

**APPROPRIATION AND OPPORTUNISM:
A STUDY OF FOUR NON-COMMERCIAL LONDON ART SPACES**

Elisabeth Tomlinson

January 2021

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Introduction

The purpose of this research project is to consider methodologies of sustainability for art spaces particularly striving to exist alternative to the commercial art market. The context of this paper is in four non-commercial art spaces based in London: iMT Gallery (iMT), Unit 1 Gallery Workshop (U1GW), Exposed Arts Projects, and Gasworks and Triangle Network (Triangle). The analysis and conclusion of this study are derived from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the directors of each space: Lindsay Friend, Stacie McCormick, Sasha Burkhanova-Khabadze, and Alessio Antonioli respectively. To understand the context in which those conversations sit, I first study the socio-political environment of the broader art market in which these organisations operate. My particular focus is on the extent to which neoliberal mechanisms within the art market shape or pressurise the inner workings of London art spaces both tactically and theoretically.

The research aims are: first, to delineate how structures of the commercial art market are experienced by independently acting artists and arts enterprises based in London, United Kingdom; second, to describe how neoliberalism determines definitions of “success”, “value”, and “rigour” in the art market, including how those definitions determine funding opportunities for art spaces; and finally, to formulate possibilities for art enterprises to exist alternative to neoliberal market values and theorise alternative ways art communities might be sustained and expanded.

Each of the four organisations in this study has a stated mission of supporting artists and developing contemporary art, a mission I assume to be shared by every gallery. How they each work to accomplish that in their programmes and methodology is briefly introduced below, and explored in depth in the following chapters.

Gasworks is a partner organisation under Triangle Network, both directed by Alessio Antonioli and established as a non-profit organisation. Founded in 1982, the Network connects arts organisations around the world. Their ambition is to support emerging and mid-career artists, but they have a particular focus on international exchange and partnerships. Their focus is also on sharing knowledge between their partners (all of which are independent and located around the world, including Gasworks in London) to aid with funding strategies and building autonomy for their

partners in the Network. They provide residencies for artists and host exchanges, exhibitions and workshops.

Exposed Arts Projects was launched in 2018 by Sasha Burkhanova-Khabadze and registered as a Community Interest Company in 2019. They are an interdisciplinary space that positions art practice not just as a means of production for exhibition and display, but as a method of research. They are built around viewing artists as knowledge producers, thinkers, and researchers, as well as makers. They hold four exhibitions annually but house under their roof a number of projects and groups responding to or guided by a yearly proposed research question, such as in 2019: "In the times of uncertainty and disinformation, when there is no given system of belief to rely on...what tactics and tools do we use to empower ourselves?", and in 2020; "How can we de-bias the notion of 'intelligence' from anthropomorphism?"

Unit 1 Gallery Workshop (U1GW) is a residency and gallery space founded in 2015. Stacie McCormick, Director of U1GW, states their principles as providing time and space to artists, allowing for a focused practice of rigour and integrity. Their ethos is to prioritise the process and labour of the artist, not just of the resulting artwork. Stacie also asserts the need to determine value and integrity of work amongst artists, rather than via a third party or by the measure of sales.

iMT Gallery was founded by Lindsay Friend in 2005 as a non-profit limited by guarantee. iMT focuses on new media, multimedia art and artists. Their stated purpose is to support new and multimedia artists, but also the field itself, pushing and developing experimentation. They represent four artists or art collectives, and have built an exhibition programme on playful, boundary-pushing, experimental art forms.

Research Structure

The following chapter outlines the research methodology, including the research design and method of data collection. Chapter two takes a broad view of neoliberal structures, as well as their ideological implications. The chapter then localises the theoretical discussion in the city of London, and in the lived experience of artists based here. Chapter three connects the artist's experience with that of the four art spaces in this

study outlining their financial structures, and where the broader London art world may impair or challenge their ambitions.

Within this context, Chapter four plays with intersecting challenges and solutions in what this study refers to as “opportunism” or “appropriation”: the creative or “shady” tactics each space enacts in the day to day functioning of the art space. Finally, chapter five draws together each space’s financial model, programming, and ethos to sketch their broader identity and finalise the discussion of the study with each space’s distinctive contributions to the art world of London.

Chapter 1: Methodology

This research will use a qualitative and critical approach to provide a detailed understanding of neoliberal capitalism's structures within London's art world, and the consequent personal and socio-political ramifications. The research project follows an interpretivist paradigm, as both its researcher and research participants are recognised as subjective, and the conclusions of the research are constructed and open to differing interpretations (Arthur et al. 2012).

Research Design, Data Collection, and Analysis

Given the interpretivist nature of the study, the qualitative research methods best suited are in-depth, structured and semi-structured interviews triangulated with a literature review of both theoretical texts and a range of studies on the art market globally and in London specifically (Check and Schutt 2011). As the data set consists of engagement with a small sample of participants, and involves the researcher's active, critical participation in dialogue, the data is not intended to be exhaustive but to reveal personal experience within political contextualisation and engagement with theoretical framings.

Participants were selected based on the legal status and stated ethos of the organisation being specifically non-commercial. Ensuring scope and diversity in the small sample, I included organisations with founding dates ranging from the oldest in 1982, to the youngest in 2018. The organisations are also of varying sizes, in terms of employed staff and budgets, but with a common factor of being situated in London. Finally, each participant was chosen for their difference in particular focus or ambitions, for example: new media, research, international exchange, or emerging artist support. The directors of each space were contacted throughout August and September, and interviewed between September and November 2019.

I began my data analysis by coding two broad areas of interest in the interview transcripts: financial structure and organisational ethos. From those coded categories, I drew out first the stated barriers or challenges in achieving the stated ethos, second where the stated ethos was specifically hindered by financial restraints, and third what I

titled negotiations or compromises within those restraints. I then stepped back to a broad perspective, drawing connections and contradictions between each of the four interviews. I analysed and coded each interview in a cyclical process with further readings. Finally, I coded areas where binary categories intersected, and coded these “opportunism” or “appropriation”; somewhat dirty words but used and redefined within my interviews to mean a certain shadiness of tactics used to fund space within the restraints of the art world and market.

