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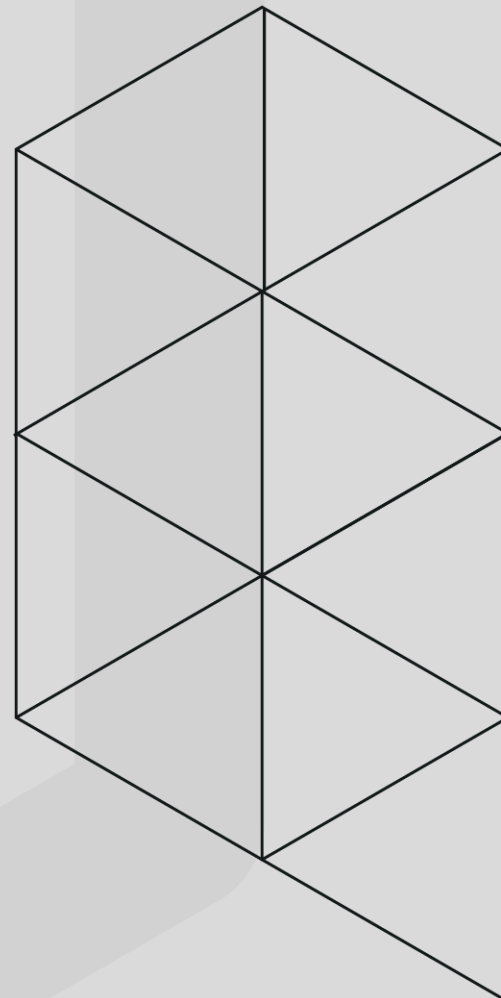
Reflexivity as Organisations: In Conversation with Coventry Biennial and Home for Cooperation

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SPACE X Work Package 2: Practices
Secondments: Sirius, Ireland

Ryan Hughes, Coventry Biennial
SPACE X Work Package 4: Archives
Secondments: University of Amsterdam

Andri Christofides, Home for Cooperation
SPACE X Work Package 3: Urban Subjects
Secondments: Coventry University



Reflexivity as Organisations: In conversation with Coventry Biennial and Home for Cooperation

Marley Treloar, Coventry University

Ryan Hughes, Coventry Biennial

Andri Christofides, Home for Cooperation

This In-Conversation event took place on August 22nd 2024.

Abstract

Hello everyone and thank you for coming to the next event in the ArtSpaceCity Agency series.

This seminar series comes out of two projects which the ArtSpaceCity working group undertook last year. These seminars developed from these project and are the sharing of our own interests, research and collective discussions from our time researching and acting alongside each other.

This seminar series we have titled AGENCY explores political autonomy in relation to the multifaceted ways that the city and urban space come into being. Given the depoliticization processes of neoliberal governments, exacerbated by divisions in the UK and the ascent of populist ideologies, and amidst ongoing culture wars, we ask what can we do to support democratic processes of city making?

The disruption created by deindustrialisation, the financial crisis, austerity, Trump, Brexit, the coronavirus pandemic, and wars in Ukraine and recently in Palestine, is an opportunity to rethink the city beyond existing paradigms. The city needs a multiplicity of actors - independent of the usual suspects of professional politicians, bureaucrats, auditors, councillors, think-tanks, landowners, investors and retired middle-class professionals with experience in local and third sector politics - to participate in the (re)making of cities according to the specific needs and requirements of each situation.

At a time when we are disillusioned about the power of our individual actions we want to question, what can be done and, how can we maintain hope for change towards more inclusive and equitable cities for all? We will explore the paradoxes of action and engagement given our own bodies which are those of artists, researchers, and academics. When thinking about agency we utilise Judith Butler's thinking in relation to performativity. Agency here is about embodying the autonomy to resist and/or subvert predefined social and political norms. Our hope is that it can lead to the repetition of actions in such a way that they contribute to the development of new ways of living together.

This seminar will explore some of the ideas I have been developing through my practice research during my PhD build upon my own thoughts through opening the conversation up with our guest speakers. Specifically, in relation to this AGENCY series my own practice research explores ideas around individual and collective action, of habit building and exploring infrastructural change through working together. I am interested in how we can hold each other to account, where our policies, politicians, governing bodies and infrastructures fall short.

