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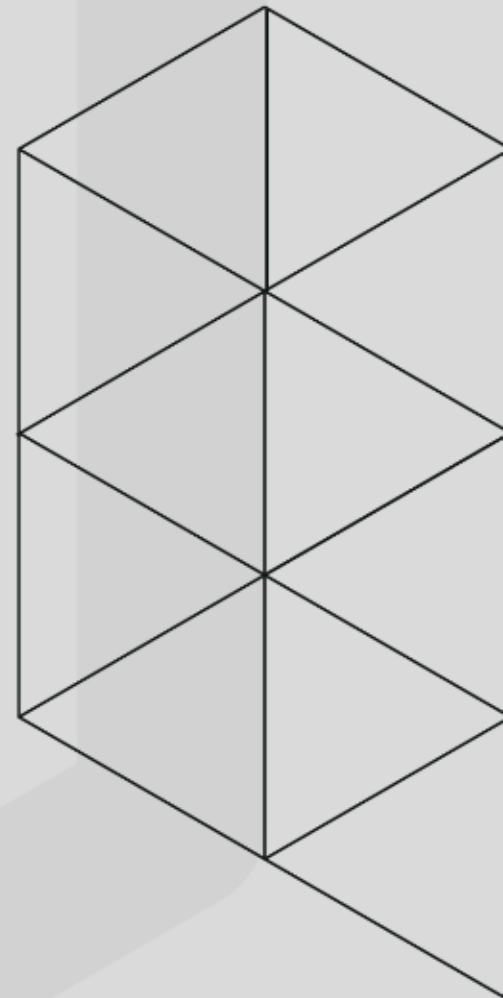Art & Architecture for
Empathetic Exchange

Learning from Critical Social Art Practice: Disassembling and Reassembling the Social

SPACEX Deliverable, Work Package 5 (Training and Outreach Event)

Mel Jordan (ER), Coventry University
SPACEX Work Package 2: Practices
Secondments: Sirius, Ireland, CASCO, The Netherlands,
LUC, Greece, The Wonder Cabinet, Palestine

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Learning from Critical Social Art Practice: Disassembling and Reassembling the Social

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Prof. Andrew Hewitt, University of Northampton

SPACEX -RISE Training Event 4, University of Amsterdam

Values and (E)valuations of or as Cultural Practices? Entering a time of pragmatic experimentation.

Thursday 21 - Friday 22 September 2023
Convened by Dr. Francesco Chiaravalloti and Prof. Christa-Maria Lerm-Hayes, University of Amsterdam

Introduction

My name is Mel Jordan (MJ) – I am an artist and researcher; I lead the research strand ArtSpaceCity in the Centre for Postdigital Cultures at Coventry University. I am also one of the SPACEX-RISE coordinators. See: https://www.spacex-rise.org/

Andrew Hewitt (AH) is an artist and researcher, he is co-lead for the Art & Design Research Centre, University of Northampton. He is also overall project coordinator for SPACEX-RISE.

Marley Treloar (MT) is an artist and researcher, her PhD researcher in the Centre for Postdigital Cultures at Coventry University focuses on embedding social art practices through placements, residences and collaborations with arts institutions and part of the SPACEX-RISE network.

MJ: The format for our contribution today is that I will begin by setting out an introduction that we have worked on together, then Marley and Andy will reflect upon two recent projects. 1. *'MORE' Making Tool Together,* Mel Jordan and Marley Treloar, 2023, 2. *'Mapping Kiosk',* Partisan Social Club, 2023 (Hewitt, Jordan, and Wright). We will then ask a few questions of each other intended to expand and explain the basis of our art projects.

We are encouraged by the talks we heard this morning, and during yesterday (21 September and 22 September 2023), and we will reflect upon our work through some of the contexts that have already been spoken about. For example, we heard about the trajectory of cultural evaluation under neoliberalism - from the attempts to evaluate art and culture for economic benefit, through creative industries strategies and the city of culture (various schemes UK city of culture and European City of Culture). Although neoliberalism was the main context, I think that what we are experiencing - probably more so in the UK than in the Netherlands - is the breaking down of the neoliberal consensus and the popular belief in its various rhetoric's (Hewitt, 2011). This breakdown has exposed massive inequalities, and floundering economic growth, we can also see a dangerous democratic decline (Jordan and Hewitt, 2022), along with an accelerating crisis of climate change.