Limitations

As a research project with only four research participants conducted by an emerging artist with a vested personal interest in its content, this study is recognisably highly subjective. This cannot be entirely allayed, but as mentioned in the previous section, I have attempted to frame the research in a range of studies based in London. This study is written in the context of London, and while it is not universally scalable in its particular details, the broader conversation is happening on a global scale. I limited the scope of the study to London for clarity and accuracy. This study also does not propose changes to the art market of London and the funding structures within it, but instead speculates on what might be possible within it. Within this limitation, I hope to have presented a plurality of solutions to the “problem” of neoliberal capitalism in the art world.

Ethical Considerations

I have complied with the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA 2018) at all stages of my research process. Voluntary, informed consent was given by each participant before beginning the interviews. They agreed to participate with me following written and verbal communication of my research process and rationale.

This study is an open discussion of potentially sensitive subjects including financial details of each organisation. Throughout the interview process, each participant had the authority to make anonymous any information they might find sensitive.

I was commissioned to conduct this study by Unit 1 Gallery Workshop as a participant in their writing residency programme. Because of the nature of the residency, I have had more frequent conversations with the director, Stacie McCormick, than with any other participant. While this is an important contextual clarification, Stacie agreed to the same rules of consent as the other participants, and the only resource sighted here is the same interview conducted with each of the other directors.

Chapter 2: Systems at play

First, art has always had buyers and sellers. This study is not a nostalgic lamenting of a past era. Second, neoliberal market shifts are also not localised to the art world, but embedded in all facets of contemporary life, famously accelerated in the Thatcher-Reagan era (Cohen and Centeno 2006). And finally, the rise of neoliberalism as we know it refers to particular laws and policies, but it also seeps into our assumptions, our worldview, values, and expectations. For this study, I am not singularly concerned with monetary funding and the ethos of exchange, but with the social, relational, and personal outcomes of its structures. The following chapter first takes a broad view of neoliberalism, and second roots the discussion in London-based studies and in my own observations as an MA Fine Arts student in the city.

A Broad View of Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is characterised by market competition, minimal state control, and individual entrepreneurship as the means to the end of economic development (McCowan 2016). Where markets did not previously exist, they are created through the privatisation of publicly-funded services; a rising trend widely commented on and lamented in the art world since the 1990s (Jelinek 2013). Neoliberalism is first a theory of economic practice, but it is underpinned by ideological assumptions including an ethic of individual freedom, choice, and responsibility (Han 2017). As an ideology, it holds that social good is attainable through maximising the reach of the market and by bringing all human action and interaction into its domain (Cohen and Centeno 2006, 36; Harvey 2007).

Neoliberalism and globalisation have had a profound impact on the art market. According to Sholette, the value of art before the rise of neoliberalism was determined by the cultural status of galleries, museums, and critical reviews in New York, London, Paris, and, to a lesser extent, Berlin (2017). These were the centres of the art world: the standard by which smaller centres were measured, and the magnet to which young artists flocked. Prominent galleries and museums consecrated the value of artworks and the reputations of artists based on their perceived cultural clout. Within a neoliberal art

world, monetary value rather than cultural significance became the seminal factor in defining “good” or “valuable” art (Sholette 2017). Bauman, writing in the midst of this growing phenomenon, argues that the significance of an artist or artwork is decided less by aesthetic merit and more by the publicity and the notoriety it attracts, as notoriety attracts attention and attention accumulates capital (1997). As a result, major exhibitions are organised to ensure mass appeal to in turn justify and further inspire investment. Jelinek adds to this by critiquing the neoliberal rhetoric of open access, saying it does not reflect the reality of an art world that quickly congeals around the artists of the day as a means of maintaining funding and cultural authority (2013, p. 25).

According to Jelinek, the neoliberalism and globalisation of the art market has only served to expand the influence of superrich collectors as defining figures in the assessment of artistic reputations (2013). This has two major consequences: first, criteria based on capital jeopardises difficult, controversial work in favour of undemanding, sensational work; and second, significantly, money becomes the determining factor in the works that are noticed and the works that are historicised (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Cooke 1988). This again has implications for the aesthetic standard altogether, the work that is supported, and the work that is remembered. We, the general population, are then left with a version of art history that has been determined by a very select group of collectors, curators, funders and galleries. These socio-economic changes undermine, if not erase, the final remnants of a modernist view of art as an exceptional, autonomous entity outside the sphere of capitalist production. Instead, art under neoliberalism is a commodity dictated by the laws of supply and demand (Jelinek, 2013, p. 241; Sholette, 2017, p. 56).

The ideology of open markets and personal freedom has broad structural influence, but equally shapes artists’ individual prospects. Neoliberal policies have quite concretely increased the pressure of financial incentives for artists. Neoliberal discourses have reshaped our very expectations of a creative career. The following section examines the individual artist within the London market.

The Artist in London

The widely explored topic of artists' working conditions in the UK, while not the central topic of this research study, is still pivotal to a contextual understanding of the art market and art spaces in London, as they are all intrinsically linked to artists themselves. Their walls are empty without us. This section offers a brief overview of studies localised in London which also set my position as an emerging artist within, and impacted by, this ecosystem.

The *Paying Artists Campaign*, launched in 2014, brought to us bleak numbers on artists' pay. The study told us what all the but the naïve know already; artists are in financial crisis. It found that artists in the UK earn on average £10,000 or less per annum. A widely explored topic in *The Guardian*, the undervaluing of artists generates titles such as "Artists' low income and status are international issues" and "By paying artists nothing, we risk severing the pipeline of UK talent" (Jones 2014, 2015). Jones points out that this £10,000 p.a. is just 37% of the UK's average salary (2015). In their own 2016 study, The Freelands Foundation adds that while that may be the average, two thirds of artists earn less than £5,000 per year from their practice and only 2% report to earn more than £20,000; the extremely fortunate among us are earning a relatively modest wage (Sim 2016). According to a 2016 Arts Council England study, 90% of us say our practice alone does not provide enough to live on, albeit "live on" denotes a subjective benchmark (Livelihoods of Visual Artists Report | Arts Council England).

