

Fugitive Relations: Sociality at Mansions of the Future

Arriving

“What is this place?” The staff at Mansions of the Future know this question well. It apparently crops up less and less now, seeing that they have been here for two years. I’ve been told, though, that staff had to constantly address this question for the first six months.

It is true that the building façade betrays very little; there are few clues other than the flags and the fluorescent pink-red door. Of course, there is the billboard to the side that sums up the organisation’s purpose, but how does one really understand “an arts and cultural hub”? And then there’s the room-sized ramp: bright yellow with handrails, wheelchair accessible, and an absolute boxchecker for children’s “imaginative play”. It takes up the entire entrance and is the first thing you see when you come in, the so-called “yellow brick road” snaking up to the main space. Speaking of oversized, you are also surrounded by huge, paper-collaged words that cover the walls: “learning”, “thinking”, “cooking”, “talking”, “listening”, “disagreeing”. Quite likely, there is something happening in the “commons room” – as coined by Mansions’ inaugural artist Kathrin Böhm – and passers-by may well head in to nose around. If there isn’t an event on, the place can feel rather quiet as staff carry on with the day-to-day administration of the space upstairs. There is no official greeter, no desk, no obvious art objects. So indeed, “what is this place?”

Situating the writer, situating the question

When Artistic Director Kerry Campbell asked me to write a piece for Mansions of the Future, I was already aware that the organisation had a social and community focus. However, I had never been before, and had no idea what I would be writing about. The only thing I wanted to do was to become *familiar*, both to the staff who work there and to the regular rhythms of the space. This means taking the time to seep into its daily textures, becoming part of the unnoticed background as much as I could.

To be clear, situating myself in the “background” of Mansions practically involved travelling to Lincoln from my home in Sheffield every week or so in the autumn of 2019, with sporadic visits in the months bookending that period. I would either be attending one of their events – some of which took place outside of the venue – or working on my laptop in the upstairs office alongside other staff members. We would have work and life related chats in between emails, share gossip, and eat lunch together, all in the office. During one of my last regular visits, I sat down with the staff members for a mapping exercise of the building, in order to better understand what the intended and actual usages of the space were. Over time, I acquired a more embodied fluency of the behaviours within the building and the activities it housed, and how the two are co-constituted.

My first time at Mansions of the Future was for a communal lunch cooked and served by SHEAfriq, a Nottingham-based collective of “female artists and creatives of black heritage”.

The artists talked through their origin story and gave some context with regards to the lack of wherewithal in their local art scenes in confronting issues of race and gender. All this was greatly informative, but I was equally taken by everything else happening around the presentation: the heat and taste of the food; the tangential conversations; the scurrying to and from the kitchen. The atmosphere was inviting and convivial, which set the tone for some of my initial hopes and expectations for the organisation.

But perhaps most telling of how Mansions of the Future functioned was when things *didn't* quite go to plan. When a spanner is thrown in the works. It's almost always to do with the unpredictability of reactions, logistics, and circumstance. Whatever the case, these moments require spontaneity, which much better demonstrates the relational material – or the ephemeral, slippery “stuff” – of socially negotiated art practices. Relations both undergird and emerge from the projects that take place at Mansions of the Future; they can shed light on the social processes needed to make something “happen”. Going back to the first impressions of the bright yellow ramp, the collaged present participles on the walls, and the friendliness, I felt warmly welcomed but also cautious: will the projects here always already enact a kind of good-natured sociality that stands in jarring contrast to the crisis present? Not that we aren't all in need of conciliatory and restorative practices to keep us from deflating completely, but will the projects at Mansions probe more deeply into the significance of co-working and co-making, at this moment?

The (under)commons and informal channels of knowledge

There seem to be at least two things about Mansions that are vital to understanding the projects they house: the first is the building, which comprises two floors. Each of them features a large space and a number of smaller rooms. Practically all their public-facing activities take place in the main space – or the “commons room” – on the ground floor, but the availability of the rooms surrounding it means they are all variously activated on an informal basis. The second thing is that, bar one, all the core staff members are women. The majority of artists and facilitators commissioned by Mansions are also women, past and present. Both the building and the bodies that occupy it have been crucial to the kinds of social relations that, in turn, occur as the “live” component of the organisation.

With regards to the building, its idiosyncrasies enable the spontaneous dispersal and rearrangement of bodies and affinities. None of this can be pre-planned: the forming of sub-groups, the movement within the structure, the locating of break spaces, etc. The “commons room” is lined on one side with a pantry (little used), a kitchen (heavily used), and a meeting room (regularly used), the last of which has a door that can close the space off if need be. On different occasions, I have witnessed and taken part in activities that have spawned other modes of sociality that are anything but inconsequential. The meeting room is often a mid-sized “holder”, acting as cloakroom, crèche, or buffet space, while the kitchen can be a refuge for low-volume conversations. I have had tête-à-têtes with staff members and artists in both, in the corridor even, or on the benches outside – but never in the commons room. The reading room is also a fantastic semi-private space, and I am told that its relaxed, democratising environment is helpful for those “stuffier” meetings. These improvised uses and activities demonstrate multiplicities by behaving otherwise than intended; they are a strong reminder of how “commoning” is always already *more than one thing or approach*.

