenda' (Holden, Bishop, Hewitt) and positioning arts to bring those underserved by society back into work, education and communities. Hewitt situates three mutually supporting rhetorics between Labour's 'Third Way' cultural policies and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and Arts Council England (ACE): 'the three rhetorics are: firstly, the rhetoric of art as a discursive cultural democracy; secondly, art as an economic driver; and thirdly, art as enabling social amelioration' (Hewitt pg 25) and argues that these interconnected rhetorics, while on the surface promote public good, contribute

to the weakening of the public sphere, furthering the privatization of the state and diminishing the transparency of government. Following on from this, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in 2010 promoted the idea of a 'big society', encouraging 'volunteerism' (Jordan) while continuing their "mission to enable all members of society to be self-administering, fully functioning consumers who do not rely on the welfare state" (Bishop 14).

Because of these neoliberal shifts, cultural policy aims as set by the government shifted 'public good' from defunded public bodies (education and healthcare) into art spaces, with cultural organisations needing to evidence to their funders the impacts on education, health and wellbeing on the public, while the social sectors which provided these services are continuing to be defunded and dismantled. Democratisation of art production, as used in social practices which point to the failings of neoliberal cultural policies, are now being used by arts institutions in limited capacities due to these same rhetorics and the constraints of their funders. This is not to discredit the benefit of the arts on people's lives. Art and culture as a 'public good' is a liberal concept which has been at the centre of public arts funding since its founding in the UK (Arts Council England). However, art democratisation has become a tool of neoliberal state control, with institutions being required to commission and develop projects which use social practices through the lens of 'levelling the playing field', fitting policy aims rather than of radical political social change which challenges the political and institutional status quo.

This article poses that to begin to address societal issues and shift the relationship put on the arts as a service provider for shortfalls in government policy, arts institutions must start with themselves, renegotiating how social practices are embedded and supported within their structures and significance of their practices communicated back to funders, the wider sector and the public. To change this, art institutions must break down barriers to

embedding social practice and develop deep commitments to working with social practitioners who challenge political and institutional frameworks, to build new social frameworks together. These barriers are structural and ideological problems, with governance, finances and requirements from funding bodies being key barriers faced by social practitioners (Lynch, Bienkowski). The project-based timelines and reporting periods of funders are too short to accurately reflect the long-term benefits these arts programmes might have on participants, and too short to develop deep relationships between community partners and institutions (Lynch, Bienkowski).

Bishop problematises the term 'engagement' as used by art institutions as an 'ideological reframing of participation, away from collective cultural production and towards marketing and audience development' (Bishop, 00:16:00). Bishop's argument boils down to the difference between 'engagement' as a neoliberal market target and 'participation' as collective social action. 'Participation', I pose, is a deeper action by art institution which requires equality and power sharing, giving the participants agency to enact change within the institution. This goes further than participation as outlined in the 'educational turn' of curatorial practices (O'Neill and Wilson), which considers transforming or giving over the roles of artist/curator and the inclusion of participants and more closely align with the nuanced relationship, as explored for example by the Free Art Collective as 'impossible participants'. Building on Lecerle's 'actant' (Lecerle), impossible participants don't just 'reinforce familiar roles within art's existing apparatus' (Jordan, Hewitt, Beech); instead the 'call for the transformation of art's apparatus demands new places, new actants, new roles, and new tasks for art that are unthinkable within the current configuration' (Jordan, Hewitt, Beech). By this they expand nature collaboration through social practices away from status quo of the division of labour from artist, towards establishing new social relations which seek to create new forms in which

to understand the arts institutions. These new forms align closer with deep activism, social change and transformation of existing relationships and the power dynamics at play.

Building these new relationships is to reimagine how social art practices might be enacted within arts institutions, which confronts neoliberal pressures restricting the potential for social change. In the remainder of this article, I will explore artist and institutional practices which begin to shift this dynamic between artist, institution and public. These alternative economies, while not perfect solutions, offer an insight into how a social practice ethos embedded within arts spaces could begin to change the service and provider relationship rendered between arts funders and institutions towards one of collectivity.