These numbers and their fallout are widely discussed, but let me illustrate it this way: I am studying towards a masters in fine art in London, and what I read in studies of the art market is not taught via the curriculum, but it is written on the walls of the university. First, "portfolio work" is discussed as a given, expected, even preferred or exciting prospect. Second, I do not know the economic status of my colleagues in university; at the least, we each have the means either by scholarship, loan or personal funds to pay several thousand pounds in fees. Of 42 students enrolled in the first year of study, 23 are presumably white US American or European, with the second most represented group being Chinese students at 13. That means only six students represent any other background, with the Black community being entirely unrepresented both in the student population and list of professors in the programme, of which all but one is white. Next, my cohort is the largest intake in one year, the year before being the

second largest. This has the immediate consequence of spreading studio space and professors' time thin, but also leads eventually to a surplus of graduates. These, among others, are the issues we face today.

Beginning with portfolio work, seven of ten artists hold at least two jobs, and almost one half hold more than two, according to the Arts Council (2016). Banks and Hesmondhalgh (2009) point out that while preferred by some, portfolio is defined by insecurity and self-exploitation, which sets up expectations of low or no pay for artists, sweetened by the message that we work for "the intrinsic reward of creative work". Galloway et al (2002) discuss the consequences of portfolio work as detrimental to actual creativity, splintering artists' time between the studio and the hustle of applications, social engagements, and the ever-promising pursuit of "exposure" – not to mention other paid work outside of their art practice. More recently, Gunnell and Bright (Gunnell and Bright 2010) point to all the ways in which the requirements for success as an artist involve a certain brand of palatability and sociability. This sociability, Morgan and Nelligan's 2015 study found, specifically disadvantages working class men who are least inclined towards the "hustle" and rapid adaptation required by portfolio living. Jones adds that these factors combine to establish a "club culture" that leaves artists to chase after trends and titles, and replaces a culture of open enquiry with performativity (2017). The Arts Council took note that identifiers of success in the art world have shifted from hard work, persistence, training, and talent, to frequent exhibitions, critical timing, support from family, and talent as the necessary recipe for success today (2016).

According to Gregory Sholette in his book, *Delirium and Resistance: Activist Art and the Crisis of Capitalism* (2017), people with pre-existing access to monetary or social capital quite obviously have disproportionate access to universities, which in turn provides them with an added stock of social capital through access to peer networks, teachers, facilities, and professional connections. This is particularly significant in an art world where opportunity is notoriously facilitated by personal connections (Jelinek 2013; Majavu and Pissarra 2011; Sholette 2017). These few crucial career-aiding opportunities stratify artists before they even begin. According to Maclean, to name one study, the demographics of artists are increasingly monolithic (2016; see also Arts Council, 2015; Banks and Hesmondhalgh 2009). So-called "portfolio work" and low pay

become added factors in narrowing the pool of successful artists to those with economic backing from parents or partners (Maclean 2016). This is a local reiteration of a globalised and neoliberal structure that concentrates and commercialises art to the detriment of a diverse diaspora of art making.

The cost of surviving as an artist after art school continues to rise, particularly because many artists determine that they need to live in London in order to access the capital's cultural institutions and contacts. In addition, across the humanities, there are more highly qualified postgraduates than can possibly find sustainable employment in their field (Sholette 2017). The expansion of university degrees as gatekeepers to the art world not only indebts a generation, but also contributes to an inflation in the number of artists rising in the past three decades. According to Sholette, an artist surplus is a central feature of the neoliberal art world (2017); this mechanism of exclusion does not operate outside of the system, but is a symptom of the system. Gaining an MA in Fine Art is less about the pursuit of training and creative production, and more about purchasing a membership to the inner circle of the art world.

The promise of neoliberalism is that of individual freedoms. What its articulation of freedom does not address is a crucial question about the conditions through which one accesses freedom and choice, nor does it address legacies of discrimination on the grounds of able-bodies, class, race, sexual orientation or gender that might hinder freedom and choice (Tunali 2015). The subtext of the promise is that those freedoms are earned through the relentless pursuit of success in a system whose definition of success is a moving and narrowing target. Byung-Chul Han argues that neoliberalism promises freedom, but conditions it on hyper-individualisation (2017, p. 1-4). Han calls the neoliberal self the "project" self: the project sees the means of attaining freedom in the competitive drive for completion, achievement and optimised attainment (p. 1). Neoliberalism drives each individual to self-exploitation through the race for production of capital. The freedoms neoliberalism offers are therefore in crisis with burnout and depression accelerated by a compulsion to achieve. In Han's words, "Although the achievement-subject deems itself free, in reality it is a slave. In so far as it willingly exploits itself without a master, it is an absolute slave" (2017, p. 2). The project renders any revolution of the exploited against the exploiter impossible as there is no collective

We when we have adopted the belief in isolationist freedom, as we are in fact both the exploited and the exploiter (p. 8). In sum, neoliberal “freedom” is not concerned with identity, affect, or plurality; it is concerned with the principles of production and accumulation (Burgin 1986).