As we heard from Francesco, the expanded thinking around 'value' (Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016) called for an assessment of the social value of art and cultural projects. Yesterday, (21 September 2023) we also discussed the problem that formal evaluation structures do not have the languages to translate or communicate tacit and affective knowledge experiences.

Reflecting on this we think this is not the whole story. Yes, evaluations and ethnographies that utilise artistic methods for finding out what happened, and what participants think etc do *look* a bit like social art practice and the methods and formats - co-creation and participation - may appear similar but they are **not** the same.

In short, we believe something else is happening in social art practice and we want to try to explain it. Our own social art projects are not aimed at developing innovative processes of evaluation or better routes to public engagement, but rather they set out to embody the social and political process of art. We engage directly with the institution and its wider structures and constraints, including government expectations of evaluation, funding, politics, and policy.

We propose that rather than art evidencing its value to society through evaluation processes, what we need to do is to discuss the function of social art practice to *disassemble* and *reassemble* the social itself?

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Perhaps we are inspired by Justin O'Connor's (Professor of Cultural Economy at the University of South Australia recent words). He says,

> "Now is not the time for 'back to normal'. Now is not the time for incremental policy tinkering or better advocacy but for a fundamental resetting of art and culture – the language we use when we speak of them, the way we understand their place in our lives and how we support them to thrive and best fulfil their purpose." (O'Connor, 2022).

fig. 1 The economic function of public art is to increase the value of private property, Freee art collective 2005

There are two problems with the evaluation of the arts for social benefit that I think we need to explore.

1. Evaluating the social benefits of the arts - presumes that the social already exists and is constant, consistent, and fixed.

Bruno Latour's book and ideas on Reassembling the Social, (Latour, 2005) is an account of the way that social scientists use the word social. He argues that sociologists conceive of the social as something that *already* exists. He suggests that we continually take this category for granted, we assume that the social is an established entity, something that is both predetermined and set. If this is so, in the many attempts to evaluate the social value of art, we are obliged to presume that the social world exists and is not in the process of being made and remade. Latour, however, believes that the social is

something that must be formed or forged. He suggests that the social is something we can study and urges us to ask questions about *how exactly the social comes to be*? Latour, of course, directs his argument to the formation of Actor Network Theory, which is also important in the sense that artworks can be considered here as actors and aspects of what configures the social. Here we think also of ideas of Foucault's *dispositif* (Foucault, 1980) and what we call 'Real Montage' (Jordan 2014). We think it is very useful to think about these propositions in relation to social art practice in what ways it forms the social and how it comes to be.

For us this helps to illustrate the entwined nature of social art practice. Finally, if arts practice is engaged in the process of remaking the social, what would the use of evaluating arts social benefit to an already existing or static notion of the 'social'.

fig. 2 The function of public art for regeneration is to sex up the control of the under-classes.
Freee Art Collective 2006

2. The evaluation of the social benefit of artworks presumes that artworks are not already social.

The consequence of this move, however innocent or pragmatic in its assumption, actually conceives of artworks as autonomous or at least not in themselves social. It fails to recognise their already social

nature or see them as actors/ part of new configurations towards disassembling and reassembling of the social.

Thereby the problem is twofold. By believing that we need to account for the social value of art we are in fact cheating art of its social agency. The evaluation of arts social benefit is not only complex (untranslatable), difficult (awkward), and instrumental - it is downright violent.

It might be helpful to clarify a trajectory of social art practice that might help to explain why certain techniques and processes are associated with social art practice.

Here we ask the question: Why do social art projects look like participant ethnography? To explore the 'resemblance' of participant ethnography to forms of participatory social art practice. (Hewitt and Jordan: 2021)

We can maybe counter this with a quick trajectory of social art practice. This is an excerpt from our recent article, 'Depoliticization, participation and social art practice: On the function of social art practice for politicization.' (Jordan and Hewitt: 2022).