The Café

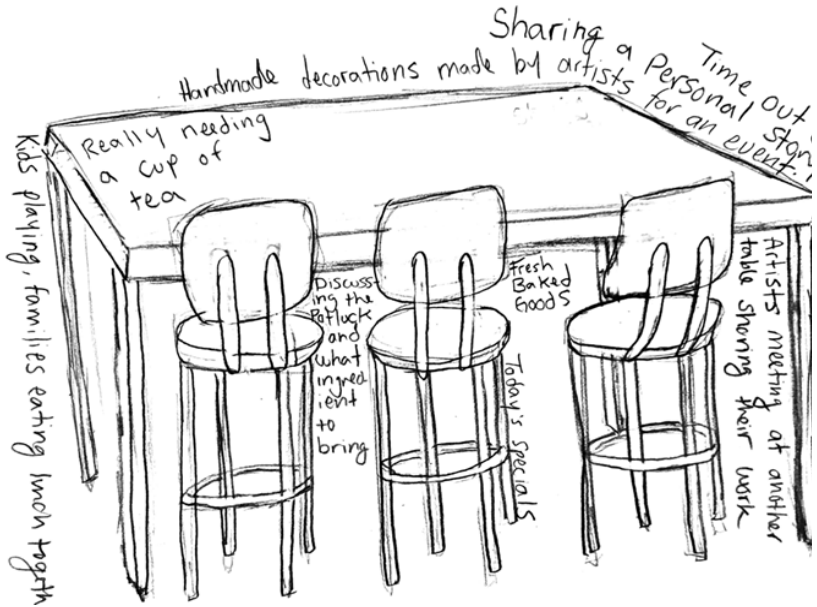


Fig. 1 Illustration done in the Toynbee Studios Café, Marley Treloar 2022

The café is one of the public and income-generating spaces within cultural institutions which has the potential to further embed social practices. Many galleries subcontract cafés on their site, providing constant revenue for the institution in exchange for hands-off management of the catering business. The café may also be built into the business model of the institution under the umbrella of the brand. I would like to illustrate how social practice might democratise the café towards a space for the inclusion of artists and communities in addition to as a business.

Jennie Moran is an artist whose practice explores hospitality as a reciprocal gesture between artist and audience. Her project/café Luncheonette started in 2013 when she took over the closed National College of Art and Design Dublin's (NCAD) canteen, where she previously attended as a student. During Luncheonette's first year, students attending NCAD volunteered at the new canteen, helping prepare, cook and contribute recipes,

shaping the menu with their own personal histories. Moran reflects that the students who helped shape Luncheonette 'are proof that a big educational institution can have a meaningful and genuine point of hospitality; that it sees the magic individuals who pass through it, and it remembered them when they are gone' (Moran). Moran was able to embed the ethics and ideals of her practice into the commercial space of the university – doing no harm and embedding sustainability and climate awareness as core tenants of the menu (Moran). This emphasis on the remembrance and recognition of community participation within the project is a core facet Moran's engagement with social practice within institutional settings.

Moran took up residency in the café of Artsadmin's Toynbee Studios, a live arts development organisation, from September to November 2022, fulfilling the role of artist-in-residence and café-in-resident, during which she offered the space for the general public to work, gather and celebrate at events and parties without the pressure to purchase anything. In addition, she programmed free events called the Morning Producers where anyone from a creative discipline could meet with the artist and programme support staff from Toynbee Studios to discuss their current projects and share breakfast made by Moran and her team. She also co-hosted free, collaborative events with resident practice researcher Malaika Cunningham, titled the 'Rest and Slowness Potluck' which explored the importance of rest and slowness across politics, food and performance in community-owned spaces (Artsadmin). Moran then acted as a consultant in the hiring of a permanent business placement for the café once her residency was over, in which she could advocate for sustainable, small business options. While this social practice intervention was time-limited, it impacted the way Artsadmin used the café as a space for public interaction and how it would be occupied in the future.