Through my practice research of working with arts organisations and their teams, we collectively explore the intertwined relationship between cultural policy, arts public funding, politics and the infrastructures of arts spaces. This work evolves out of dialogic and workshop practices to unpick and understand the ways in which we work, how these are informed by the infrastructures which supports us and how we can shift working practices to better embed social practices ethics. This work is concerned with what we as people as well as our organisations say they do and what they stand for matches up with how they function and produce with artists and cultural workers.

This second session presents an in-conversation with Ryan Hughes from Coventry Biennial and Andri Christofides from Home for Cooperation. We will be discussing ideas around organisational

reflexivity, embedding ethos into institutional infrastructures and ultimately how this creates processes of social, political and structural change. I'll let Ryan and Andri introduce their organisations next, but in case you have not met them please allow me to quickly introduce our guests here today online.

Ryan Hughes is the founder, Artistic Director and Chief Executive Officer of Coventry Biennial. He is an artist-curator and independent researcher interested in collaboration, DIY cultures, practitioner-led activities, placemaking, cultural policy and site-specific practice.

He is Deputy Chair of Meadow Arts and has co-presented exhibitions and public programmes in locations including MK Gallery (Milton Keynes, UK), Herbert Art Gallery & Museum (Coventry, UK), Eryri National Park (Snowdonia, Wales, UK) and Flat Time House (London, UK). He has additionally contributed to events, panels and programmes delivered by British Council (Italy), Kunsthal Gent (Belgium) and University of Amsterdam (The Netherlands).

Andri Christofides is the Executive Manager of the Home for Cooperation, and her role includes overseeing and coordinating all operations and projects of the organization, as well as developing plans and strategies towards the organization's social and financial sustainability. Andri is also currently undertaking an interdisciplinary PhD in Social and Cultural Anthropology (KU Leuven) and Architecture (University of Cyprus), interested in exploring the transformative potentiality at the peripheries and thresholds of highly political spaces in divided Nicosia.

I met Ryan and Andri through our involvement in the Spatial Practices in Art and Architecture for Empathetic EXchange (SPACEX-RISE) transdisciplinary research consortium, consisting of 13 HEIs and 16 Cultural Organisations across 11 EU countries with 1 partner in Palestine.

One facet of which our SPACEX-RISE consortium is concerned with the lack of interdisciplinary knowledge by those working in the cultural sector which has significantly affected the way in which the

social benefit of cultural activities is understood, articulated and applied. SPACEX-RISE proposes that inventing new and inclusive ways of living together, requires the implementation of new transdisciplinary and cross-sectoral practices and methods, that connect spatial practice with cultural sociology, cultural policy, critical pedagogies and behavioral economics.

So today, I wanted to zoom in on socially engaged and reflexive habit forming as artists and art workers for structural critique and change. To do so, we proposed an in-conversation format with Coventry Biennial and Home for Cooperation whom I've come to know and work with closely. This event really, to me is a continuation of many of the conversations we have been having already within the SPACEX-RISE network and through my PhD research. I hope you for all attending today get a short insight into why politics and reflexive practices as artist and arts workers are essential skills today when situating how arts organisations can reflect, change and shape the political and cultural landscapes not only of their own organisations, but their cities and infrastructures beyond.

KEYWORDS: Reflexivity, Arts Organisations, Social Art Practice, Politics

Ryan Hughes, Coventry Biennial

Thank you very much and congratulations on the completion of the SPACEX full name. It's not something I've actually managed in conversation, so I'm very impressed.

As you've said, I was the founder and am now Artistic Director and CEO of Coventry Biennial. We're an artist-led social, political, and critical platform for contemporary art.

As the name would suggest, we predominantly operate as a biennial, delivering city and countywide festivals every two years. Of course, given our social, political, and critical inclinations and programming style, that often means working with artists over longer periods of time between and across festival periods. Very often working closely with different, for want of a better phrase, community groups. Generally, folks.

In terms of what the biennial consists of, it's generally a programme of exhibitions spread over institutional and other spaces. Those exhibitions are very often contextualised by a wide range of public programme's ranging from fairly academic conferences, through more hands on creative educational workshops and parties.