> In 2010 the 'educational turn' in art was defined by O'Neill and Wilson, who describe the prevalent use of pedagogical models as used by curators as well as artists engaged in critical art projects. They explain how lectures, classes, workshops, and discussions have long been considered forms of dematerialized art practice as well as operating as a supporting role for exhibitions of art in museums and biennials (O'Neill and Wilson 2010: 12).
>
> Community art and public art contexts are central to the artworks produced as social artworks, manifesting in an engagement with particular communities or specific sites of production. These artworks are usually developed through a programme of group workshops. Miwon Kwon (2002) has described the art historical trajectory from site to location, explaining how artists have explored ways to enter into deliberations with publics, with outcomes not defined in terms of material, but by processes of interaction between the context and local participants and the commissioned artist.
>
> Arte Útil have embraced the usefulness of art for society, yet others have cautioned of aligning art with the provision of tasks associated

with social reproduction, warning that this 'can cohere with, rather than confront the paternalism of the state and capitalism' (Abse Gogarty 2017: 124). Abse Gogarty explains, 'the notion of usefulness has permeated the field of social practice more broadly, with "use value" frequently posed as an undisputed moral good, and a category that might be wrested from its socio-economic relation to exchange value within capitalism' (2017: 118).

Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, in his text 'A note on socially engaged art criticism', identifies social art practice's relationship to the trajectory of art practice after the twentieth-century avant-garde. He describes social art practice as 'four overlapping practices: relational aesthetics, institutional critique, socially engaged art, and tactical media'(Rasmussen 2017: n.pag.). He further explains: [W]e are trying to account for phenomena whose identities are in no way fixed but are in movement, and that, for instance, former oppositions between the avant-garde's anti-institutional 'over-politicization' and anti-aesthetic institutional critique are gradually changing. (Rasmussen 2017: n.pag.)

Social art practice is multifaceted; it generates a complex set of social relations between the outcome and the audience, it has a primary audience of those involved in its co-production as well as a subsequent secondary audience that is produced when the resulting artworks are displayed and published (Jordan 2014). Social art projects extend the reachability of a social network, thus creating a wider communication base for the sharing of values as well as the making of new ones. Its relationship to supporting community empowerment is complex and is much debated within the field, with opposing positions adopted by practitioners including the convivial (Bourriaud 2002), the antagonistic (Bishop 2012).

Numerous scholars have lamented the way in which socially engaged art practice is employed by the UK government to address social problems. Berry and Iles observed that '[a] rising crescendo of criticism may finally be denting the blithe confidence of the "Creative City" formula and its liberal application to all manner of post-industrial urban ills' (2009: n.pag.). Their concern is that a 'post-conceptual order of aesthetics […] masks the unaltered or worsening conditions that affect the urban majority as welfare is dismantled, public assets sold off and free spaces enclosed' (Berry and Iles 2009: n.pag.)

It is in the context of participatory art practice in the United Kingdom and Europe that Claire Bishop's book Artificial Hells is formulated. Bishop calls for agonistic artworks within the format of participatory projects (Bishop 2012). This relies on art taking an agonistic approach to its production, content, and site, and at the same time generating an exhibitable output. Bishop utilises Mouffe's concept of agonism to remonstrate with Nicholas Bourriaud's seemingly convivial exchanges developed through artworks that align to what he calls 'relational aesthetics' (Bourriaud 2002). Bishop's claim for antagonism conventionally calls for the 'artwork' to emerge from the social or participatory art project; her proposition, which is one place with which I disagree, is committed to protecting a sense of autonomy for the artist and artwork. Bishop believes this autonomy can lead to a critical and political art, where art is assigned the function to provoke critical reactions through revealing hidden aspects of global capitalism.

Writing in 2015, Loretta Lees and Claire Melhuish remind us that little evidence is provided to support the 'quasi-social fact' that 'arts-led regeneration is a tool to combat social exclusion' (2015: 242). Given the complexity of evaluating programmes of art-led regeneration that are similar to 'management consultancy reports', they 'offer suggestions for constructing a new and more robust evidence base' (Lees and Melhuish 2015: 256). (Jordan and Hewitt: 2022).

The use of educational strategies, participatory modes of production, and arts' ability to visualise and represent ideas means that social art practice is affected by forms of depoliticization. However, problems of instrumentalization by patronage and state funding are well debated, and some art projects are specifically developed to confront and reveal these issues.

Social arts practitioners who foreground multifaceted types of participation can support political engagement that occurs beyond and complementary to the modes of governance emphasised within the depoliticization literature. These include participation in the production of artworks that utilise dialogue, discussion, critical analysis, making skills, introduction to political topics and knowledge production as an alternative to state-supported educational structures. Participation in this context also extends towards artists' projects that reveal political conditions, developing communications

with publics through 'publishing' artworks and seeking opinion formation through insights provided in the artworks.

