Institutional ecosystems, ecosystemic institutions: life cycles, (non-)linear time, and stewardship

Anna Colin, 10 July 2023

It's a great pleasure to have everyone gathered around today for this seminar titled "Institutional ecosystems, ecosystemic institutions: life cycles, (non-)linear time, and stewardship". My apologies again for the very late invitation to everyone, but I am truly glad you are all here. There is a lot to talk about, so I'll journey through different themes and ideas, but quite speedily as time is short.

To give some context, this is a nascent research project that continues some of the enquiries of my PhD, which I completed last year in the School of Geography at the University of Nottingham and was titled "Alternative to what? Alternative how? A Study of Multi-Public Educational and Cultural Spaces in England since the Late Nineteenth Century". This PhD was dedicated to the study of the foundational years of three organisations started in East London – Toynbee Hall (1884-present), Centerprise (1971-2012), and Open School East (2013-present) – which have combined the trinal functions of school, community centre, and cultural space. Multi-vision, multi-purpose, and multi-public, these organisations deemed themselves alternative, whether through their pedagogical, cultural, and social engagement and practice; their governance model; or their conceptualisation and use of architectural space. Core to their mission were their democratic ideals of togetherness and of equality of access to education and culture, along with a preoccupation with developing participants' agency, rebalancing power relations, and making the experience of education non-alienating and emancipatory. This study was dedicated to questioning how these spaces understood and situated themselves as alternatives and how they enacted their alternativeness. Moving within and beyond the case studies, it examined the qualities, values, and prerequisites of what I proposed to name 'multi-public educational and cultural organisations'. By the same means, it scrutinised the hurdles associated with the effort to remain alternative with the passing of time and that which comes with it: processes of habituation; temptation or pressure to scale up; ethos-bending fundraising exercises; long tenure; as well as the plain desire for stability and sustainability.

This research was triggered and informed by my experience of co-founding, in 2013, and directing for 8 years the independent and non-accredited art school and community space Open School East, and the realisation that the informal and agile nature of Open School East had quickly given way to self-institutionalisation. We had wanted to create an inclusive,

agentive, and non-fee paying art education space. A multi-generational and informal art school that would be porous and transformed day after day by its participants. An art school that would be infused with the qualities, values, atmospheres and possibilities afforded by certain community art centres from the 1970s, for instance the aforementioned Centerprise in East London, which I will return to shortly.

As Open School East morphed from being a project to becoming a charity receiving regular funding from Arts Council England and an array of foundations and private donors, practising our intended values became a near-impossible task. Put differently, the achievement of long-term sustainability – in connection to finance, brick and mortar, and otherwise – proved to be discordant with the organisation's characteristics, namely versatility, nimbleness, open-endedness, and ever-evolvingness. Further to that, the organisation became for many of its workers a place of stress, fatigue and suffering, constantly chasing after success for the organisation to keep going. Would being short-lived have been a negative outcome for the organisation, or was it more that I, and others, believed in the normative stance that success is longevity? With the benefit of hindsight, I would opt for the second option.

While my PhD was focused in part on the socio-spatiality of alternatives, I have since been concerned with notions of time, partly triggered by my training in horticulture and permaculture design and my engagement with gardens and allotments, and I have turned to institutional time and notions of success and failure. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, theorist Jack (then Judith) Halberstam starts from the observation that success may require too much effort and be best replaced by failure. They write: "Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (ibid, p. 2). "While failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life" (p.3).