We work really closely with artists and our community groups on what the contextualization of those exhibitions looks and feels like. I think our artist-led commitments are something that we might actually talk about quite a bit today. That sort of artist practice is really central to how we build the programme.

In terms of why Coventry Biennial exists? I started the organisation very much in response to a 10-year cultural strategy the Coventry city council had published, which has two-year review points. This dictated our biennial structure. But also that was happening at the same time as a bid to become UK City of Culture. Perhaps my artist-led, practice background made me deeply sceptical of what a City of Culture might be or do. I'd sensed actually that there was a real moment of opportunity there.

So, mapping together the City of Culture timeline and the cultural strategy timeline, I started the biennial in 2017. I recognise that 2017 moment has been pretty pivotal for the city.

We've now delivered our 4th biennial festival, just closed the doors in January this year. We have just secured the first bits of investment towards some business planning. This is something we very often do between festivals, take some time with the team, board and our stakeholders. To really consider what worked, what didn't work, how we become more fit for function? Whilst we're already developing a 2025-2026 biennial.

Andri Christofides, Home for Cooperation

I am here representing the Home for cooperation. We exist within a unique, strange situation, maybe I'll give a bit of context of where we are in the world. We are currently based in Nicosia, in Cyprus.

Cyprus has been divided in different ways across decades. It's been divided in the way it's currently shaped since the 1970s. The island is divided into the north and the south. The Republic of Cyprus manages the south, where the Greek Cypriot community exists. Then there is a self called state of Northern Cyprus, where the Turkish Cypriot community resides. This is a very simplistic geographical representation of our political context.

Since the 70s, contact between these two parts was not possible. Until 2003, when crossings along the ceasefire line opened. This is what we now call the buffer zone. It becomes a buffer between the two communities. Inside of the buffer zone at one of these crossing points the Home for Cooperation exists.

The home is a civil society-led effort. It was established by the Association for Historical Dialogue and Research. This association was put together by different teachers, educators, academics from both communities who wanted to work together on understanding history, teaching and how it could potentially help reconciliation efforts. In 2003, when the

crossings opened, one of the first dreams they had was to have a space in the buffer zone to bring people together. Almost 10 years later, that happened with the support of the United Nations, different diplomatic stakeholders and the leaders of the communities at the time.

20 years later, we operate in a very different situation. Circumstances have changed, political priorities have shifted away from what we are doing here. Which makes the theme of this discussion today, being reflective and reflexive on all of your work, even more important for us.

What the home does as a non-profit organisation, a non-governmental organisation is create opportunities for people to come together. One of the avenues in which we do that is through the arts, through different festivals or smaller events. We found that using arts and cultural practices has become a very useful and meaningful way to trigger discussions and conversations that are not done in a different in different formats.

We are currently a very small team. With a governing board on a voluntary basis. We are registered as a nonprofit company, but we operate more as an NGO. The political situation in Cyprus now, has impacted the way we see our own work in terms of how we allocate resources, how we reflect on the activities and the projects that we implement. Firstly, to make sure that we meet the needs of the communities, that we actually respond to what we say we're doing. What the goal is and what the mission is of the home but at the same time, how do we continue to be sustainable? I think that's one of the biggest difficulties at the moment.

Marley Treloar, Coventry University

What does being reflexive or reflective, what does that actually mean for your organisation and how do you do it?

Andri Christofides, Home for Cooperation

Because we are a nonprofit in the buffer zone, we have this, let's say, key position of being accessible from people across

the divide. Unfortunately, there is no other such place on the island. That comes with a lot of responsibility. Being reflective comes on different levels in the scope of our work.

Number one would be reflecting on if we are meeting the needs of the people, because what happened 10 years ago when the home opened and what happens now, is very different.

Then secondly, reflecting on how funds are allocated and used because we are constantly in fundraising mode. There's no state support for any of the kind of work that we do. Civil society in Cyprus is not really on anyone's agenda.

So then the question becomes how do you utilise those funds in the in the best way possible, to actually have the impact that you want to have. While at the same time not looking just at numbers but the quality and sustainability of engagement. Where that leads and what the ripple effect might be.