Artists’ pay in London has no lack of study. The big art fairs, famous art galleries, and levers of power pulled by wealth are also sensationally explored. What I haven’t found is a more graspable, localised exploration of the ecosystem around artists’ pay. Our plight is intrinsically linked to the functioning of galleries and arts spaces in London. The good news is that there are many and they need us – the bad news is that they are in crisis as well. In my discussions with the directors of iMT, U1GW, Exposed, and Triangle Network, I noticed that nearly point by point, each of them is hitting against the same barriers as individual artists. The points outlined in this chapter are no more saliently summarised than in Sasha’s description of Exposed’s financial model:

I want to be very honest because I’m very curious about other spaces like us and how they survive. I think this is a really big problem today and it’s a bit painful, not disappointing, because you understand how it works, but it’s a bit painful to get rejections for another application and then you see who they supported after all and [what] you see is...a lot of “hype practices”. It narrows what people will work with because they know this is what’s getting funded. If you want to do something that feels different and is not oriented [towards] selling to as many people as possible, you will find this trap where there’s not a real way [to] fund it... Which takes us to this really difficult decision because we need to find the grounds between what we want to do at the top of our ambition versus what we can do in order to continue doing it (2019).

Chapter 3: Portfolio Funding and Sustainability

This chapter pulls the macro picture of neoliberalism in the art world and the micro consequences on individual artists into an examination of the financial structures and strategies of each of the four spaces in this study.

Funding Structures

The piecemeal funding strategy of portfolio work holds true for each of the arts organisations in this study. Each of the directors I spoke to were generously transparent in describing how they structure their funding model, and other factors that make it all work.

iMT is a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee, and Lindsay describes their funding as a mixture of three factors: funding, sales and occasional personal financial contributions by herself and iMT curator, Mark Jackson. Lindsay splits her time between iMT and running a second business, which supports some of iMT's financial costs. They also procure funding for about two of their shows a year.

Unit 1 Gallery Workshop's current financial model relies on an investment of personal savings, which Stacie states is "a limited resource but the financial model at the moment." She goes on to describe a list of additional initiatives the gallery has taken on to move U1GW towards financial independence including: renting the space in the off season, which brings in 30% of their total rent; one-off events at day rates; and in 2019, they launched a set of fundraising dinners at which they also launched "the edition series", a series of limited edition prints developed from the Workshop Foundation's collection, to which each artist from the gallery's residency programmes has donated a piece. Stacie also referenced consulting fees that she attains from her work with other galleries and residency programmes, and the sales of her personal artwork, all of which combine to offset the bricks and mortar costs of running U1GW.

Sasha began Exposed Arts Projects with one year of full funding from the board of Kensington and Chelsea, but upon losing that funding, the organisation now operates

by applying to funding on a project-to-project basis, in collaboration with groups working in the space. Additional funds for day-to-day costs come from friends of Exposed, as well as small student grants from universities.

Gasworks and the Triangle Network rely on public and private funding, one of their main funders being the Arts Council. Money provided by the Council, however, must be used within the UK so while the stability it provides trickles through the Network, applications for further funding outside the UK are submitted separately for each project.

“Triangle and Gasworks are intrinsically linked financially because both my salary and the salary of the deputy director are paid by the Arts Council. It’s paid for what we deliver in London, but also for the fact that we have this international network and our job is to maintain it... that’s where I’m able to concentrate on Triangle, because I know my salary is paid.” (Antoniolli, 2019)

When asked if their current model is sustainable, each answered no, but each with a degree of optimism. Beginning the conversation with Lindsay Friend, who meets iMT’s assemblage funding model with hope and energy, she nonetheless works long hours to maintain it. She states:

“We are built on me working 35 hours per week and running another business. I work 70 hours per week and I have for 14 years. Can I sustain that? At the moment yes, but I can see how I would need to change my way of operating.” (2019)

U1GW is also managing long term sustainability questions as Stacie describes the challenges of establishing financial autonomy without orienting the gallery towards a “capitalist model”: “[Right now], it’s no more no less a charitable organisation with two backers, myself and my husband, which is unsustainable long term”. She continues, however, that this is a stage of any young enterprise, describing U1GW as a “...dynamic startup that’s building a reputation and community [which is the] foundational strength to provide a self-sustaining organisation” (2019). Gasworks and the Triangle Network operate on the largest budget and have the most established base

of years, reputation, and functioning to ensure further funding, but Alessio still describes their work as in crisis: “There is no regular funding for [the Network]. It’s [always] searching for funding, trying to create clusters of projects [with] partners and trying to raise money for that” (2019). Exposed is similarly ‘OK for now’, as Sasha put it, the model of gaining funding project by project is “not ideal but it works”. Though the model is constantly uncertain and “on-the-go”, she continues that applying for longer term funding doesn’t fit the work of Exposed, as it doesn’t clearly fit one discipline or institution.

“Arts-based [projects] could apply to Arts Council funding, [projects] that are more about creating a scientific research environment could apply for arts and humanities, a different discipline. It’s a very on-the-go model, and it’s not structure, and I don’t know how to make it structure because it would mean changing Exposed a lot and this is quite a painful idea... I don’t want to lose the interdisciplinarity of what’s going on here.” (2019)

Herein lies the crux of the problem, the question of loss or compromise. The next set of questions posed to each director addressed compromise and conflict in the battle between ambition and budget; what’s possible and what’s practical.

Willing and Unwilling Compromises

Beginning on the macro scale, according to Alessio, one of the problems they face is that there are “less structured opportunities [and] less funding opportunities for residencies [or] exhibitions, because there’s less money”. He attributes this to a political rise in conservatism, nationalism and right-wing policies globally. This particularly impacts Triangle, as funding opportunities for cross-cultural exchange are what allow their programming to continue. This has perhaps not caused, but further encouraged Triangle’s purpose to shift towards:

“...making [our partners’] local infrastructure more sustainable [to] allow these places to have a fixed point in which they’re not constantly waiting for the donor from Europe or America or your own country to give you your next lease on life, but you’re looking for a situation in which you can generate your own income...” (Antoniolli, 2019)

The drying up of public funding has also caused them to shift to private funding, as entities such as banks appear more and more in the art market offering scholarships, grants and awards to artists and art spaces. All money has strings attached, nothing is pure, but fundamentally public money is for public good, private money is for private good. The very mechanisms of neoliberalism are at play as the void left by public funds quite quickly fills up with private interest.