Halberstam's understanding of the term failure as constructive, politically meaningful, and an intrinsic part of a collective learning process has informed and/or given credibility to a number of discussions dedicated to the subjects of failure, vulnerability, and the refusal to abide by the metrics of success (Harrowell et al., 2018; Hunt, 2020). In particular, writer and scholar Irvin J. Hunt deployed the term "planned failure" (2020) in his analysis of the Young Negroes' Cooperative League, which was set up by African American journalist George Schuyler and activist Ella Baker in upper Harlem in 1930. Schuyler and Baker worked towards establishing a mass movement led by young black people in response to what they saw as the failures of

contemporary black leaders who, in Schuyler's own words, "had supplied no program capable of emancipating [black people] from subserviency, insecurity, insult, disease and death" (cited in Hunt, 2020, p. 6). In 1930, Schuyler wrote a manifesto to enlist people between the ages of 16 and 35 to help launch a "'cooperative wholesale,' a 'cooperative bank,' a production plant 'where [...] to produce some of the many commodities we consume,' a 'cooperative housing department,' and a 'permanent cooperative college'" (Hunt, 2020, p. 3). As Hunt explains, achieving economic independence was the means by which to protect the black population against racial violence at large, "from arbitrary incarceration to sexual assault" (ibid). By 1935, the League had set up base in "twenty-two cities and twenty states, including California, New York, Washington, D.C., Ohio, Louisiana, South Carolina, Virginia, Arizona, and Pennsylvania" (ibid, p. 7). When the young would reach the age of 36, they would have to resign to make space for younger souls.

In his reading of the League, Hunt puts forward the concept of planned failure – not to confuse with "planned obsolescence and reinvention" (ibid, p. 4), he warns us – as "the performative codification of strategic anarchy" (ibid), "the synchronized operation, the co-operation, of two affective drives: a love for the world thus a desire for its preservation, and the sense that the world must come to end for the world to have a chance, for property to be dismantled and for shared freedom to be born" (ibid, p. 5).

> Planned failure designates the intended demise of the original plan. It assumes that to maintain the structure of a movement's organization, which is made up of not only social arrangements, but also the constitution of its political subjects, is necessarily to reinforce the very problems one sought to escape: the distribution of property according to hierarchies of class, race, and gender (ibid, p. 4).

In other words, to plan a social movement's failure is to plan for it not to succeed in the accepted sense of the term, for success, in Hunt's view, almost inevitably entails compliance, compromise, conciliation, formalisation, regularity, property, centralisation, and institutionalisation (Hunt, 2020). The League was set up to resist this predicament and unsettle the dominant "conceptions of what it means to succeed at anticapitalist resistance and the metrics of measurements commonly employed to assess that success" (ibid, p. 6). Hunt asks: "[w]hat social movements come into view when [success and longevity] are not made synonymous and when success does not depend on schemas of duration?" (ibid, p. 1).

Planning a movement, an organisation, or an institution with an end-point in mind is infrequent and yet institutions have life cycles of their own. Organisational theorist Jeffrey A. Miles observes the life cycles of organisations in the following terms:

> Newly born organizations suffer a "liability of newness" […] in that they have to learn how to survive, and must create successful patterns of operations despite having limited resources […] Slightly older organizations can suffer a "liability of adolescence" in that they can survive for a time on their initial store of resources, but then their failure rate tends to follow an inverted U-shaped pattern as they age […]. Older organizations can suffer a "liability of obsolescence" if their operations are highly inertial and unchanging and become increasingly misaligned with their environment.

Miles broaches the birth, growth, peak and decline of organisations, but not their end and closure. Besides Schuyler and Baker's experiment, I'd like to mention other models and proposals that defy chrononormativy, whether through planning their overhaul, working with seasons, or turning the process of closing institutions into an active conversation about why to do it and how to do it ethically.

I will start with the aforementioned Centerprise, London Borough of Hackney's first bookshop as well as a community cafe, a legal advice bureau, and a publishing and literacy centre focused on Black and working class literature. Its four founders, Glenn Thompson, Nancy Amphoux, Anthony Kendall, and Margaret Gosley, set up Centerprise in 1971, premising it on the decision to leave the organisation after three years and let it be taken over by the local community or fold. They stuck to their word with support from Centerprise's eight trustees, who they had chosen, in their own words, "for the convenience of the project – initially to add respectability to the early stages and later by allowing smooth transition to community control". In 1974, the charity they had established became a cooperative, which would be led according to participatory, grassroots, democratic, and non-hierarchical principles, for the following twenty years.