Moran's practice of re-establishing the café as a residency space shifts

the business model of the gallery café into a public space for gathering, creating and investigating together the relationship between public, food and institution. Her practice of hospitality reimagines the relationship between public and service sector as one of co-creation, building living legacies of those who contribute to the menu and who share meals together in those spaces. This combined artist and café-in-residence blurs the institutional structure of the artist-commission, as Luncheonette is Moran's art practice as well as being a functional business. Through this, she blurs the lines of what are artist practice commission budgets and what are operational expense budgets. In offering free space, food and experience as part of the residency programme, Moran shifts what could have solely been used as operational budgets of café expenditure towards opportunities for collective social events for the public.

In many institutional funding structures, the café fully transforming into a residency space for artists-in-resident is not sustainable. While the café-in-residence does provide a place for income generation within the institution, the artist-in-resident poses free uses of the spaces, the tension here for the institution is balancing the income generation of the café with programming budget for the residency. In an effort to scale small into these more social functions for the café, arts institutions could take inspiration from adjacent fields by offering guest menus, pay-what-you-can menus, host events, or perhaps collaborate with the permanent café while artist-in-residence in another programme. This would develop short platforms for the institution to develop this social framework without putting the entire café's income on hold. This need not extend only to artists, but communities-in-residence as well, offering space to use facilities, host, cook, and gather within the centre as part of these small steps towards. As such, the loss of income is managed through deliberate choices connected to other budget areas in the programme while also opening access to the facilities

of the café to social practice artists and communities.