Scholars Fred Moten and Stefano Harney wrote about the “undercommons” (2013) that flourishes around and between the spaces of an official system which, for them, specifically meant the university. They sought to reframe what “studying” looked like by asking: how *else* can we understand a “text”? And how do we read and learn *together*? The undercommons concerns forms of study-as-sociality, like “talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering.” (p.112) Of note is how the co-authors namecheck “the smoking room” as an exemplary space for “intellectual life.” (ibid.) Also found in the text’s subtitle is “fugitive planning”, indicating that the undercommons happens covertly, in plain sight: “[w]e’re telling all of you but we’re not telling anyone else” (p.68). This “we”, then, is an unstable, constantly reconstituting collective that emerges through spontaneous practices. Likewise, the knowledges “we” produce in the undercommons are emergent; they are hushed, often difficult feelings that find outlet in the semi-exclusivity of chance or peripheral encounters.

Rather serendipitously, the building of Mansions is able to provide them in abundance. It is important to emphasise that the undercommons is not auxiliary or converse to the commons, but is in fact the very waywardness of the commons. That Mansions is explicit in its intention to co-produce means that *the multiplicities of the commons must be brought to bear*. Who “we” are is always changing because the *terms* for who “we” are – are also always changing.

There are other opportunities for undercommoning that exist beyond the peripheries of a given project. Most notably, they are found in the social reproductive labour of the organisation, including the administrative, physical, and relational labour that supports Mansions. They are performed by all members of staff, despite their specific “positions” – director, curator, producer, coordinator, etc. The maintenance duties are carried out through a balance of self-initiative, shared trust, and casual but articulate communication. I noted already how the staff and artists of Mansions are predominantly women, which I want to work through as thoughtfully as possible. I do not want to suggest that their ostensibly “easy” performance of care can all be boiled down to a matter of gender, because affective labour is part and parcel of working in care and service adjacent industries. But “being personal” at Mansions of the Future takes place at a *deeply-seated, organisational level*. So much chatter happens as part of work: the exchange of instructions and strategies of course, but lots of gossip too. The latter carries with it personal or professional evaluations, delight, and comfort. Challenging its bad reputation as idle chat – particularly between women – philosopher Karen Adkins redefines gossip as a “feminist social epistemology” (Adkins, 2017). Women historically made their own forms of public within sites of domesticity, where gossip played a particularly crucial role in strengthening female solidarity. It continues to be indispensable in all aspects of contemporary public life, generating speculative forms of critique and social evaluation (Federici, 2018; Adkins, 2017). Against its trivialisation, gossip is in fact a key enabler in creating informal channels of knowledge that not only enrich but *constitute* meanings and contexts. And the (mostly) women of Mansions, knowingly or not, tap into the generous rigour of gossip to maintain working relations. *How* they take care of themselves as a support structure is therefore aligned with *what* they aim to produce – art commissions that communicate a situated understanding of place, people, and context. This is quite an anomaly; it shouldn’t be, but there are plenty of cultural institutions that have “progressive” aims with completely dysfunctional infrastructure. What is almost moving about Mansions of the Future is how this robust informality-as-organisation echoes the

undercommons' study-as-sociality: "fugitivity" invigorates the relations within the infrastructure as it does the in-between spaces of projects.

More than smiling faces

Indeed, is there more to the sociality at Mansions of the Future than well-meaning friendliness? There is clearly a great deal of care and thought put into the conception and execution of the projects, especially with regards to the socio-artistic processes and the kinds of publics they would help generate. The artists also represent a wide range of backgrounds and social concerns thanks to conscientious curation. From the half dozen workshops I took part in, attendees seemed mostly happy, involved, and pleased to be there.

But the relational dynamics explored in this essay are less about the deliberate choreographing of situations than they are about the unpredictable moments that *also* take place within and around them. These are the spaces where friendliness can find some respite. While this in no way invalidates the programming offer, the undercommons and the informal channels of knowledge must include the frictive, difficult moments of sociality. And to wit, the work of community-making can be extremely exhausting. Mansions' social, open-door approach sometimes leaves staff members without the space or time to step away, which means they rely on the running of errands or even their car for just five minutes of "alone time". By shedding light on this alongside other tacit, hidden ways of being, I hope to draw attention to a richly textured relational material that is made not only as part of Mansions' public-oriented projects, but also in their nooks and crannies. *Fugitive relations are already there*, in plain sight. If the intention to create a commons directly responds to a hyper-individualising political climate, then it behooves Mansions of the Future to be more self-aware of *other* relations that are engendered from their work. The scene-setting of art projects may serve to contain particular kinds of encounters, but there are always others that fall just outside of the frame.

To reiterate the emotionally complex and entangled relations of socially-situated art means challenging the selective display of projects; smiling participants and friendly conversations are just a small part of the narrative. I would like to contend that the (under)commons and informalities of Mansions critically displaces more official, public-facing socialities. A "we" of greater radical value can only emerge when we are caught off guard, sharing an unexpected connection. Attuning ourselves to these blink-and-you'll-miss-it moments is especially salient at a time when our ability to pay attention is more compromised than ever by digital media, especially feeds. Exposed infrastructures like Mansions of the Future have the potential to sharpen our focus onto forgotten details through their projects, of course, but also through the *how* of what they do; what they don't mean to do; what they fail to do. Peripheral, "meanwhile" actions and social relations always underscore – and frequently undermine – the official ones. Without them, there will be no affective variation and thus no rigour to this "social"; it would be likeable but bland, a commoning-as-being-together when a commoning-is-complicated would be a far more interesting and honest analysis.

References

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