Culture is a Verb
Annual Lincoln Keynotes on Culture Talk by Kathrin Böhmb
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Just over three years ago I got together with other artists and we began using the motto ‘Keep it Complex – Make it Clear’ to collectively become more explicit about the politics and values in our work as artists, curators, designers and arts administrators. We had just finished running a Remain campaign together, where we were trying to add a critical cultural voice to a public debate otherwise dominated by economics and xenophobia. We came to realize that unless we are explicit, our work would be too easily seen as simply social, commentarial and marginal.

You don’t have to use the word radical to be radical, and we chose Keep it Complex - Make it Clear instead, proclaiming that we want to deal with complex issues in a complex manner – be it migration or economics, food production or art – instead of simplifying topics and stupifying others in the process. Within a rapidly changing landscape of leader and nation state focused politics in the UK, the US and many other countries, we wanted to be clear about what we want and what we want to change.

We want to change many things, but for the talk today I will mainly talk about changes (or better still call them shifts) in the art world. Shifts which can open up possibilities for art in society, instead of further narrowing the process down to object production and spectatorship, which is used to confirm art as something that is to be consumed and contemplated, instead of used for all sorts of public realms and reasons.

The principles and actions that we outlined in our practice as Keep it Complex – Make it Clear include: no hierarchies between art and non-art, no hierarchies within our own working and social structures, a critique of our inherited privilege and the recognition of diverse and the use of non-exploitative economies. These are all principles that we also want to see within wider society.

The statement from the Keep it Complex website is more concise:

“Keep It Complex is about making clear what we want, without simplifying discussion: a peaceful, caring, angry, anti-austerity, factual, DIY, transnational, struggling, messy, family-friendly, queer, inclusive, intergenerational, generous, diverse society.” (1)

So, the aim is societal, my job is art.

I want to use this talk today to explain what I have done here at the Mansions of the Future and why? Why do I suggest that culture is a verb, and how does that affect the making and meaning of this project?

**Life is a Verb**

This is a slogan created by Nike, that I first saw in the late 1990s. I clearly remember it being plastered across the new flagship store on Oxford Circus, London. Its shortcoming is that it’s incredible human-centric, but hey trees don’t buy trainers. It’s definitely convincing, memorable and obvious.

**Art is a Verb**

This is a quote used by the artist Tania Bruguera, to explain where she sees art sitting and functioning within wider society, and to underline her concept or Arte Util or Useful Art.
“Useful Art is a way of working with aesthetic experiences that focus on the implementation of art in society where art’s function is no longer to be a space for "signalling" problems, but the place from which to create the proposal and implementation of possible solutions. We should go back to the times when art was not something to look at in awe, but something to generate from. If it is political art, it deals with the consequences, if it deals with the consequences, I think it has to be useful art.” (2)

**Common is a Verb**

The commons only exist as a verb, a commons that is not being practiced ceases to be a common, and I want to use a quote by Silvia Federici here:

“Commons are not things but social relations. This is the reason why some (e.g. Peter Linebaugh) prefer to speak of ‘commoning’ that underscores not the material wealth shared but the sharing in itself and the solidarity bonds produced in the process. (...) Commoning is a practice that appears inefficient to capitalist eyes. It is the willingness to spend much time in the work of cooperation, discussing, negotiating and learning to deal with conflicts and disagreement. Yet only in this way can a community in which people understand their essential interdependence be built.” (3)

**Culture is a Verb**

The talk will be less about cultural production and more about (re-)production of culture.

As Doina Petrescu and Kim Trogal point out in their introduction to the book *The Social (re)-Production of Architecture*: “following 40 years of feminist work we can no longer speak about production without speaking about reproduction at the same time. (...) We must read beyond Marxist notions of production and beyond binary oppositions of production/reproduction and production/consumption.” (4)

Following on from Lefebvre’s famous work on the ‘social production of space’ where he declares and explains that spaces shape society and society shapes space, Mansions of the Future has to be seen and understood a relational space, a space that is shaped by its users and by use. Lefebvre’s observations around the social production of space also indicates that the way in which we set up spaces will underpin and strengthen the systems that they suggest. A public square, containing mainly coffee shops suggests a cappuccino sipping public. An adventure playground with nails and hammers suggests something very different. Spaces – be it buildings, squares or parks, are not neutral but instead make strong suggestions for how they can be used and by whom. Architecture produces and reproduces values and practices. By creating a setting, we are providing the conditions for a system to be reproduced and strengthened.

