

Gathering and dispersal in precarious programming

I first visited Mansions of the Future in December 2019, to do some initial research around the organisation and to attend a communal pre-Christmas lunch. I had been invited by Artistic Director, Kerry Campbell, to reflect on the organisation from my perspective as an arts worker who had always been based 'regionally' and often in areas with relatively low 'cultural engagement'. I've put these terms in inverted commas because they are not neutral and shouldn't be taken for granted. Regional is used to communicate the relationship between London and the rest of England, and in terms of arts and culture the gap in funding and provision is stark. This isn't a natural or inevitable state of affairs and needn't be taken as such. Whereas, with 'cultural engagement' we must always remember that what is and isn't considered to be 'culture' has been decided upon by a particular class of people, who have economic and social power, and make sure that their interests and tastes are represented. These might seem like obvious or superfluous points to be making, but in order to properly understand and analyse the work of organisations like Mansions, it's vital to consider the structural inequalities at the heart of the cultural industries, inequalities that have recently and rightly been emphasised in terms of institutional racism and administrative systems that keep people - often already marginalised people - in precarious and insecure economic positions. Currently, organisations in receipt of public funding can only plan as far ahead as their grant allows, with even National Portfolio Organisations operating on a four year cycle with no guarantee of continued support. This insecurity is something that Campbell had cited when I spoke to her for an earlier piece, looking at how arts organisations in 'low cultural engagement' areas find themselves needing to facilitate the preventative social care that, often due to austerity, can no longer be provided elsewhere; Mansions is a three year project that was only ever supposed to exist for that amount of time.

Access to buildings for artist-led programming is obviously important to the flourishing of a creative ecology, recognising the loss of ad hoc and DIY spaces that comes with gentrification. However, the question of whether culturally designated buildings in the form of art centres, galleries and museums are necessary is contested, and has been brought into focus by the present crisis. The urgent financial needs of individual artists and small organisations has been placed into competition with the needs of institutions, which of course employ and commission artists, but also facilitate jobs for arts administrators and curators that are markedly better paid and more secure than anything offered to creative practitioners. Over the past three months as the Covid pandemic crisis has unfolded, researcher and advocate for artists' livelihoods Susan Jones has written several articles that lay out what could be done to 'reset' and ensure artists' livelihoods going forward. This has involved clearly and succinctly laying out the situation as it now stands, including how propping up the buildings that house arts activity has neglected the producers of that activity;

"The heady mix of new National Lottery capital awards and aggressive region-by-region fundraising in England forged a rash of new arts buildings over the last 30 years. But the majority haven't ever been financially viable... keeping the volume of building-based ventures afloat has consistently been at the expense of funding many individuals to gain artistic stamina through the experiment and risks that characterise the progressive arts. It's no accident that there are 40% more visual arts workers than there were 20 years ago, while the number of artists has remained static."



'Public House' by ON/OFF, 2020. Photo by Fergus Carmichael.

How can arts organisations properly serve communities, who may already be distanced from 'culture' for the reasons outlined above, if precarity is baked into their very existence? I was glad to find that the Mansions team readily acknowledged structural inequalities, and how these play into individual interactions between institutional workers and members of the public. It's on this basis that I'm going to consider Mansions' work with socially engaged architectural practices. These projects, collaborating on indoor and outdoor, semi-permanent and durational works, engender a consideration of how architectural interventions function within, and against the inherent precarity of cultural organisations. The second time I visited Mansions of the Future was in February this year, to spend a couple of days observing and partaking in the work of ON/OFF, an international design collective who were commissioned to work in response to, and in collaboration with the Ermine Estate and its residents. This is an example of Mansions' 'off-site' work, and something to parse here is how site and off-site function in the case of a temporary organisation; once Mansions ceases to exist in its current form, what does the relationship between these different states become? Considering the basis upon which Mansions was founded, Campbell described how the organisation had been originally devised to inject artistic activity into Lincoln, on the basis of the City having comparatively little cultural infrastructure. Funded by the Arts Council's 'Ambition for Excellence' strand, this plan to seed cultural activity through high quality international commissions assumes and depends upon entrepreneurialism. This strikes me as clearly at odds with the programming and attitude of the organisation in practice, with an acknowledgment that cultural activity can and should be a part of anyone's life whether they are entrepreneurial or not. Just as the precarity of arts organisations seems to necessarily preclude the kind of community engagement that they are tasked with, treating cultural activity as a reward for (a certain