Social historian Ken Worpole, who had joined Centerprise as a publishing worker in 1971, and who contributed to the life of Open School East for a number of years a few decades later, once told me that in order for an organisation to remain radical, the founders needed to exit after five years maximum. The other OSE co-founder stayed six years and I stayed eight, following a belief that succession planning could only be initiated once OSE had become stable on programmatic, lease, and financial levels.

After stepping down from OSE, I interviewed the former chair of the organisation's board, Justin O'Shaughnessy, who reminisced over an event, in 2016, when OSE was contemplating purchasing a building to secure its future. Another board member offered to make the purchase and after much debate, it was decided that this amount of money would be donated to the organisation over a 10-year period to provide what the organisation really needed, that is funds for its programmes and operations.
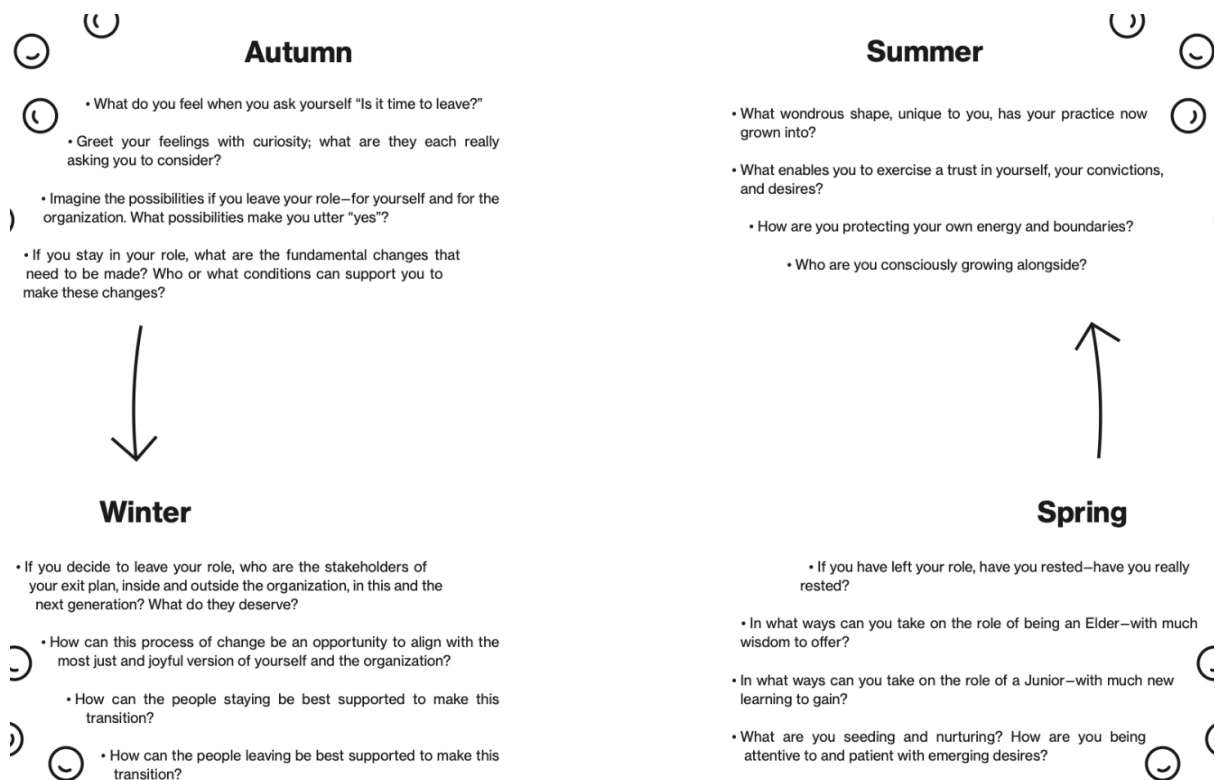
During that interview, O'Shaughnessy suggested that the end of this funding should mark the conclusion of the organisation's life. This was a provocation more than anything else at this stage, but one that had the potential of generating a discussion on the relevance of an organisation at any given time. When questioned if he would have introduced the idea of a scheduled closure, had OSE not been, in his own words, "only three steps away from collapsing, because of its over-reliance on individuals", he posited that this exercise in self-reflection – which could lead fossilised institutions to decide to close down and allow for the redistribution of money to other or new organisations with fresher ideas – should be carried out by every institution. Similarly, the American cultural worker Deana Haggag posits that:

> We live in a culture where the assumption is that [organisations] live on indefinitely, and that they should be built with the ability to live on forever. [...] Is longevity a necessary aspect of something having an impact, and what does it actually mean to cede space?

Deana Haggag calls for organisations to anticipate their closure and to "sunset", rather than shut suddenly, wether silently or dramatically. Sunsetting entails both taking the necessary time to honour the commitments that are already underway (e.g. exhibitions, residencies, short-term contracts) and having an open conversation about the process of discontinuing an organisation's activity. Haggag has helped organisations to sunset, most recently Common Field, a network of independent organisers and arts organisations, which operated in a peripatetic manner in the US from 2013 up until its closure in 2022. For fourteen months from that date, Common Field shared a range of resources on their website, from podcasts on governance during sunsetting, to a 360° Organisational Audit commissioned when Common Field was contemplating folding, through to conversations on accountability and sustainable leadership.

In a short text titled "Ready for Another Season? Exit-Planning for Founders", cultural worker Joon-Lynn Goh recounts a conversation with artist Kathrin Böhm (responsible for setting up the deliberately short-lived Centre for Plausible Economies) about the "Founder's Syndrome".

Goh describes this syndrome as "a phenomenon describing how the passion and charisma of a founder, often the creative force and initial success of an organization, becomes obstructive to an organization's capacity to change". She posits that: "The word "Founder" has two very different meanings. It can be the one who lays the foundations or casts the metal, or the act of sending to the bottom, to sink, fall, or fail. Often the arc of being of an organization can straddle both these dynamics, but in many cases we learn nothing from a founder's exit that is hastily negotiated behind closed doors and defensively narrated to a public." In this same text, Goh has put together what she calls "a simple set of reflexive prompts", "a compassionate exercise in alignment, a seasonal calendar to consider one's exit".

Autumn

• What do you feel when you ask yourself "Is it time to leave?"

• Greet your feelings with curiosity; what are they each really asking you to consider?

• Imagine the possibilities if you leave your role—for yourself and for the organization. What possibilities make you utter "yes"?

• If you stay in your role, what are the fundamental changes that need to be made? Who or what conditions can support you to make these changes?

Summer

• What wondrous shape, unique to you, has your practice now grown into?

• What enables you to exercise a trust in yourself, your convictions, and desires?

• How are you protecting your own energy and boundaries?

• Who are you consciously growing alongside?

Winter

• If you decide to leave your role, who are the stakeholders of your exit plan, inside and outside the organization, in this and the next generation? What do they deserve?

• How can this process of change be an opportunity to align with the most just and joyful version of yourself and the organization?

• How can the people staying be best supported to make this transition?

• How can the people leaving be best supported to make this transition?

Spring

• If you have left your role, have you rested—have you really rested?

• In what ways can you take on the role of being an Elder—with much wisdom to offer?

• In what ways can you take on the role of a Junior—with much new learning to gain?

• What are you seeding and nurturing? How are you being attentive to and patient with emerging desires?

Ros Gray reminded me of Henri Lefebvre's writing on the collision of natural biological and social timescales, the collision of cyclical time (which "originates in the cosmic, [in the worldly], in nature: days, nights, seasons, the waves and tides of the sea, monthly cycle) and linear time (which originates from social practice, therefore from human activity: the daily grind, the repetition and monotony of actions and of movements, imposed by structures).