To conclude this part of the discussion it might be useful to state what we have in mind for our own artworks.

Given the crisis and breakdown of neoliberalism, we are left thinking, ***How can a third way approach to public services continue to survive, when any (apparent) slack in the system has been recuperated?*** In the UK, public services have been hollowed out and wound down. Not only is this an economic crisis but it transforms our expectations of public life and social provision and threatens to challenge the collected values that cohere the wellbeing of our communities. We believe that art and cultural projects can support democracy and provide new versions and generate imaginaries of a reassembled society. We see art practice helping to disassemble the current crisis of the social, at the same time to reassemble a possibility for a new more equal future.

To do this we want to embed principles of social art practice into cultural institutions and articulate this to policymakers and arts funders like ACE, also research funders such as the AHRC - the aim is to develop the potential for more politicised institutions - and more grass roots (less managerial) approaches to living together. We want to rebuild associational life through art and cultural projects.

I will hand over to Marley Treloar and Andy Hewitt who will talk about instances of our work in this context.

fig.3 Graphic image (Michael Wright) for the MORE project. Jordan and Treloar 2023

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MT: Thank you for the great introduction, Mel and starting the conversation around the contexts, issues and theories which begin to inform the two projects we are here to share with you all today.

On MORE

The project I would like to share today is called Making Tools Together: Exploring new ways to understand art's social benefit - or MORE as we call it. MORE was a small research project initiated by Prof. Mel Jordan (as Research Lead) and me (as Research Assistant), which was funded by Research England Development Fund. Out of the necessities of funding, we took on these roles, but the project was devised through a collaborative interest in the relationship between social art practices and the art institution and how this could be explored through social projects as a research practice.

My interest in the art institution is two-fold, informed by my own experiences from my previous careers in the sector, having worked in programming, education, and administrative roles in UK National Portfolio Organisations, which are arts organisations that are granted longer-term funding from the Arts Council England, and my own practice as a social practice artist. This dual experience comes together in my practice-based PhD research, in which I am concerned with social art practices possibilities to collaborate with arts institutions to understand more social institutional models.

As Mel articulated, the relationship between artists and institutions has been strained throughout social art practice history. And through our conversations yesterday and today the instrumental function in which art is used through policy, funding and evaluation is part of this fraught relationship. However, many social art practices today choose to directly engage with institutions not in an antagonistic way - as waves of institutional critique may have done in the past, but through - however guarded and sceptical - collaboration. Through this collaboration, I am interested in practices which disassemble and reassemble the practice of being an institution, in the wider social-political contexts as spaces which can uphold themselves to the ethos and ethics which they say they support.

MORE started in earnest as a small pilot study to identify opportunities and embed evaluation within programmes for small arts organisations. We did this by spending two days with each of our

three partner art institutions, discussing the organisation and reflecting on our conversations. These discussions included intertwining aspects of artistic production, audience engagement, documentation, and communication together, towards a more holistic process of evaluation for each institution.

To do this we asked a specific set of questions to each organisation:
1. What programmes does your organisation produce?
2. How do you evaluate or reflect on these programmes?
3. What methods of evaluation would you like to develop?
4. How do you organise your evaluation data?
5. How can this be embedded into programming?

These conversations then were reflected upon over a two-week period and developed through collaborative report writing between Mel, myself, and our institutional partner.

However, as the project went on, while evaluation was the jumping off point, we realised that we were really having reflexive conversations about the wider influences of cultural policy, austerity measures, deficiencies in the structure of public arts funding and how arts organisations in England are often struggling to keep producing at pace. Through the dialogue generated by asking questions about institutional structures, workflows, and institutional principles: the social, political, and ethical concerns which surround these institutional models became the centre of discussion.