A third level of reflection comes, at least in our in our case, through reflecting the procedures we have in place. As a team, we have a very small team of 4 people who in different ways have been developing the operations, the procedures of the organisation. So how do we have transparency? Do we have mechanisms to respond to criticism? Because we may not be a political organisation but we operate in the buffer zone of a divided island. So that in itself that's a political statement.

For us, reflecting on the role of the home and on our projects, like the buffer fringe performing arts festival, that has been going on for 10 years. So, people expect the festival to take place and expect the festival to question things and bring about some sort of momentum for their artistic community in Cyprus. But then again, if that's more than 50% of your budget, what does that mean for the organisation as a whole? All of these things are where deep reflection needs to happen, in making sure you actually do what you were saying you're doing. And for us that's, contributing to the reconciliation efforts.

Marley Treloar, Coventry University

I think you're spot on with that necessity of multiple levels of reflection, to break down where change is needed within an organisation. Coventry Biennial, would you like to pick up on that?

Ryan Hughes, Coventry Biennial

We just submitted our final reports for Coventry Biennial 2023. There is so much of what we do which I describe as data-led. For those academics in the room, data-led means something quite particular and I don't know that's necessarily what I'm referring to. But of course, as a publicly funded organisation, there are expectations around evaluation and it's our legal obligation to meet those expectations.

What I think is actually more useful and interesting is that as an organisation, we're actually really data rich. That's in terms of visitor numbers, visitor demographics but also things like workforce, experience and testimonials, artist satisfaction and progression. All of those different data sets enable us to make decisions and actions which are actually rooted in something and measurable.

Yet similarly, funding socially engaged art in the UK is not a government priority. So, where we've got relatively limited funds, actually knowing that 90% of our workforce have shared a particular concern, within our limited resource, being able to actually really target that, is much more sensible and then therefore impactful. Than us thinking, "Oh well, wouldn't it be great if we had a ping pong table in the staff room", which of course lots of organisations might do and might be really fun, but actually making sure we've all got a pro Zoom account is perhaps more responsible. I think for us it's really about being responsive to the information that we have.

Marley Treloar, Coventry University

I think one thing you both said which, in in your own ways, is that it's necessary to take the time as an organisation to listen. Not only listen to your audiences, but your staff and the artists that you commission or you work with over long periods

of time. And that process of listening is probably quite a long term.

Could you describe a little bit more about how you make change internally as an as an organisation? How do you identify those things and then turn around to the staff and your stakeholders and say maybe we should talk about this?

Andri Christofides, Home for Cooperation

That was a very important process we've had to follow over the last year and a half.

The Buffer Fringe, is a performing arts festival we started back in 2014. Through the years, it grew into this International Festival, with participants from over 10 countries every year and the budget exponentially growing, with applications from like 30-40 countries worldwide.

It grew in reach, it grew in spirit. We had thousands of people joining. It was one of our most successful projects in terms of audience development. It started occupying a very important space in the art scene in Cyprus. That comes with expectations, that comes with some responsibility.

This was the only and I think continues to be the only inter-communal festival, meaning that it is organised by an inter-communal team with both main communities of the island represented by members of our team that has been consistently happening across the divide. There was a certain responsibility coming with the implementation of the festival, to meaningfully talk about difficult things and trigger discussions. To have high-quality presentations and performances while having this context of inter-communal work and reconciliation efforts.

What that means and how an arts festival can contribute to building resilience but from within the arts scene. Another element of the festival was how do we make the most of the local and international connections that happen because of the festival, how do we create this dialogue and this intercultural exchange?

Coming to the end of the festival and then reporting takes, such a long time. Being a very small team, with a limited budget. Having to finish the festival in October, then evaluate in the next couple of months and in the new year, we're already starting to plan the next year's festival. It was becoming impossible given how big the festival was becoming.

One of the things we were very consistent with was asking feedback from the participating artists, local and international, to understand what they took from the festival. What they think could have been done better, what they wish would have happened, or if they came again, what would be a suggestion.

What we had been doing with the festival, was that every year or every couple of years, it worked with a different creative team. The idea was to give the space and the platform to as many artists as possible and take ownership of this space. In these conversations, we realised that there was a need for more meaningful and longer engagement. For example, we had artists last year from Brazil coming for three days. They performed and then they left. When you build relationships with the artists, when they develop their programme and their piece months in advance, and they finally land in Cyprus and then they only get to stay for a couple of days. That felt like we were missing a big opportunity.