But it is not only spaces that are reproduced, any social and cultural construct we have, be it art, the commons or politics, undergo the same process and are therefore strengthened in the way we practice them. Practicing art as an object that can be either bought or exhibited, confirms and reproduces the importance of the art market and the exhibition system. Practicing art in more social terms and outside of the gallery exhibition nexus, explores and reproduces art that can be applied and maybe have more than one function. So we need to
be careful in how we set something up.

My inaugural commission was titled *Culture is a Verb*, this signals two things:

**01** My understanding of what culture is. For me - in short - culture derives from everyday activities, whether you are a butcher, a teacher, a carer, an artist, etc. We are all involved in producing and reproducing culture. So, it’s not a question of whether or not we want to produce culture, but the question is what kind of culture do we make and what culture do we want?

**02** I also want to respond from the position of an artist who has been involved in setting up a new public cultural space for Lincoln. Which culture do I actually want to suggest and support? And why is what I do here art, and is it important that it is art? After many turns and revolutions, art is not bound by any medium. It can be anything, a painting, a sculpture, an installation, an airplane or a urinal. So, what I am interested in, is what art can be and not what it should be. My general interest as an artist is the production and reproduction of public space, and later I will also use the term ‘public time’ to describe periods of activity that we spend in places outside the designated ‘private time’.

What I mean by culture. Culture is a verb, it is participatory, and it is constantly in the making, and in a way, there are as many cultures as there are people. Culture, in this sense, is an all-encompassing idea: it contains the arts, politics, the built environment, and the entire array of voluntary activities that are part of human life. We have to understand the interrelatedness of all aspects of culture, rather than giving in to the view that each aspect is a specialized enclave, best left to experts. In short, culture must be seen as a public interest.

Quoting again Doina and Kim “the notion that all citizens have the right to shape their societies in and through its spaces, suggests, of course, participation, but contemporary conditions demand that we go beyond participatory or ‘socially engaged’ approaches, to work with more radical forms of politics and values.” (5)

I want to introduce the iceberg image here, one that is used by the feminist economic geographer Katherine Gibson, to illustrate and explain that economy is a public realm, which we are all part of.

**The Economy as an Iceberg**

The image of the economy as an iceberg is one way of reframing which practices are included and valued as ‘economic’. When we see the whole iceberg above and below the waterline, the economy as we have known it melts away. We start to recognize the vast range of practices, places, organizations and relationships that contribute to daily survival. What was once seen as ‘alternative’ is now part of an existing diverse economy.
Gibson talks about diverse economies, and the need to take back the economy, by first recognizing the less visible economic practices, and to then slowly tilt the iceberg, in order to have an economy that is not dominated by financial return and growth, but by social return and care for the planet. This is an emancipatory process, one which makes us all recognize that we are part of the economy, and involved with it, which gives us a certain amount of authority, but also responsibility. With everything we do we support a particular social construct and economic model.

The iceberg model works for most realms of society. Culture is an iceberg, too.
The Artworld as an Iceberg

The market is at the top of the iceberg, and then we have the many other artists and practices that don’t appear in the market, for different reasons. They organise outside of the path which is set for the market. Gregory Sholette calls it the Dark Matter (6). According to Sholette, the artistic universe is very similar to the physical one, as the bulk of its social energy is generated by people, who are not registered as valuable contributors to the world of art. The daily labour of all artists, assistants, art aficionados, students, art activists, Sunday painters or Saturday conceptualists maintains the machineries of the art world, which venerates only a couple of people – famous artists, curators, directors, collectors – placing them in a spotlight. In other words, the artistic universe is like an iceberg, with a visible peak dominating over dark, social matter. Sholette highlights the exploitative nature of this system. The strategic invisibility of the 99% is a condition of their exploitation in the artistic economy, where even small differences accumulate over time, and result in glaring inequalities – not only in earnings, but also status, fame and positioning within artistic networks.

The ‘dark matter’ includes artistic practices that do not look like art as we know it or produce commodities for the market, instead these artists are concerned with social and immaterial processes, with political investment and cultural return, rather than financial return. They could be called plausible art worlds, instead of alternatives, as actualising different ways and reasons for making art set out different intentions and principles. I want art to undergo the same emancipatory process as the one Gibson is demanding for our understanding of economy, where spectatorship and the focus on the object doesn’t dominate and define art, but is just one possible aspect, and definitely not the only plausible one.
Here I will introduce Stephen Wright’s concept of Usership (7), where modes of usership and different uses allow art to gain meaning again beyond the object. We can also reference the concept of applied arts, or useful art, but in short it is about opening up the possibilities for art, rather than narrowing them down. Demanding a richness, a diversity, a rich ecology, no monoculture, no supremacy.