The Garden

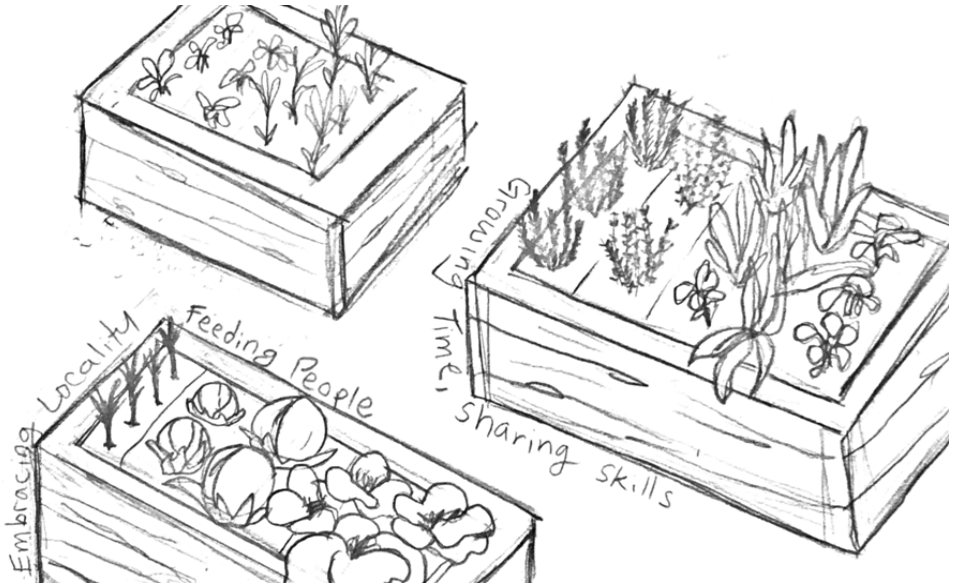


Fig. 2 Illustration of my local community allotments, Marley Treloar 2022

The Pod is set within Coventry Council's Adult Social Care system and funded by the Clinical Commissions Group. The Pod is a programme to support adults in social care by investing time with them to develop skills, community and creativity through the development of a cyclical alternative economy. While not a straightforward social art project, The Pod uses social practices and its ethos of care in tandem. Their programmes use communal garden allotments, environmental activism, arts-based projects, and a soil to table café (Coventry Council) to champion their core aims: 'the right to be included', 'the right to their place in community', to 'access universal and mainstream opportunities (which include training, education and employment)' and 'the right to design and manage their own route to recovery' (Coventry Council). The Pod is made up of three strands of programming: The Time Union, The Food Union and Quiet Activism (Coventry Council). Here I will explore their first two strands and how they might be embedded through social practice in arts institutions.

Time Union is a time bank system between members of the Pod, sharing their skills and time on a give-and-take system. Examples of this include DIY, language learning, music, dance, cooking and career coaching between individual members through mutual exchange. These exchanges between members are facilitated by a paid member of staff, connecting members to meet up when their schedules align.

Interconnected to the Time Union is Food Union, a food activism and garden allotment project based at the Sherbourne Valley allotment in Coventry. The aim of Food Union is building a sustainable vegetable garden which develops knowledge of gardening, growth of biodiversity, and develops skills which will serve The Pod members in the adult health service programme in their lives and recovery. The Food Union supplies 70% of what is served in The Pod Café, with the remaining 30% supplied by local businesses (Coventry Council).

"Gallery time Union"
recognizing
volunteer in-kind
value"

Q: How much would it cost
US to staff the galleries with
Paid attendants / agency workers?

Q: How much are volunteers
Saving US VS bringing in paid
staff?

Q: What do we already spend
Compensating volunteers?

Q: How Else can we share
in-kind support to our
volunteers?

Fig. 4 Questions for art institutions opening a time union for volunteers, Marley Treloar 2022

How could these two programmes be adopted by art spaces to promote community inclusion and more circular economies of time? Many hours of free volunteer labour are already present within the workflows of galleries today (DCMS). The framework of a time union has the potential to recognize the value of the labour volunteers perform within institutions in a deeper, socially engaged exchange than is customary in many arts institutions. This radicalisation of the value of time questions the value institutions give volunteers in exchange for their free labour and against the governmental acceptance of volunteerism as the norm. The accrual of time could be put towards volunteers earning free spaces in workshops, talks, courses, time with members of staff to learn industry skills, or professional development. This could also act as a way for galleries to develop relationships between communities they wish to consult, in exchange for sharing of space, facilities or expertise.

‘In-kind support’ is already a familiar term to institutions needing to define their capabilities of support to cultural funding bodies, and the same language could be used to express the value gained by institutions by their volunteer labour. As such, institutions could formalise processes as evidenced by The Pod which embed sharing of resource from a top-down level. While this on the surface maintains the top-down power hierarchy of the institution, as Raichovich (2022) poses this could be done centring care by building strong communication which allows for the inclusion of volunteers to shape and maintain these processes. Even further, this gives art institutions the ability to advocate on behalf of their volunteers, evidencing their impact on the organisation through formal data demonstrate to other organisation the benefit of these practices which builds momentum towards collective sector shifts away from low-valued volunteer positions.

In sharing resource, the communal allotment of the Food Union could be embedded into interconnecting social programmes with arts institutions

as part of a residency, commission, exhibition, or education programme. For those galleries with outdoor space, window ledges for planter boxes, or connections with local allotments or a garden, this would open another avenue to share institutional resources, provide space and develop an interconnected circular economy between the allotments and café.

Dr Nirmal Puwar, Reader in Sociology at Goldsmiths University of London describes The Pod as, 'a deep activism, a unique case of civic care for people, places, land and multi-species, at a time when civic care is aggressively being eroded through calls to austerity, auditing and capital' (Coventry Council). Taking lessons from The Pod, the art sector has multiple programmes it could carry forward from deep activism and care The Pod supports. By re-evaluating the value of labour and 'in-kind' support that volunteers and communities contribute to institutions, art spaces can challenge the established volunteerism and instrumentalization of unpaid labour contributing to sector precarity and barrier of widening access to working in the arts, towards more social and equitable exchange.