Localising the discussion back to London specifically, 2019 is the first year since its founding that U1GW will break even: “We operate at a loss year on year. This year we might break even, but we are breaking even by exploiting Stacy McCormick as an artist.” Both Stacie and Sasha do not take a salary for their work. Sasha, like Lindsay, has another job, and Stacie describes personal savings and familial support. All three self-exploit, so to speak: a compromise of self for the preservation of their programmes and ethos. As outlined in the first chapter, this is a frequent and rising ultimatum faced by artists (Banks & Hesmondhalgh 2009). Each of them invests their time with great purpose and optimism, but when we are talking about working for free or lack of funding in the arts, these women are whom we’re talking about. And it is connected to us as artists. Sasha described what they are and are not able to provide for the artists who work with Exposed:

“We can’t provide anything in cash, and if they want to make an artwork they need to sort that out themselves. What we have is a space that they can use as much as they want, and we have lots of equipment they can use.” (Burkhanova-Khabadze, 2019)

There are quite concrete bills and costs associated with any gallery space. The ones most fluid and therefore first to be compromised are the salaries of the directors, and fees for artists.

My conversation with Lindsay outlined several practical day-to-day decisions that make iMT sustainable and give her room to not compromise on their programming. For example, living in the gallery space, which makes her responsible for only one rent bill at the end of the month. They have also rented from the same landlord since iMT's founding: "[iMT] is running and the landlord respects my loyalty, so I feel that there's a security there, but not entirely. They could change at any time, I'm not oblivious to that."

Lindsay runs the space with her colleague and the gallery's curator, Mark Jackson. The working hours of two people powers iMT and are frankly a limited resource. The gallery then represents just four artists, runs four exhibitions per year and maintains a small gallery space. Throughout the conversation, Lindsay discussed how she and Mark balance the dreams and practicalities of iMT between their two personalities and skills; Mark leaning heavily into the integrity and experimentation of the programme, and Lindsay counterbalancing with the strategy and planning of running the space. The compromise they are unwilling to make is the programme itself.

The programming of each space, be it residencies, exhibitions, projects, research, exchanges or their very methodology and ethos of working, is what each director is least willing to compromise, and adamantly so. But the reality is that financial limitations also begin to encroach on the freedom to enact or pursue programming aligned with the space's ethos.

Exposed began on a full year of funding from the board of Kensington and Chelsea. What they offered was unique to an area more oriented towards museums and commercial galleries. But in their second year of operation, Sasha describes how they lost the board's funding: "I think the enthusiasm went down because they would see the numbers and they wouldn't be able to put us in a box. Now, when I see the projects that they choose to support, they're more straightforward." Their loss of funding came, according to Sasha, as they shifted to position themselves as fully interdisciplinary as a "research and think and do tank". Their programming is experimental both in content and structure, with exhibitions fluidly defined and nearly entirely dictated by the process

of making. Exhibitions could therefore be a step in the overall process rather than a result. This could be a series of lectures or discussions, a game, a research project or the like. Essentially, they do not always involve something being hung on the wall, which is what we expect from an art space.

“Once we stepped from a more defined path of being an arts organisation, towards something more blurred and uncertain, this was the moment when we started having problems with funding.” (Burkhanova-Khabadze, 2019)

Their programming therefore chafes directly against the stream of neoliberal expectations that pull artists and artworks towards definable and indeed marketable content.

“Do we want to say we are an arts space, full stop, and just accommodate our activities to the box of what is expected from an art space or can we experiment and try to find other sources of funding? The second option is what I want to do. The first is what we have to do sometimes. And that’s why you will see projects that are more framed as art [events] because it’s an easier and more straightforward way for us to get funding for them.” (Burkhanova-Khabadze, 2019)

This brings us to the question of how much influence funding bodies or the overall pursuit of sustainability have on the content on our gallery walls. Triangle Network has a history, an output, and a reputation spanning nearly 40 years that undeniably grants stability and a certain assurance of funding, yet Alessio still describes how their programming can be pushed and pulled by funders’ interests:

“At the moment there is interest in supporting projects in Africa – it goes with investment, it goes with where the interest is, so here this German bank is funding that. I’m sure that will change with time like there was a time when it was all about Latin America or all about India and the South Asian subcontinent. Money comes with strings attached and a wave of interest and yes, we’re being

opportunistic because if we know that someone is interested in funding activities in Africa, and we have partners in Africa, we go for it.” (2019)

He goes on to describe this as the game of funding: finding points of mutual benefit for the funder and for Triangle. This “strings attached” is an inevitability in the art world we are each up against, which is why Lindsay is particularly interested in sales as a means of establishing not only sustainability, but autonomy.

iMT, like Triangle, is a not-for-profit organisation, which does not mean that you can't make money, but it does give a structure or perhaps an ethos on how the money should be used and reinvested. When iMT started, they chose this legal status because of visions along the lines of an educational institution, but Lindsay describes how that eventually changed for iMT:

“After the first five years...there were two things going on in my mind: I am literally throwing stones from the outside. No one is taking us seriously because we're not part of the art market... At the same time, it felt like every [funded] project was a false start, and I felt a need to continue working with certain artists. I said, let's start to represent artists and change our model of operation... What I would like to see is more sales, [which brings] more sustainability, that has to be it, especially as a non-profit, especially as a small gallery. This is us standing on our own feet and being able to cultivate a collector base as well as being amongst your peers and existing.” (2019)

U1GW and Exposed are also moving towards a version of sales that would allow them to maintain their programming without compromise. Stacie has plans in place for building an online sales platform, and is building a membership programme for all artists involved in their residency programmes: “In my opinion, [this is] really our ticket to turnover of funding and sales and ways for the artists' practices to grow and for us to generate income that will help keep the programmes running. That's the next level” (McCormick, 2019). Meanwhile, Sasha is projecting into 2020 a series of educational programming that Exposed could offer to schools, trying to move away from

dependency on either funding or sales of artwork: “At the moment, we are trying to find more ways to make money that are not through funding, but through making classes and thinking about how to use artists’ knowledge and things that they can produce” (Burkhanova-Khabadze, 2019).