I now want to shift to the Mansions of the Future, and the discussions I had together with Clare Cumberledge, Rebecca Blackwood, Colette Griffin and Rachel Long in early 2018, which led to decisions that materialized themselves in this building. I want to explain and reflect on how the design and fittings that went into each room supported the ideas of ‘Life is a Verb’ and ‘Art through Usership’.

**Front of House**

How do you connect art to everyday life? By creating everyday spaces for art and making space for public time.

‘Public Time is a term I borrowed from Catherine Schonfield, and she uses the term to describe the time we spend in public. Be it at a bus stop, in a square or at a train station. It’s the time we spent outside of the home and outside the workplace. She makes the sharp observation that the quality of our democracy is directly mirrored by the state of our public time and public spaces. How rich are they, what’s possible, what’s enjoyable, who owns them and are we pressed into roles or invited to explore?’
I think any rich public space needs a high level of adaptability and multi-functionality, as opposed to mono-functionality. The Front of House can be used for more than one reason, in many different ways. The furniture resolves a strict threshold and prepares the space for different public functions, from extremely informal to more formal uses, from hanging out to having your lunch break, from announcements, to temporary stalls, workshops etc.

The Reception Room

The invitation is simple, it’s to make a mark on a map by noting what you consider your cultural contribution or work in Lincoln. The map has some very important principles:

- Everybody was locate themselves.
- Everybody can contribute what they consider to be culture.

The Culture of Lincoln is located both within a certain geography of Lincoln and Lincolnshire but also within a global map. Within a geography of trans-local connections, be it between Lincoln and London, or Lincoln and a village in Poland, etc. The mobility of ideas is universal, and migration of people and practices is a human condition. Culture is continuously in the making and trans-local, trans-regional and trans-national influences happen on all levels, from national art institutions to local reading groups.

Every place has local cultural particularities, but they are in flux, sometimes slowly, sometimes fast. The interconnectivity and interdependency of cultures is a given. I’m not certain yet what to call this, a multiculturalism, a coexistence of cultures. Is it intercultural or a cultural pluralism or culture as a trans-local universalism. Eastside Projects in Birmingham calls it the Multiverse. (8)

What I like about the room is that it is a simple idea with a clear suggestion. That culture is everywhere and that we’re all involved in producing it. The function of the mapping was not
to evaluate or differentiate, it was a tool to conceptualise and locate Mansions of the Future within the cultural reality of Lincoln. What we have after a year is a very rich mass of what culture is, of what is understood as culture and a plurality of possibilities and practices which illustrate the cultural self-understanding of MotF, and who is invited, supported and connected through the offer on hand.

The Ramp

This ramp is important. It illustrates a simple principle, that access is - or should be - the same for everyone, be it a building or art. Mansions of the Future has many access points, meaning that it’s porous. Connections to the building and its offer can be made through a vast range of interests and reasons, but physical access is kept simple and the same for everyone.
Economy as a Glue

This room provides a platform for making the economy of the space an integral and visible part of how Mansions of the Future operates. Referring back to Katherine Gibson’s concept of diverse economies, we have to recognize and acknowledge the diversity of economic underpinnings that allow Mansions of the Future to operate, and at the same time define what Mansions of the Future is. Economy is not just a means, it’s a self-portrait, it’s a direct reflection of how you relate to others, and who is collaborating and cooperating to make something happen.

The idea that we all are part for the making and shaping of our economy is a fundamental thought; as a result, we are all participants in its development, with each if us having different interests in what the return is. This is also a call for de-professionalizing of economy, as it is for a de-professionalizing of culture. This doesn't mean that certain specialisms aren’t needed or appreciated, it just means that in order to make economy and culture more popular and common and functional again we need a progressive emancipatory act, which allows us all to be understood as active contributors, and not just receivers.

It is also crucial that places like the Mansions of the Future are not simply read as Arts Council funded. The Arts Council is of course a very important funder without whom the project wouldn’t exist, but there are many other donations and contributions by many different groups, organisations and individuals, from giving the building to giving time. In cultural terms it is important to stress this diversity of economic underpinning in order to stress the co-produced character of this initiative again and again. It is co-contributed to, not simply a funded offer to be consumed.
The Commons Room

Lincoln has a great tradition of physical commons and a great history of knowledge of about the commons. This room suggests an addition to these existing commons. Commons Rooms - as a more standard typology of room - are not terribly difficult to equip. They must be of a certain size, but besides scale it’s mainly a matter of flexibility.

The Commons Room at MotF can be an auditorium, a cinema, a workshop space, a maker space, a dining hall, etc. You just need chairs and tables that can be moved around, a good size room and some basic technical equipment (e.g. projector, speakers etc.). However, it is easy to underestimate the effort that goes into enabling and facilitating a commons room. Doors need to be opened, chairs need to be moved, tables assembled, technical equipment must to be switched on etc.