One of the key decisions we made was to make the festival biennial. I have to say it was also highly influenced by my discussions with Coventry Biennial, while I was in Coventry for my own secondment under the SPACEX project.

In actually understanding the need to reflect, evaluate and take the time needed to do it properly. We felt that we've been rushed to, organise the next edition and the next edition, making it more meaningful and better than the last. I think taking a step back to really understand what is happening, what is your mission, what is your goal at the end of the day is very important.

With all this in mind, communicating this to our board members and funders was a difficult discussion. Why we're not having Buffer fringe this year, how is that gap going to be filled and why is it important to have this empty space to have these conversations? But I think once you go through that process and you go through the process in a genuinely open way, then all of these changes do make sense for us. It's a risk. It's the first time we're taking this kind of risk.

We still have people are calling, journalists and the media that we've been in touch with for years, asking what's happening with fringe this year. So, we have this awkward conversation of we're not doing it this year because of this and this and this reason. But there seems to be a shared sentiment within the artistic community that this is seen as a mature step after the first 10 editions. Moving forward to be sustainable, you need to make these difficult decisions at some point.

Marley Treloar, Coventry University

Coventry Biennial, I'm quite interested on your perspective on sustainability of the biennial model. I know when we've talked before, you've said that earlier editions of the biennial had two or three times the artists that these later editions have had.

As much as kind of both of your organisations are situated in different places, with different funding structures, you share this common rushing for the next lot of funding and getting the next thing out. I wonder if you could just speak on that idea to change to reduce the number of artists, but extend the time of development.

Ryan Hughes, Coventry Biennial

It's really interesting hearing Home for Cooperation talk about that shift from annual to biennial. And although I don't think in any sort of serious sense, we're considering a shift to triennial. I do often think, oh, an extra 12 months of time is such a commodity. When you've got genuine social ambitions for the programmes that you're building, those relationships between everybody just becomes all the richer with time.

Our first biennial in 2017 had 73 artists, if I recall correctly. The programme that year was only 11 days long. I was absolutely exhausted after it. I remember going to all of our funders and saying we weren't prepared for what we've just delivered and they all supported us with some business development.

In 2018, I was naive enough to think that having done some business development meant, we're ready to really grow that now. And so our 2019 festival almost doubled in size. We had 130 something artists.

Actually looking at the team's experience of delivering that year and looking at the feedback from artists, there were a lot of artists that had really wonderful experiences, but there was also a lot of artists that felt like they hadn't had the conversations with curators they wanted. They perhaps hadn't had the kinds of exhibition spaces that they wanted. They hadn't been able to engage with audiences as meaningfully and deeply as they'd wanted.

We became really aware that this sort of programmatic growth, it was not useful. As we were really reflecting on that, of course COVID happened. Which for us all of course, was a moment for slowing and reflection and in lots of ways, really focusing on what was most important within our practises.

We did, of course, then have 2021 to deliver, which because Coventry was City of Culture in that year, we knew was a moment for us to be big and bold. But having simultaneously had this process of knowing that we had to be big and bold in a more sensible way.

Our 2021 programme was significantly scaled. We almost halved the number of exhibition venues. We almost doubled the team. And artists within the programme were down to, I think, 52 or 53. What we had done with that sort of shifting of a of a programme scale had been really been able to assign members of our team to work with a small handful of artists, rather than everyone being spread really thin.

That meant each artists had a regular point of contact, really regular support. It meant that the communities who were coming into work on project had a regular point of contact, who knew who they were going to be seeing that day. And that just made things a lot more streamlined.

Of course, being within the City of Culture came with a whole host of problems that we've rehearsed in Coventry a lot, so I won't do that here.

We became really aware coming out of that year that in lots of ways our programme was still too large. Particularly given an increasingly difficult public funding environment.

For our 2023 programme, we decided to be really quite bold and it was 16 artists in four exhibitions. Which when we compare that to the 130+, feels really quite drastic.

I remember some of our earliest sort of curatorial conversations were about how bold can we be? We did discuss whether a biennial could be a solo show. One artist in one venue with this strap line of being a biennial.