Lindsay asserts that she believes, and has proven for 14 years, that their system of funding is sustainable. She says, however:

“I don’t think it’s possible to make a lot of money if you want to do it the way we are doing it. I could say, OK, I’ll be commercial and show loads of painting. Perfect, the collectors would all be there getting that painting...[but] we’ll lose sight of what’s important and then we should just do another business, something that will make more money – this is about a life’s work.”

Similarly to this idea of a life’s work, Sasha expresses how she is asked about the validity of her time investment at Exposed considering the lack of monetary return. She is firm in her belief of the worth of Exposed, but is still faced with the question of financial viability. We closed our interview, however, with a question of definitions:

“What do [we] mean by sustainable? Something that’s capable of going on from year to year with some predictability and stability? We feel unsure about the future and [have] financial insecurity, but at the same time we have this growing pot of people who get what we do and see how it benefits and they come back and then help us – some financial, others with donations, and others with human hours. It sounds a bit idealistic, but sustainability is not always about cash... I have this – not belief – but fact-based and people-based belief that it’s not only me who’s trying to continue, but there’s a group of people who are really passionate about this way of doing things and who are driven by this idea...” (Burkhanova-Khabadze, 2019)

Now, quite obviously, we all have bills to pay, but Sasha points to an underlying value system that says both labour and sustainability are *solely* measured monetarily. Each

space has a different idea of how to attain stability or longevity for their organisation. It could be argued that none and all of them have managed it. Triangle represents, let's say, "the most stable" and has proven to sustain itself since 1982, but it is still not certain. What happens to international exchange in the wake of Brexit? Will austerity measures further limit public funds for the arts? Money is, in 2020 London, an obvious and absolute necessity, but it is still malleable and the institutions providing it are not fixed or certain. What each of the spaces have in common is what Sasha is pointing to in the case of Exposed: no matter the amount of money, what sustains each space is an investment of time and purpose by their directors, their team, and their artists.

Chapter 4: Survival Techniques

Chapter two outlined the neoliberal market structure, which first centres on open access, deregulation and privatisation. The values embedded in the structure are then defined by broad and sensationalist appeal and monetary value, which shifts the scope of artists' work towards marketability, shedding complexity, nuance, and challenging or difficult practices in favour of work that brings capital, be it monetary or cultural. It is important to me to maintain a bird's eye view of the art market in as much as it is important to zoom in and address resulting issues like artists' pay and public funding for art spaces. The shortcoming I find in studies on the art market, artists' pay, exclusion or representation, for instance, is they are not often discussed in tandem with the structures and values maintaining or indeed causing them. I cannot offer a singular solution, as erasing these challenges would take no more and no less than an entire cultural shift from our governmental policies to our cultural values. That may be a battle worth waging, or it may exhaust and distract from the important work of actually creating in spite of the system. As neither I nor these four spaces have the power to uproot the system in place, this chapter instead focuses on what we *can* do, and what is already being done. It is adopting shady tactics to open up spaces, to appropriate values and expectations, and to act opportunistically. My hope is in presenting, not a solution, but a plurality of tactics that expand the possibilities of art making between and beyond commercial constraints.

Opportunism and appropriation

Both Stacie and Lindsay are interested in curating important, innovative, thought-provoking, "good" art, but are re-appropriating the very definition of "good". They both have the closest of the four to a classic gallery model, but fill that somewhat predictable model with art we haven't seen and therefore art from which we have something to learn. However you choose to define or phrase the question of "good" art, Stacie, through U1GW and the dozens of artists who have worked within its walls, believes that artists should reclaim validation from the institutions of art and should self-validate.

“We really want artists to take ownership of their practices, [to bring] their practice to the world without a third party. We’ve had a long history with academic external validation; that the smartest man in the room had to tell us what to think. I think there’s a real humanism now that says that’s gone because that power is gone. Giving this crucial respect to the viewer and the producer, and a synergy of the two, as a valid experience, raises everyone to ‘smart enough’.” (McCormick, 2019)

U1GW hosts three solo residents and three groups of ten residents in their Radical Residency every year. This means that about half of their exhibition programming is reserved for artists that they are personally invested in encouraging and developing regardless of their previously established reputations and resumes. Stacie talks about the calibre of work produced and the energy exchanged between “the radicals”, and the confidence built up by the implied trust of a programme that allows them to work and exhibit. She also refers frequently to the professional profile of U1GW and how quickly it has been raised in an art world unwelcoming of newcomers. She accredits this to the integrity of work being created by artists who are validating themselves, building each other and are given the trust that their work is valid. Stacie’s ambition is to appropriate these loaded terms of the professional or institutional, by putting those validating tools into the hands of artists themselves (2019).

At the top of iMT’s website “About” section, you will see: “We don’t support names, we support artists and art we believe in.” I asked Lindsay about this specifically, and she explained to me that if their stated ethos is the development of new media art and artists, then it is contradictory to follow reputations and names.

“It would be easy to fast-track my way to something and [to show] anyone and everyone so that people will say ‘wow, I have to go to that show.’ [But] I’m more interested in showing the artists that you don’t know, or artists that have been overlooked. It goes back to the idea of trying to develop contemporary art – if we’re all doing the same thing then what are we really learning and doing?” (Friend, 2019)

This openness to new artists and art that pushes expectations is what freedom within neoliberalism promises, but adverse to risk, quite quickly retreats from. And it is a risk when numbers and sales determine not only your potential monetary sustainability, but also your weight and reputation as a gallery as a whole. Centring your exhibitions and programming on the *development* of contemporary art seems quite obvious, but in reality, it's become a quite radical rarity.