For the first year Colette and Rachel carried out these tasks (just a small part of their ever-expanding roles), with this in mind I think that their official titles should be Directors of Actually Talking to People and Making Things Happen. Their roles are a new form of Public Relations for a cultural organisation like Mansions of the Future. Public relations in the literal meaning of the word are relations in public or relations between publics, and they are not administered, but enabled and practiced. Common is a verb is key here.

The Resource Room

I’m using another Nike slogan here: Just Do it. I believe that any idea, any suggestion for change and action, has iterations on different scales, and the 1:1, the here and now, the ad hoc, the just do it is one possibility. Every idea will have different impact on different scales, but the 1:1, the immediate is not to be underestimated. You can always get started with what’s available.
What Culture do I Want?

I want a culture that is:

Non repressive.

Feminist in its broad meaning of practicing non-binaries and replacing hierarchies with practices of solidarity and support.

Tolerant.

Pluralistic.

Anti-mono.

Political.

Cultivating a collectivized social, a sense of working together, supporting each other, enabling and changing things together.

If I imagine culture as an object, it is a plate rather than a fork.

What does art have to do with it?

I think it is important that art survives as a category and a profession, as one of the many cultural tradition and practices. Art is important but not special.

Art is a privilege – it allows for self-expression, self-determination, autonomy, this all has its shortcoming, but these should also be basic individual rights, not executed exclusively and at
the cost of seclusion by the art crowd, but as a public and shared possibility. Art still offers autonomy, a realm in which to avert the demands of neoliberal and profit orientated mainstream culture and increasingly nationalistic and divisive politics.

I’m quoting Stephen Wright here:

“Autonomy is a tricky term to handle because in the field of art it has come to denote almost the opposite of what it set out to name. Literally, auto / nomos means to determine one’s own laws. When art slowly but surely pried open a new social space for itself in nineteenth-century European society, on the basis of aesthetic principles laid out by Kant, Hegel, Diderot and others, it was in the name of giving itself its own laws. Its ‘conquest of space,’ as Pierre Bourdieu calls it, was about wresting art from the overarching control and hindrance of religious and political authorities, carving out a separate sphere for itself where it could develop in keeping with its own internal logic. This space of autonomous art determined the art of modernity. Of course, the autonomy was only ever relative – but it was effective, and jealously guarded.

However, autonomous art came at a cost – one that for many has become too much to bear. The price to pay for autonomy are the invisible parentheses that bracket art off from being taken seriously as a proposition having consequences beyond the aesthetic realm. Art judged by art’s standards can be easily written off as, well... just art.-To gain use value, to find a usership for art, it requires that art quit the autonomous sphere of purposeless purpose and disinterested spectatorship. For many practitioners today, autonomous art has become less a place of self-determined experimentation than a prison house.” (9)

The art market has narrowed art down. The bourgeois tradition of spectatorship has narrowed art down. So yes, I refuse to be imprisoned as an artist in this self built ivory tower. The question is of course how to destroy the ivory tower, and how to spread and share the privilege of autonomy, instead of locking it up?

One way out, is to use the concept of usership in art, which can incorporate but at the same time replace the currently dominant concept of spectatorship. This must not be understood as a demand for art to be useful, but to open up the different uses of art in society. Turning away from pursuing art’s aesthetic function, many practitioners are redefining their engagement with art, less in terms of authorship than as users of artistic competence, insisting that art should foster more robust use values and gain more bite in the real again.
Ending

A few years ago many of the suggestions from this talk would have been read in terms of establishing an alternative, developing a model that would slowly revolutionize mainstream practices and understandings. However, with a recent increase of aggressive, divisive and nationalistic politics the practices laid out in this talk start to become a practice of resistance.

If the black matter artists (those who chose art because they wanted to do things differently) come together, then we have a movement. Here is a proposal from the Community Economy Research Network that calls for a global connecting of like-minded practices, they call it The Interdependence. The idea for Interdependence could easily be applied to the extended field of art practices:

The Interdependence is a multi-local contagion between not-for-market art initiatives. The Interdependence wants to surface the ubiquity and interconnectedness of organisations and initiatives, to signal at a glance that they are interdependent and are part of a larger movement. The act of connecting and recognising each other, is a collective response to the naysayers who respond to our examples of art making by saying “that’s nice, but is it scalable?” Ubiquity is our answer.

Thank you.
(1) www.makeitclear.eu (accessed on 25 July 2019)
(3) Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, PM Press/Kairos, 2019, page 94
(5) See above, page 19