We had a few assumptions going into the project; we knew that public funding for the arts in the UK is currently at an all-time low, that the pandemic led to the restructuring and reforming of institutions for better or worse and through the contributions of Jordan and Hewitt's writing on depoliticization of art through cultural policy, artists and art institutions are being instrumentalized under neoliberalism (Jordan and Hewitt 2022).

fig 4. Mapping MORE 1. Jordan and Treloar 2023

As such, we set out to discuss evaluation – but as social practice artists. As artists, we see evaluation as a cyclical process, one which is iterative and collaborative in itself. Through reflection we come to new understandings about what we do, how we do it and its impacts on the world around us. We endeavoured to link this practice of artistic reflexivity with the social and ethical concerns of social practice – for us foregrounding social justice alongside arts economics. This framed our interactions with arts institutions as a PRACTICE through which the structures, processes and communicated ethos of the organisations could be picked apart, asked questions about, and discussed to better understand social, political and personal values of the organisation through conversations with its staff.

We learned much through our time with our partner organisations. Some of which was expected, and some rather surprising. I want to highlight a few key takeaways which I'm sure we will expand upon during our conversation here today:

1. We encountered 3 different motivations towards evaluation with our partners.

Our 1st institution saw evaluation as a 'necessary evil' of public funding, contributing what was needed to fulfil funders requirements and discussed the heavy time commitments needed to do so. This organisation valued the flexibility and freedom of socially engaged artist-led approaches to programming, taking less time to reflect on these practices and processes. This for us led to a question - how can institutions evidence - even if only to themselves - that they are upholding the values and politics they state without self-reflective processes in place? Do social and ethical institutions need self-imposed checks and balances to ensure they're 'putting their money where their mouth is'?

Our 2nd organisation due to their organisational structures were 2-steps removed from the kind of evaluation of the public wanted by funding bodies such as the Arts Council England. As such they struggled to maintain a model for public funding. They have a very-very small team, with only one part-time member of staff and a second staff member only paid through the success of project grant funds. This organisation did not have the time, budget or capacity to evaluate in the way in which cultural policy demands it, but we identified their organisation as playing a vital role in the ecology needed for artists to exist and thrive in their city. Without them, there would be no grassroots level spaces for artists which would provide access, mentoring and physical space to be an artist in the city.

Our 3rd organisation saw evaluation through a politicised lens, linking it with their cities cultural review policy and developing an organisational structure which built in time for long-term evaluation periods. This most shocking of all ticked all the boxes of what is asked for in terms of formal evaluation processes and then some by UK cultural policy yet were not granted long-term public funding support. Most interestingly, they communicated their institution as a collective artist practice while formally looking like an arts institution from the outside, this allowed them to communicate their organisation not only on a strategic policy level, but as a social project.
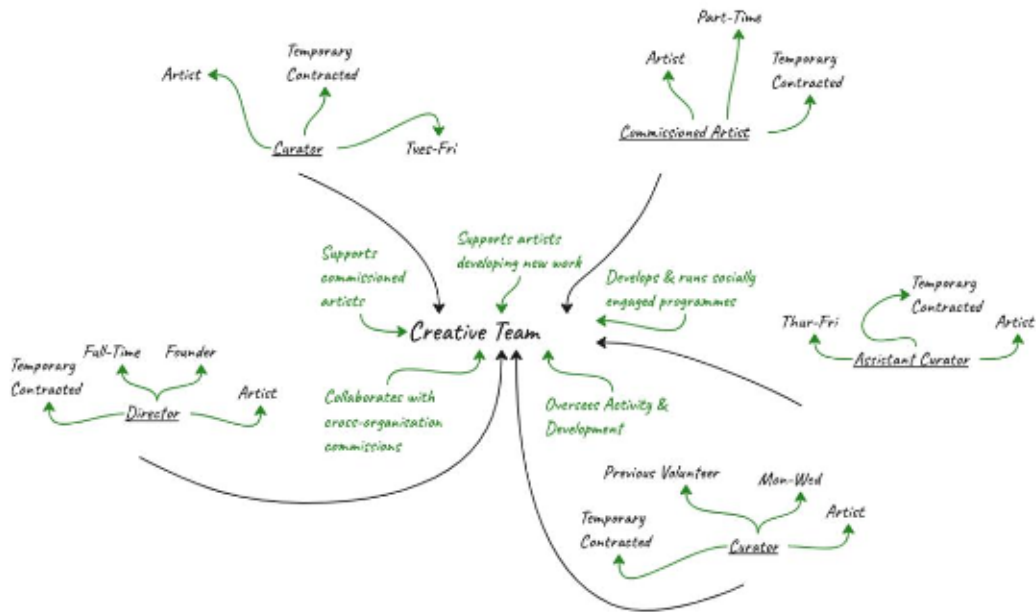
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Temporary
Contracted