The Gallery

The gallery, as a space within the art institution, provides a different function to that of the café or garden, which is more deeply tied to wider art market forces both in commercial and publicly funded galleries. I pose that the artists who galleries work with are also a community in which the relationship needs to be reassessed through commitments by institutions for more radical, social and communal support for artists.

In this section I would like to stretch towards reinvesting of institutional profits, and how an embedded social and political ethos by arts institutions can seek to address inequities which are prominent within the current art sector. In this, the art institution itself is reimagined as a social practice project, testing the boundaries of the sector it functions within and questioning

why others are not doing things differently. While this section specifically explores different models for fairer artist commission, the need for fairer pay in the sector extends to the unpaid voluntary labour and the barriers to access caused by not sufficiently paying community partners for their time in institutional projects.

The We Industria 2023 report on artist commissions suggests that due to low pay, art institutions are fundamentally inequitable and inaccessible for many artists, and points to the necessity of reforming how artists are paid and their labours valued by arts institutions, in order to evidence the need for policy reform to arts funders (We Industria). With the 2023-2026 ACE Investment Programme (Arts Council England) many arts institutions are re-evaluating their financial viability, having lost percentages of their previous support. Major NPO's and well-renown contemporary art galleries in London such as Southbank Centre, Whitechapel Gallery, Serpentine Galleries and Camden Art Centre (Arts Council England) lost large percentages of funds in this shift of public funding outwards towards the rest of the country. The idea of increasing the pay of artists seems further away than ever before.

I describe Guts Gallery as an example of an arts organisation subverting traditional economics of the art market by developing circular economies of support whilst still operating within the system of the art market, to counteract income inequality. While this differs significantly in function from the previous café and garden examples, interrogating the relationship between artists and institution can evidence how an ethos of embedded social and political practice can develop towards social change even in the most economically driven elements of the art sector.

Guts was founded in 2019 as a nomadic gallery, its name stands for 'Grafting Under Tory State' and sets the tone of the political and ideological framework for the gallery (Guts Gallery, Perdu). Led by Director Ellie Pen-

nick, the gallery is aimed at tackling structural inequalities that plague the art industry, including racism, classism and ableism, by exclusively working with artists from underserved backgrounds and identities. On the surface, Guts is an independent commercial gallery, facilitating the creation, exhibition and sale of artworks. However, the ethos underpinning the business model of Guts aims to offer an alternative to the traditional art market for artists who have been excluded from entry through other channels.

Guts opened two online exhibitions over the Covid-19 pandemic, 'When The Shit Hits The Fan' and 'When The Shit Hits The Fan Again' (Guts Gallery) on Instagram, exhibiting the work of established artists in the art market who agreed to contribute 50% of their profits to a pool of support for the emerging artists exhibiting alongside them. These exhibitions sought to address the economic impact of the widespread cancelling/postponing of exhibitions for emerging artists who had less sector representation and suffered most from the loss of commissions due to the pandemic. In addition to artists supporting each other through the communal sharing of profits, Guts takes less than the established 50% commercial art sector percentage of commission, ensuring the artists earn a fairer percentage compared to other commercial contracts. This rebalancing of the relationship between gallerist and artist, ensuring artists are paid more for their work allows for the development of mutually supportive collective funds, which begins to address income inequality through an agreed social practice of sharing resource collectively.