All of that the expectation that the international art world puts on, as Andri shared, all those expectations that a very local audience have come to expect a particular thing would put on to that. We decided a solo show was perhaps too bold.

Making that very dramatic shift to 16 artists, was hugely impactful for us. Yet, we've seen from all the data sets coming back that the team found it the most enjoyable and manageable experience of working with us.

Artists have had almost entirely outstanding experiences. What we have found is there's always exceptions within datasets. There's one artist who was quite unhappy about their experience that they had working on the programme.

Of course we're just looking at how we address that with the team. We've done some follow up work with the artist and I think having the systems to really have those sort of one-to-

one conversations and be able to bring that back to a team, is really healthy.

Marley Treloar, Coventry University

Having gone through that process of working with lots of artists and this time around a very small group, and yet there are issues to be addressed as an organisation.

Maybe this is a slight step even further, but that act of listening and caring, and putting in the effort to hear someone, to take the time to address their concerns and then possibly make a change as an organisation.

That feels more human than perhaps business, and I think that's what kind of strikes me in, having spoken to both of you and maybe my own interest of how our organisation act.

Ryan Hughes, Coventry Biennial

We've always very clearly defined our work as artists-led, as social, political, and critical. And I think if we're saying we're those things, that comes with a set of expectations from ourselves and from our stakeholders and communities and participants.

We've never necessarily defined what any of those words mean in isolation. We've had lots of attempts at it actually, but I don't know that we've got there. I don't know that we need to because that actually my sense is that as an artist-led organisation, we've been on the other end of institutional nonsense. We've been on calls after exhibitions going "I wish you'd just asked me about the interpretation, because we could have fixed that before the show opened". If I've had that experience as an artist and I have that experience of knowing what resolution I might have liked.

Then actually, it's really easy to imagine a system that we could implement that would give artists that we're commissioning that same agency. I think for us it just comes from a place of having been on the other end of it.

Marley Treloar, Coventry University

I think a lot of artists resonate with that and it's that kind of internal drive to not create the same environment that got us to where we were having worked in other places or worked with people or corporations and just questioned why. There's one thing that we haven't fully touched on yet, which I think is quite important. You've both mentioned the importance of the political stance of your organisation, but also the political context in which your organisations are situated or were born out of.

There is this, I'm not going to call it a trend because I don't want it to continue but in the UK at least, we have seen a rise in academics or gallery directors, curators, art workers being asked to resign or lose their jobs, or face criticism for engaging in political discussion because they are the face of an organisation or in some social media online identify that they work at that organisation. Most recently particularly around Palestine.

But also, earlier this year, Arts Council England came under criticism for changing a clause in their funding framework for a publicly funded NPO galleries which very much verged on possible political and artistic censorship. As much as that was then, somewhat walked back after mass protest. As an organisation who holds quite a political stance, what are the risks of that for you as an organisation, as individuals, and how do you ensure that you're able to continue to make the work you want to do?

Andri Christofides, Home for Cooperation

I think you're touching upon a very, very big issue for us and kind of a sensitive issue as well because.

On a personal note, I've worked at the Home for Cooperation since 2018. I am here. I work in this NGO, bringing people together. I have this unique opportunity to see daily people from different communities. I feel like it's a very fulfilling job to

do because I really feel like I'm creating connections and I'm contributing to this.

Now I'm the manager of the space. I see the resistance from the communities. What I advocate for, what the home advocates for does not resonate with everyone. We tend to be criticised, from both sides, for siding with the enemy. Depending on who's saying this, the enemy changes. You get the kind of double-sided criticisms that come our way.

We have been operating in this in this environment for 10 years as home for cooperation and then 10 more years prior to that. There is a very solid network and community around the home, local and international, but that doesn't mean we've managed to kind of burst the bubble as we say. We tend to preach to the converted, we tend to have events with the usual suspects. So, we're always reflecting on how and why not more people feel included enough to come to our projects.

As a nonprofit, as an NGO in the buffer zone, we say that we are here to bring people together. But the political priorities shift away from what we do, meaning that there are even practical difficulties for people to get to the home for cooperation because the crossing police become more strict that week or because COVID hit and the crossings are the first thing to close. How do you react to that?