Artist

Curator → Tues-Fri

Part-Time

Artist

Commissioned Artist

Temporary
Contracted

Supports
commissioned
artists

Supports artists
developing new work

Develops & runs socially
engaged programmes

Creative Team

Temporary
Contracted

Artist

Thur-Fri

Assistant Curator

Temporary
Contracted

Full-Time   Founder

Director   Artist

Collaborates with
cross-organisation
commissions

Oversees Activity &
Development

Previous Volunteer   Mon-Wed

Temporary
Contracted

Artist

Curator

fig 5. Mapping MORE 2. Jordan and Treloar 2023

Temporary
Contracted

Artist

Technical Manger   Thur-Sat

Temporary
Contracted

Tues-Thur

Artist

Marketing Officer

Promotes our work and
our partnered artists

Plans & installs our
exhibitions and events

Oversees our funding and
makes sure things get paid

Operations Team

Temporary
Contracted

Finance Manager

Artist   Mon, Wed, Fri

Coordinates between teams
& commissioned artists

Looks after the business
plan of the organisation   Temporary
Contracted

Full-Time   Artist

Operations Director

fig 6. Mapping MORE 3. Jordan and Treloar 2023

2. The barriers for evaluation were plentiful:
Staff capabilities, time needed for evaluation, short-term project periods, lack of funding, breadth of evaluation needed, rigidity of reporting requirements, zero-hour/fixed term/temporary contracts for staff, uninterest or a lack of agency to change institutional processes were discussions we had with all our partners in one form or the other. These barriers are structural – structural of arts funding, of institutional frameworks and of expectations from policy.

And lastly,

The prevalence of social practices in the sector is reflecting back on the institutions – but just as not all artists are suited to social practice, not all art institutions are willing, capable or should be social institutions - despite the call for this through the aims of cultural policy.

In our discussions we came to the exploration of what a 'social institution' must function as today. Whether describing themselves as such, as an 'artist ecology' or 'as social practice but institutionalised' the conversations drifted to the social role of the art institution today. And while our two days with each organisation has finished, we have kept being invited back.

In an effort to further engage with this line of conversion, we have brought back our reports and findings back to different levels of the organisation - both positive and critical understandings of their institutions. We have discussed our findings with the boards of the organisations, exploring not just what we set out to learn about their evaluation processes but the wider structural processes we saw at play. And in addition to engaging with top-down governance, we are continuing to engage at different levels of the organisation - developing space for the volunteers and front of house teams, who we see as a catalyst for evaluation, to develop processes to expand, visualise and explore the structures of their organisations to continue this reflexive institutional practice.

Ultimately, we concluded that MORE did a lot in a short time. Key to our discussions today is the movement of artistic practices away from solely an engagement process and unpacking the relationship this close work with arts institutions have. Critically in this is understanding this collaboration with institutions as fundamentally and ethically different from the realm of corporate consulting. We

pose this social institutional collaboration as a practice which is closer to the legacies of institutional critique, one which is more socially and ethically concerned with the political and institutional structures which operate under neoliberalism today, and how we might together, slowly and in solidarity with each other collectively shift policy goal posts through developing common practices.

AH: Thanks Marley

On Social Infrastructures and Institutions
As you have heard, we are artist researchers concerned with institutions. Institutions can be perceived negatively as simply apparatus of power, privilege, and hierarchy, and some of them are. But our lives are embedded in multiple institutions, in art, education and the rest. We all need institutions. In response to cultural hegemony, artists (of the Avant Garde) established institutions of and for critical culture, institutions for experimental art and more generally the making of institutions for social life.
Our work, in the Freee art collective and the Partisan Social Club (http://partisansocialclub.com/) aims to bring social practice to cultural and educational institutions. This is to work with and change existing institutions or to form new groups, organisations, and associations, that practise social and cultural transformation. To make institutions into spaces of collectivity, resistance, and dissent.

I would like to briefly discuss a funded research project the Partisan Social Club[1] worked on recently, in which arts were to be used in institutional contexts but ideas of social art practice were missing. This, I think, reveals some of the problems for practice-led arts research when working within current funding streams and notions of evaluation.