The Guts model plays within the system, reinvesting in their artists and upholding commitments to access and equity by developing new artist funds through existing ties with the commercial art market. This model of supporting the sales of early career, underrepresented and marginalised

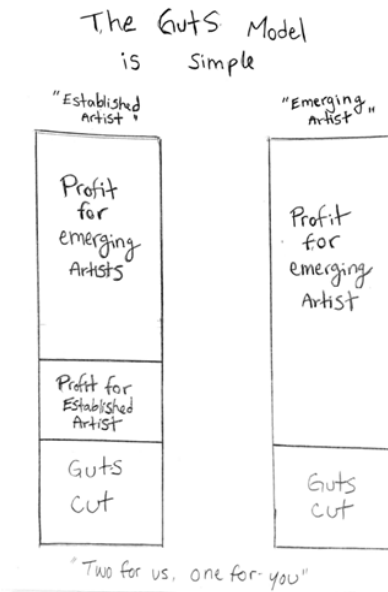


Fig. 5 Napkin math illustration of the Guts Instagram Sales Model, Marley Treloar 2022

artists through pools of collective funds generated by the wider art market could develop towards radically rethinking how art institutions commission and work long-term with artists. It shifts away from a service model of artists selling individual works for individual profits, and towards a collective decision to share resource, including institutional profits for the equality of pay for the artist community.

Discussion

Charnley poses that due to the impacts of neoliberalism, the institution "tends now to block attempts to situate art in the political currents of the present" (Charnley. Pg 18). Yet, despite the pushback externally on politics being situated within the institution, social practices have increasingly become commissioned in the art sphere. This tension that exists then is between the neoliberal will to neutralise politics within the arts institution

while simultaneously employing cultural policy which promotes the commissioning of social art practices, even in instrumentalized forms. The neutralising and co-opting of radical social practice, as seen in the legacy of institutional critique can then be questioned if it is as relevant today and instead gives opportunity to position the institution as against neoliberal pressures alongside artists. To do so, requires development towards collaborating with art institutions to develop agency and advocacy for change.

One argument is that social practices have been successful due to their ecologies outside of the art market, however, the examples explored in this essay provide insights into artists who view the institution as required partner to explore what a social art sphere might look like under neoliberalism. Charnley writes that these collective social practices which reimagine the art institution “sometimes mimic corporate identities” (Charnley, pg 48) and thus work within the art sphere to evidence how it could be formed differently. This can be seen in the practices of Moran, The Pod and Guts Gallery, offering alternative ways for social practices to collaborate with, ethically drive and create formal structures of social art institutions. Circular economies are one way in which social practices can begin to shift institutional pressures of neoliberal cultural policies away from a lip-service relationship for the defunded welfare state, and towards the development of a social ecology which advocates for change.

To address the prevalence of ‘volunteerism’ (Bishop, Jordan) arts institutions commit to reducing the underpaid and free labours which profit institution as a first step in advocating for the need of increased funding. Included in this is the amount of unpaid labour existing in current artist commissioning model, through commitments to fairer pay (We Industria), arts institutions combat inequity, and make commissions more accessible for social practitioners. Deeply embedded of social practices over long-periods of time (Lynch, Bienkowski), such as The Pod provide an example of

how an individual institution can offer alternatives to existing sector wide frameworks. The arts are not a gap filler for health services, but contribute to wider societal need, of belonging and prospering within a community. In addition to advocating for increasing funds, by sharing existing institutional resources art spaces can continue to democratise access to physical space, pushing back against wider privatisation efforts.

Revisiting the role of impossible participants (Jordan, Hewitt, Beech), each of the three case studies positions the artist, public or institution in a moment of poignant transition away from established models and brings with them their own barriers of increased staff capability, oversight and structural change to financial models. Critically, this puts institutions and social art programmes in a place of precarity, needing to declare openly the issues within the current public funding model and demonstrate their programmes as an alternative example of how the sector could function more collectively. With increasing funding cuts, to make these cyclical practices sustainable in the future, institutions must advocate, better articulate and reflexively evaluate how these social practices contribute towards social change across the entirety of the arts ecosystem – artists, institutions, publics – not for ‘levelling up’ the arts but by providing tangible actions which combat structural inequality.

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