Freedom from Funders

Of the four, Exposed has a structural model least like the traditional gallery. They do not take any commission if an artist's work sells in their space, nor do they orient any of their programming towards sales or even towards exhibition in a concrete sense. Exhibitions emerge from the projects hosted within the space. The form they take, and the point in the process at which they occur is entirely determined by the nature of the work and the intent of the artist. Sasha describes their structure as more like a cloud diagram of connections than a schedule of events with different groups negotiating and collaborating to experiment in their space. The flexibility allows projects to mutilate in the direction they need, and Sasha ties this freedom to, ironically, a lack of funding:

“Maybe there's some good elements when you don't have the big funder or the big board of people who supervise what you do. Here we don't have limitations and people can experiment and not be scared to fail because people who come here, they expect this honesty in delivering. We would maybe lose this with an obligation to report to an authority – and they would ask: ‘So, how many women came? How many of this kind of person came?’” (Burkhanova-Khabadze, 2019)

What she's speaking of in the latter part of the quote is the necessity to quantify the value of a programme by measurable outcomes. One of the central indicators of acquiring Arts Council funding for projects is “Public Engagement”. They ask quite direct questions around who you will engage, how many, and by what specific means. There

is obvious interest by the Council to have a wide impact for the projects they fund, but it has two significant consequences: first, it favours artists and spaces with already established networks through which they can ensure a large number of participants in their projects, and second, it prioritises breadth of audience over depth of audience.

“From the very beginning, I understood that the project I am trying to create is quite a niche enterprise. I didn’t delusion myself with the need and aim for attracting large audiences. The idea is to attract people to whom this work is relevant... It’s not about getting a large audience. It’s about involving people who can be helpful, useful and somehow benefitting each other’s practice and thinking.” (Burkhanova-Khabadze, 2019)

Exposed has the freedom to have blurriness and unquantifiable worth in their programming precisely because they are not beholden to a governing body, but are entirely run by those invested in their ethos. We could say they have freedom: the dichotomy of neoliberalism is that “freedom” is attained through burrowing into its restrictive systems, not by remaining on its margins.

Triangle is also focused on providing a level of freedom to their artists to focus on process and to develop research and work without the pressure of an end result. This has to do with their non-profit status, but also with their long history, which establishes a sort of reliable income from funding bodies. But Alessio still describes how “...the money is still very much embedded in everything we do, but it’s for a different reason.” This goes back to the way that reliance on funding pushes and pulls organisations in their direction or defines the parameters in which they can work. What Triangle has found to be the key is finding the space between the demands of multiple funders:

“...it gives you more autonomy. The more strings you have, the more you can’t be everything to everybody, but you can make sure that you remain yourself in a sense. When you meet a funder and they say, “We’d love to give you money, but you have to do this and this and this,” and you say, “Well, I’d love to get your money, but I can’t because I’m also answerable to this and answerable to that.”

The more supporters, the more you can be yourself, paradoxically. (Antonioli, 2019)

This is admittedly a privileged loophole to have access to, and one not afforded to the other three spaces in this study. In fact, it points to one of the problems of the neoliberal market in that even public funding, such as the Arts Council, and certainly private funding, follow each other and accumulate around low risk artists and spaces. The same applies to the city of London itself, which, despite the discourse of globalisation, open trade, and exchange in the past decades remains a concentrated “centre” of the art world. This aids all of the spaces in this study not just with an obvious access to a busy and thriving art world, but also with the perceived clout of what it means to be based in London. In Alessio’s words:

“[Triangle] doesn’t deny the fact that there is an interest by artists and by the system to clump things into these major art centres and, although there’s a lot of impetus to decentralise these spaces, they do hold a lot of important resources, so you can’t write them off. ...Unfortunately, we still live in a world that if you studied in London, it gives you kudos. It’s about balancing it out.” (2019)

In the same way that a space like Gasworks or Triangle presents a low risk due to measurable outcomes and traceable history (a history that we could speculate may have had a harder time establishing itself in this current climate), London is a low risk city. Globalisation, rather than establishing a genuinely collaborative exchange, far more readily solidifies a single channel input of culture and status into “global centres”. Alessio is in no way naïve to this, and continued this self-criticality with a reference to opportunism:

“I think there’s something to be said about being opportunistic. In many ways a problematic word... [but] an example of that is that we use Gasworks as a gateway into the Network because it’s tangible, it’s in London, because it’s in the last few years been successful and people hear about it so... That’s when

opportunism works: when you become a way in and the benefit filters through.
We are a constituted organisation with lawyers, a financial and legal structure...
[We use] that legal entity to funnel the money where it's needed." (2019)

Finding a basement in which to get things behind the back of neoliberal structures may never bring about a revolution: That could be argued endlessly in endless directions. What I see in this idea of appropriation or opportunism (meant with all flattery) is a tunnel creature digging just under the foundation of capitalism: sometimes squeezing through tight spaces, sometimes redirecting, but moving and making new space that aerates for the rest of us and sets the neoliberal agenda on shakier ground. It's opportunism as a tactic, appropriation as a strategy.

Chapter 5: Identity

The final recurring theme throughout the interviews with each director is the question of identity. This is tied up in their ethos and in their financial model, but it seems to also be the negotiation of the two: where they align and where they conflict. Firstly, is a defining of identity based on what each space is not?

“[The Network] is not an identity that comes out of a franchising sector that you’re rolling out, a model or set-up, or visual identity; we’re not Starbucks. The partners share the same ethos, but the way that ethos is manifested is different because it’s a different context run by different people. The Network [is] a slippery thing. Some people totally get it, others don’t, but that’s a murkiness that’s worth having. If we were to try and clarify things more we would have to get rid of the nuances, but that’s what gives each partner their uniqueness and value.” (Antoniolli, 2019)

Alessio stresses throughout our conversation the particular ways in which Triangle works between partners. It’s not a discourse of globalisation that results only in further “diverse” talent accumulating in London: it is an exchange between regional and global partners for the sake of learning. It is not Western Saviourism: it is strength in numbers, and a recognition of differing needs in different countries. Importantly, it’s an identity whose “murkiness” and nuance work against the essentialising discourse of rising nationalism and protectivism (2019).