It can be heartbreaking. It can be very difficult, but when it becomes more difficult politically, that's when the sense of this community, the bubble, that's when that becomes more important. We've really felt this during COVID. We lost access to the building, we couldn't see each other for months. The crossings closed, people couldn't cross to go to work, to go to school to, even to see family. Being in the buffer zone comes with a lot of kind of responsibilities and a lot of meanings that are not always easily addressed.

The political situation in Cyprus now is probably the worst situation has been because there are no active negotiations happening between the leaders of the communities. That's where the role of the home and the civil society in general working on reconciliation becomes even more important.

We've kind of turned into a reference point for people who have questions about, accessing public services, day-to-day stuff. Although initially we're presenting the home as this community centre that works for arts and culture. Now it's becoming more of a vital space that connects these type of lived realities for people, people who want to apply to university or who want to get a job and they don't know how to access the other side. We've become this kind of connecting point.

Adapting to the needs and understanding where your focus should be changes and how we operate in a very highly political context. We're prone to be highly impacted by everything that happens.

Marley Treloar, Coventry University

Ultimately, organisations are made-up of the people that work in them and how we choose to act together.

I'm sure there are lots of other infrastructures that can impact that, but that is kind of my fundamental belief that, we are the people that drive those exhibitions, the organisation, the projects forward and I was curious to ask if you felt that the home for cooperation was filling a role or a need that the governments are not, and evidently it seems that that's the case.

Andri Christofides, Home for Cooperation

Yeah, there is very visibly a gap in how the authorities work on the ground to bring people together.

Even before I mean around 2016-17 there was this very big momentum. There was peace negotiations on a high level, which were really close to proposing a referendum to the public. But locally from the bottom up, there was no structural support. There was no systems in place to cultivate trust and understanding, and even explain what the new constitution would be.

Things that have been discussed for 50 years, they were not readily accessible to the public. We've seen that although top down, there may be some talks, but no structural work happening and that's a gap that civil society is called to fill in. It's a very big responsibility, especially when there's no state support and especially when you're struggling to keep the doors open. There's a very big mismatch in that in that sense.

What civil society, at least a lot of organisations have started doing is working a lot with academia. It's a path, into infiltrating, or at least being in contact with decision making processes and other democratic processes that otherwise civil society is left out of.

Marley Treloar, Coventry University

I think it is interesting with the nature of SPACEX as well, that cross university and cultural organisation relationship, is the foundation of our connections as well. I agree with your word infiltrate. I think sometimes that is needed.

Given our very politicised, globalal polycrisis at the moment, as organisation that has firmly put itself in a social, political, critical stance, Coventry Biennial, how do you hold yourselves to that when criticism or backlash might come?

Ryan Hughes, Coventry Biennial

I spend a lot of time thinking about this phrase that I've been like mulling over Democratic Curating. I've begun to think about this because of two very particular interactions I had with people.

When I was giving a talk on the biennial's work at Leamington Spa Art Gallery Museum. Leamington Spa is like Coventry's affluent cousin. There was a very elderly, affluent lady in the audience. Who was really not happy about us using public funding for political work. She became even angrier when I pointed out that actually, I haven't declared a political position. I've said that our work engages with politics, but I'm not up here waving a black flag. Personally, I may want to. I may not. But actually as an organisation we've declared that we will

engage in politics. That is a perfectly useful and important way to engage in the world.

Another interaction came about a number of years later. At an event a good friend made quite a bold statement. There was an event of maybe 200 people, all artworldy people and he said everyone in this room voted the same way in the Brexit referendum. I think he was probably right, but it made me deeply uncomfortable given that we were at a publicly funded event. I know for a fact one of our colleagues at the biennial didn't vote the way that that individual was referring to. We've had lots of arguments about it in the pub after work, but actually the colleague in question believed in the way he was voting. So, at that event, I said "well actually I don't think everyone did vote the same way because clearly we left [the EU]".

These two interactions, this person who was really unhappy about politics within the cultural sector and this other person within the cultural sector, who was making huge generalisations. Both sort of sat with me for years. Of course, maybe both people were right, and I need to come to terms with that.

Where I've got to with this idea is that for an organisation that is making political claims to actually be really actively contributing to democracy.