kind of) proactivity plays straight into existing structures of inequality. For example, entrepreneurialism in the arts implicitly includes voluntarism, with an expectation that creative practitioners and organisers will work for free, self-exploiting and encouraging this practice in others. This mode of working obviously depends on a certain amount of free time and cultural capital, which in turn privileges the sort of people who already have an unequal level of control over cultural activity. However, the programming team at Mansions are aware of this, and have been resolute in undermining the idea that cultural activity should be based upon competition, with only those who produce work that is deemed exceptional within current frameworks achieving success, if not financial stability. This practice of trying to work around and under inherently unequal structures has meant that Mansions have been able to act in ways that forefront the social, physical and emotional needs of local communities. ON/OFF's work with Mansions and the Ermine Estate reflects this, whereby an incremental engagement with residents took the form of consultation, attending neighborhood board meetings, workshops based in the local church hall, and a one-off performance. These activities haven't left behind a public artwork, destined to decay and act as a reminder of something that never quite happened, but have instead served as part of the organisation's ongoing investigation by into social housing, it's legacies and current possibilities - attending to one of the most pressing human needs, and a huge political issue - as culture. This is recognised by Sunshine Wong who, in her piece of critical writing commissioned by Campbell, focuses on the interchange and sociality produced by the way Mansions' spaces are used, observing that "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"¹. A related issue is discussed by Jane Rendell in *Art and Architecture: A Place Between* (1977), in terms of the different associations that 'private' and 'public' hold for different people;

*"Public and private, and the variations between these two terms, mean different things to different people - protected isolation or unwelcome containment, intrusion or invitation, exclusion or segregation...we need to define carefully how we use the terms...in the Western democratic tradition, 'public' stands for all that is good, for democracy, accessibility, participation and egalitarianism set against the private world of ownership and elitism...democratic public space is frequently endowed with unified properties, but one of the problems of aiming for a homogenous public is the avoidance of difference."*²

This critique of how we define public and private is particularly relevant now, as our access to ostensibly public space is further complicated by how staying in, staying private and concealing our identities with masks (those of us who are usually uncovered, anyway) is an act of solidarity, to preserve the safety and health of vulnerable others. Often when critically considering socially engaged and relational practices I am reminded of Hamja Ahsan's 'Shy Radicals: the antisystemic politics of the militant introvert'³, whereby 'extrovert-supremacy' and a culture of assertiveness is linked through pointed satire to western imperialism, via the cultural industries and the galleries and art spaces that Ahsan has often

¹ www.mansionsofthefuture.org/wp-content/uploads/Eugitive-Relations-by-Sunshine-Wong.pdf

² Rendell, Jane, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*, p.19., published 1977, accessed via: www.janerendell.co.uk/books/art-architecture-a-place-between