In the UK cultural work is supported by a cultural economy that is driven by cultural policy. Cultural policy steers not only the public funding of arts, in which arts institutions and organisations have to evidence the social value of art projects but now we see this in the public funding of research. For context, funding for research in the

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[1] **Partisan Social Club:** Andrew Hewitt, Mel Jordan, with Michael Wright, and Melissa James on evaluation. Mapping Kiosk: Devised a conversation map, posters, badges, and apparatus for mobile events including poster stands, tables and A frames.

UK comes from UK Research and Innovation Funding which directs funds to meet Government policy objectives, usually with neo-liberal imperatives. In turn UKRI funds The Arts and Humanities Research Council, which is the chief funder for our area of research. The AHRC has developed interdisciplinary schemes to build an evidence base to explore cultural value, such as the one devised by Geoffrey Crossick, as Francesco mentioned yesterday, and at the same time they launched a scheme entitled 'Connected Communities'. So, it's not only cultural institutions and the artists they work with that must justify the benefits of art practices, but researchers too, as they meet the demands placed on them by funding bodies such as AHRC.

The funding of research is then another instance of 'Depoliticization' (Jordan and Hewitt 2022) that is the process of neoliberal political and social organisation that undermines democracy. Depoliticization functions to create a lack of accountability in the way that the government devolves responsibility through non-governmental agencies or quangos, organisations delivering public goods but are themselves not democratically constituted. Both UKRI and Arts Council England are quangos with an increasingly instrumental policy agenda. As such, arts-based participation is being fostered and commissioned through policy agendas by both ACE and UKRI. For example, Nicolas Serota is the Head of the Arts Council England, but he was not democratically elected. Art projects that are funded in such arrangements are expected to promote social inclusion or forms of audience engagement. This can mean the arts are used to reflect the middle-class tastes of the academic researcher, which generate liberal values, such as individual expression, personal well-being, and private interests. This is in areas of deprivation in which there are deep seated social and cultural divisions, where art is low down on people's list of immediate needs, where they face a chronic lack of services and infrastructures. Hence the need to argue for arts-based research as a space for social praxis, that seeks to create agency and critical citizenship to help call for change.

The project I am going to discuss very briefly, was funded by AHRC, from the funding call *Mobilising Community Assets to Tackle Health Inequalities*. In response a consortium was developed, that I am part of, called the Well Communities Research Consortia (WCRC). Included in the WCRC are City University London, Royal College of Music, University College London, University of Northampton, Voluntary Impact Northampton, Tower Hamlets CVS, North East

London Integrated Care Board, Northampton Integrated Care Board, Office for Health Improvement and Disparities. This includes 21 researchers from across arts and humanities, social sciences, and public health.

I was invited to join this consortium, as they needed researchers from an arts background. I was curious. Could social practice help intervene in this project and support the objectives of the call? In addition, the project would enable me to understand the conditions faced by publicly funded institutions in my locality.
WCRC is a large consortium, with big public institutions, like the NHS, and local government teams. It is evidence of how AHRC funding has shifted toward health, wellbeing, local service provision - as I state above in relation to the De-politicization argument. This sets up an instrumental focus for Arts and Humanities researchers. These shifts in how policy is steered points to the crisis in neo-liberal UK. We have experienced years of decline. The UK is falling apart. People are struggling. Policy is then directed toward this crisis. Therefore, funding calls aim to reorganise research teams to manage what's left, to try to hold it together.

As its AHRC, the arts are included, hence my invitation to join a consortium. It is imagined that the arts can contribute within an interdisciplinary team. In this case, to explore how using cultural workers and cultural assets can help stem health disparities in areas of deprivation, and to effect systems change in frontline organisations. All of which is a tall order.

However, in the Well Communities consortia, arts research was new to the principal investigators who were researchers from health sciences and community development. They, like most outside the art field perceive it as a means to improve data collection with residents by using novel techniques. This perception of what art is and does is common to the eight projects that had received monies from this funding call, most of which are led by health experts or by social scientists. A pattern then emerges in which arts researchers are brought into interdisciplinary teams and given roles and remits by non-art research leads. This relegates the work of art practitioners to the role of technical support.

My work has been to bring social practice ideas to the consortia. Aiming to move from artistic techniques to artistic practice, that is

disassembling and reassembling the social within the project contexts. Working in a research consortium is a challenge as one seeks to understand the interdisciplinary scope of the project, often with little time to get to know one another. But the group response was very positive, and we have learnt from each other.