In a demonstrable way for its programming. It is genuinely useful in the world today, and that might mean working with people that you don't necessarily agree with. That might mean working in places, that are that are difficult to be in. We're already fortunate enough to be in a position where working within the arts and let's really sort of make the most of that.

One of the ways that we really tried to evidence that within our programming is when we're recruiting, whether that's to the team or through a commissioning process is to actually be really aware of who our audiences are.

I've sort of spoken about demographic data and actually we're really aware of the all of the demographics that make up our

immediate communities in in Coventry, in Warwickshire, in the West Midlands. If our team and the artists in our programme don't reflect those communities, then we're not actively contributing to democracy and we've made a mistake.

Marley Treloar, Coventry University

There's this link between peace building ever present conflict when you are working in a political space or with artists making political work, whereas an organisation that is taking a political stance or to be political as an organisation. You end up doing a little bit of both.

I always call it your organisational ethos, that this is who we are, what we do, and how hold ourselves to it. To me at least, having worked with lots of organisations that often times those don't necessarily align.

Coventry Biennial, right at the beginning of our conversation, you mentioned the starting spark of the biennial being linked with the Coventry city of Culture and this two-year review of culture by the city. I wanted to ask today, many years down the line after starting that process do you think you're still contributing to that political discussion of culture in Coventry? Has it changed at all from when you started to now?

Ryan Hughes, Coventry Biennial

Yes, I think we are. And yes, I think it's changed.

What for me was really interesting in the City of Culture evaluations, which we were, strangely tied to at one of the review points of the cultural strategy. There was this phrase that Chenine the Creative Director of the City of Culture was using...which I've forgotten it now because it is in the past. But she was very much claiming that Coventry had this sort of co-created participatory mode of working. Which I think it does. I think that that's existed for decades actually. Going back to the 1960s when Art and Language were teaching at Coventry

University.

The biennial has contributed to a mode of cultural production in the city. That the city has come to really reflect on. It's easy enough for us to say that "Oh yeah, artists have done this for years", but actually, for the city to acknowledge that. And for the city's leaders to speak about it, I think is a change.

The cultural strategy itself now has more than 8 lines about visual arts. That feels like a success. How much we've played into that, I

don't know. We've been making sure that our lengthy evaluations are landing on all of the desks of the people writing that that strategy. I would hope that our discoveries and learnings have contributed.

Of course, the City Council now has a new head of culture. We've met with her on her first week in post, so again I think the fact that we had that meeting so early on into her tenure in that position. I think that sort of speaks the impact we're having.

It would have been perhaps not the case, that we would have been meeting with that person back in 2017. They would have been straight to the Herbert, straight to the Belgrade. I've no doubt that she's met with the Herbert and the Belgrade, of course, but nice that we are there too.

Marley Treloar, Coventry University

Home for Cooperation, I was hoping you could maybe leave us with some closing thoughts about what does it mean to change as an organisation and what are you most excited about with change on the horizon?

Andri Christofides, Home for Cooperation

Change, especially when it's the kind of well planned and through reflection, when you've done your evaluations and you really see what needs to be changed. I think when you go through that process, it can be quite refreshing.

For us at least, because what we do is highly personal. We work in this in this field and in this environment. But ultimately, we are members of these communities, and we are citizens of this country that remains divided. There's also personal investment. Whether it's fighting for other socio political issues or something so visible as a division here. When you're personally invested and the organisation you work for is also able to adjust, pivot and react to whatever is happening and have a direction that fulfils these needs. I think it can be quite refreshing.

Although there are a lot of risks, difficulties and criticisms that come from different actors, whether it's audiences or funders, or colleagues. Who may think things should be done differently, especially when your work is public. To understand it may resonate with when you do something that is public. It's not just an internal structure, when there are changes in organisational missions or in focus and priorities, you're up for this type of criticism. Criticism, but doesn't always mean that it's harmful. Sometimes it can be really, really useful to engage with this type of comments and feedback. And at the end of the day, it can be fulfilling for even the people working in the organisation, let alone everyone else who responds to that.

Marley Treloar, Coventry University

I think that's a really lovely point to end on, what we do is visible and it should be visible because the work both of you are doing is really fantastic.

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