³ www.bookworks.org.uk/node/1917

spoken at. As mentioned earlier, under our current cultural policies, whereby only the entrepreneurial are deemed worthy of investment, it is important to acknowledge and make space for other, negative experiences of public-ness, as Ahsan puts it: 'Do not dare to impose your feelgood ideology on us ever again'⁴. At the time of ON/OFF's Ermine intervention, the estate's Lincoln Imp pub had recently been closed down, reportedly due to 'antisocial behaviour' and mismanagement, although these terms are in themselves loaded. In line with the critiques summarised above, it is important to acknowledge that public doesn't always mean pretty, or pleasant, or at least may not conform to dominant ideas of pretty and pleasant. The architecture of sociality implemented by ON/OFF did seem to acknowledge this, accommodating that dispersal and collapse can be as much a part of public life and social interaction as togetherness and cordiality. In an inversion of the public house as an interior where everyone is welcome, they created a hearth that could be brought outside in the form of a perambulatory chiminea. In a free and open-to-anyone workshop held at the Ermine United Reformed Church wooden shields were decorated, to be worn on the backs of participants in an ad-hoc procession through the estate, taking a route identified through earlier mapping workshops with local residents. The shields could be used to form a shelter around the hearth/chiminea, requiring collaboration from participants to create a transitory public house, or dispersed into individual, turtle-like and person-sized walls or ceilings. This momentary formation and then dispersal of a community space is echoed in the trajectory of Mansions itself, if on a different scale, and complicates how the 'institutional' space of the organisation is delineated. These interventions on the Ermine Estate could be considered to have the same relationship to the Mansions building as any off-site programme to its central institution, but the temporary nature of the organisation disrupts these categories; Rendell speaks of the 'gallery territory', whereby work taking place outside the gallery building is not necessarily outside of its institutional influence. Considering this in relation to the Ermine-based work of Mansions, and that of ON/OFF in particular, it is not straightforward to locate where and when the territory of Mansions begins and ends. There is also something to consider here with regards to how and why arts organisations choose to work with architecture collectives and vice versa. Temporary structures like the public house of ON/OFF, as well as previous workshops by 'utopian regeneration agency' Spacemakers⁵ and social enterprise architectural practice Studio Polpo beg the question - what remains? And do these interventions go on to influence more permanent structures, or ongoing processes, and if so, how? The timescales of urban planning and availability of funding mean that it can be decades between a design or plan being floated and its implementation, if it ever happens at all. Now more than ever, the idea that urban regeneration and infrastructure should be implemented for the good of everyone, feels very distant indeed. In the meantime then, we seem to propose and reiterate other ways of engaging with our localities in practice and in process. The apparent desire for these tests and trials reflexively points back to the temporary nature of cultural organisations, and in turn the often temporary nature of their directors' and programmers' engagements with their localities. It could be argued that community-led, embedded 'commoning' activities are inherently incompatible with the trajectory of the ever-available, ever-flexible contemporary cultural worker that might programme them, but this doesn't mean we shouldn't be trying to model the world we want to create from within the structures that preclude it. Prior to

⁴ www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ssu743GYz0

⁵ www.spacemakers.info/

working with ON/OFF, Mansions had resurrected the Ermine News, a hyper-local community newspaper that had been published by the parish church between 1957 and 1965, edited by the Reverend John Hodgkinson, Priest-in-Charge on the estate. Local media that reflects a community back to itself, without the need to engage in clickbait or overwhelming advertising, seems quite alien now. Yet, as trust in the mainstream media understandably declines, local, independent media is a potential site for community cohesion and resistance. The way that the original Ermine News ceased publication - once its' driving force the Reverend Hodgkinson could no longer commit to it - speaks to how community-led culture is often dependent on the proactivity and dedication of one person or a limited resource. This, in turn, invokes my earlier point about the inadequacy of hinging cultural production on entrepreneurialism. Perhaps, then, the role of the cultural organisation here could be too lightly hold the needs and wants of their surrounding communities, providing administrative and infrastructural support, as well as directing resources towards those that need them under and around the programming they're 'supposed' to be doing according to funders.



The Ermine News. Photo by Fergus Carmichael.

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Further reading, watching and/or listening:

- www.peopleplacetimespace.superslowway.org.uk/project/much-more-than-making-do
- www.artsprofessional.co.uk/magazine/article/treating-rash-or-investing-cure-future-artists-livelihoods?utm_source=subscriber_features&utm_medium=email&utm_content=nid-214202&utm_campaign=4th-June-2020
- www.janerendell.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/Art-and-Architecture-prepublication.pdf
- www.andmillionsandmillions.net/files/kathrin-bohm-complete-web_v2.pdf
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ssu743GYz0
- www.artreview.com/evan-ifekoya-withdraws-labour-from-goldsmiths-college-claiming-institutional-racism/
- https://www.internationaleonline.org/opinions/1038_when_and_where_to_become_a_spider/
- <https://www.bookworks.org.uk/node/1917>