The project set out to build a method for system change within organisations - removing obstacles to change, learning from key workers what needs to be done, learning from the lived experience of residents on the barriers they face in their area. The emphasis here is on asset-based community development work, a methodology for the development of communities based on their strengths and potentials and with efficiencies in mind. There was also a focus on improving the delivery of local services within the existing institutional framework and political culture, despite the evident failure of those systems in meeting people's needs over many decades as cuts diminished social provision. This then is not a radical version of community development, but a direction set by the project leads within an UKRI neo-liberal framework. However, ideas on how social practice did become part of the discussion within the research team, building an understanding of what this form of practice entails and how it can support the more critical aims of the project. These are measures that can give people space to create a campaign for change and to help them organise with each other.

The project team has been introduced to participatory arts, the use of film and documentary, dialogical and participatory works, pedagogic workshops, and site-based interventions. In addition, resources on social practice and references to literature have been included in project documentation. I was also able to bring down funding to employ a Research Assistant to interview the WCRC research team on the role of art and design in the project. The original bid did not include reflection on aspects of art practice, so we needed to build this in to help establish why it needs to be integral to future bids. So small steps that can be built upon.

fig 7. Mapping Kiosk, pin badges for Kings Heath. Partisan Social Club and Michael Wright, 2023.

fig 8 Mapping Kiosk, table map for Kings Heath. 2000cm x 60cm. Printed paper. Partisan Social Club and Michael Wright, 2023.

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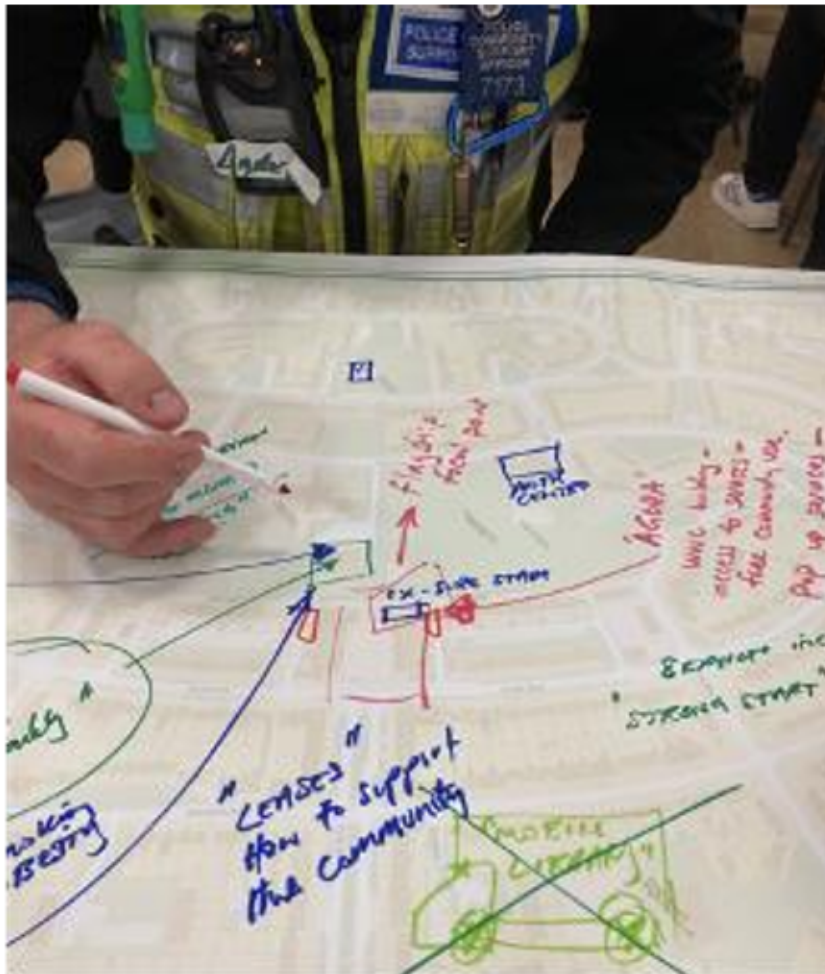Art & Architecture for
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fig 11 Mapping Kiosk, pop up table maps for Kings Heath. Partisan Social Club and Michael Wright, 2023.

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