Alana Jelinek (2013) discusses in depth how the commercial market, funded in large through private investment, congregates around the easily defined, marketable and sellable. Recurring in my conversations with Sasha and Alessio, who both have no focus on sales, was a similar centripetal force pulling them to a clear and defined identity in order to obtain funding. As already discussed in the previous chapter, the non-commercial world still holds interests and agendas in whom and how they fund. From my conversation with Sasha, Exposed has struggled to locate their funding strategy, as their identity is entirely and deliberately counter to clarity. Similar to the murkiness Alessio refers to, Exposed is built to keep space for fluidity, interdisciplinarity,

enquiry, and knowledge production. All of which she puts in contrast with clarity of identity:

“I wouldn’t say I wanted to make something that would then become a second Whitechapel Gallery or a commercial enterprise. It’s about aggregating people who sense a need for an alternative space which is not a university, not academics, not [the] art market, it’s not a government institution, but [a] space where people can just work without the risk of failure, and think together, not being scared of asking stupid questions or being pressed by the need to produce a certain thing by a certain date.” (Burkhanova-Khabadze, 2019)

Exposed Arts Projects looks directly in the face of neoliberal values, and responds with an ethos of nuance, research, and knowledge production in an environment of soundbites, misinformation, and late-stage capitalism. They have a distinct identity, but what they identify with is fluid and unquantifiable. The question facing Sasha at this point, of course, is: How can that last?

A “brand identity”, or at the least a clarity of purpose, is by no means a negative in a city saturated with art spaces all vying for limited funding. Lindsay and Stacie speak of it as a strength, and Alessio as a necessity. iMT has a distinct identity and Lindsay draws it in contrast to blue-chip galleries, describing how she shifted from adhering to the “professional” presence of commercial or institutional gallery spaces to the playful space that is iMT today:

“We wanted a heavy tone to our brand and sillily, we went into a formula: a stark white website, the commercial professional image. [But] you can’t keep using a formula that doesn’t work. We’re not going to be a blue-chip gallery...I think I’m not prepared to work in the same way as everyone else anymore. I’m not going to have that website that’s clinical, I’m going to have a website that looks like Instagram because I want it to be accessible, I want it to feel normal and usual and be easy to navigate and to be fun. One of the things we’re interested in is making sure both we and the art [are] friendly.” (Friend, 2019)

iMT acts as a space that dissolves barriers between the viewer and the artist by ensuring comfort, humour, fun, and honesty in delivery; expanding the definition of valid or “good” art into the “uncouth” or “low class” and having no shame in fun.

Interestingly, Stacie discussed her goals with U1GW in direct contradiction to Lindsay’s rejection of the commercial image or blue-chip gallery. She asserts that:

“There are many artists and organisations that cheat themselves in their status: they don’t want to look like the big art galleries, but - I don’t know how to articulate this apart from saying that we want and do present ourselves on a high calibre... [to have] respect within ourselves, but also from without because of how we are presenting the work and exhibiting the work.” (2019)

“High calibre” is something socially defined and constructed and is only by assumption directly associated with a blue-chip gallery or professionalism as defined by the commercial market itself. U1GW is comfortable in the professional identity of the gallery model, but within that image Stacie is intent on establishing a growing network of artists that prove their merit by holding each other to account rather than handing validation to a third party. To Stacie, the process of establishing authenticity and integrity of work is oriented away from the commercial, but towards the institutional and academic.

“The shows are not built on sales, they’re built on academic integrity. We’ve had sales but we don’t [regularly] – I think it’s a flaw [in] the system, but think it’s also given us credibility. Our brand integrity is probably light-years ahead of where it would be if we were really trying to sell the work.” (2019)

That “brand” is wrapped in the words credibility, rigor and integrity, which were sprinkled throughout our conversation.

Referring again to Jelinek’s writing, one of the central consequences of a neoliberal art market is the shedding of plurality and the disappearance of small

alternative spaces (2013). What is important is the possibility and space for both nuance and clarity.

Conclusion

Each of the four art spaces represents one of the salient critiques that tell us capitalism has reached a critical point of destruction. Triangle is a London-based art network with the social and cultural weight of a centralised and stratified art world, which enables its sustainability. Lindsay is whole-heartedly self-exploiting herself working 70 hours a week to keep the doors open, and is moving into art fairs to reach the most criticised promise of neoliberalism – freedom through independence. U1GW is not oriented towards sales in their exhibitions, but in their identity and image they have wholesale bought into the blue-chip profile of professionalism and merit – words that were a consistent theme throughout my conversation with Stacie. Exposed is seemingly the “freest” of commercial influence, both ideologically and structurally, but in no way free from the often-exclusionary presence of academia, and is the most precarious in its financial position.

In the writing of this study, I have examined a range of texts written from predominantly two perspectives: that of the thinkers and that of the doers. Broadly what I observed is an overwhelming pessimism from the thinkers or the theoretical texts, and a certain level of turning-a-blind-eye-optimism in the texts written from the inside of gallery spaces. In sum, I’ve found that we are actually somewhere in the middle. It is possible to theorise endlessly about how we each fall into the trap of our own neoliberal indoctrination. It is possible to endlessly examine numbers that tell young artists and hopefuls that our prospects are bleak. It is also possible to allow your head to stay in the clouds (or the sand) with dictums like “change happens slowly” which only serve to stifle imaginings of a more equitable art world. In speaking to the directors of Triangle Network, Unit 1 Gallery Workshops, Exposed Arts Projects, and Image, Music, Text, I could conclude that neither and both are a necessity: we can be neither purist nor passive, but must hold frustration and optimism in equal measure. What I appreciate and pull from each of the four interviews is a sense of realism and ingenuity in locating spaces in the cracks and crevices of the art world.

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