Similarly, Barbara Adam writes: " Clock time, the organizational time-frame and structure of industrial production (including time-efficiency, time-budgeting, time-management), is governed by the non-temporal principle of time, a time that tracks and measures motion but is indifferent to change. Abstracted from its natural source, machine time is created to the goal

of invariant repetition and perfect repeatability. [Clock time] is finite because it excludes becoming. It does not create time in the present but it is time: a time that is running on and out." (P. 52). Which I think many of us would relate to, whether or not we are working within the space of an institution. In another echo to some of our practices and their setting, in "Soil Times: The Pace of Ecological Care", the last chapter of her book *Matters of Care*, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa discusses the contrast between "the temporal pace required by soil's ecological care as a slow renewable resource" and the "conditions of emergency, running against the accelerated linear rhythm of intervention [...] traditionally straddled to a productionist pace". If she is writing about future-oriented timelines in technoscientific societies, the timelines that educational and cultural institutions are working under are equally future-oriented and ought to be quantifiable and measurable in order to determine their achievement. That future isn't that of the seventh generation though, it is what de la Bellacasa calls a "restless futurity [which renders] precarious the experienced present: subordinated to, suspended by, or crushed under the investment in uncertain future outcomes". She therefore calls for making time for care time. For "In a conception of care as a collective good, care has to be shared, distributed, the "surplus" of life and energy that it produces returned to the carers in order to avoid affective and material burnout—including burnout of nonhumans subjugated in relations of ecological "service" and humans bound to the logics of productivist exploitation of nature (such as agricultural workers)."

In *Rhythmanalysis*, Lefebvre writes about another type of time, which, to quote him, "we shall provisionally name 'appropriated" and which "has its own characteristics. Whether normal or exceptional, it is a time that forgets time, during which time no longer counts (and is no longer counted). It arrives or emerges when an activity brings plenitude, whether this activity be banal (an occupation, a piece of work), subtle (meditation, contemplation), spontaneous (a child's game, or even one for adults) or sophisticated. This activity (p. 77) is in harmony with itself and with the world. It has several traits of self-creation or of a gift rather than of an obligation or an imposition [that] come[s] from without. It *is* time: it is *a* time, but does not reflect on it."

What would institutions, and in particular educational and cultural institutions look like; and what would our relationship to work look like, if we embraced the qualities of appropriated time? What if we put the maintenance of resources, including one's own energy, at the centre of our practices? De la Bellacasa has turned to permaculture, a term that, as she reminds us, "puts 'culture' at the forefront, indicating also the purpose of cultivating ongoing communal practices over time (acting within a community of human and nonhuman beings) that foster a certain durability of (permanent) renewal and fruitfulness versus the antiecological depletion of resources".

There is a nascent debate about institutional permaculture, whereby the term permaculture is increasingly used as a metaphor and model for differential artistic and institutional practices that aspire to be sustainable, responsible, interconnected, community-focused, small-scale and holistic. Last September, at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris curator Béatrice Josse organised a series of meetings asking the question: Is permaculture a model that can be applied to art institutions? At the end of 2022, the Palais de Tokyo made available on its website "Petit Traité de Permaculture Institutionnelle pour un Site de Création Contemporaine Vivant et Productif", a booklet written by the president of the Palais, Guillaume Désanges. I should disclose that both are friends, and that I have had conversations with them about it. I am no expert, and there are some interesting reflections in the pamphlet, but it is appropriative and while permaculture doesn't happen from one day to another, I am doubtful of the ability of the institution to enact its claim in the long run. Nonetheless, it's the beginning of debate with potentially great scope.

Désanges uses the permaculture approach as a "way to rethink the mission and functioning of an institution with a view to permanence and sustainability", two terms that I hope we can unpick later on. He writes: "Beyond the exhibition themes, recycling actions and minimising carbon footprints, permaculture breathes its spirit into the whole institution: governance, communication, building, programming, etc.". Above all, he reminds us that the basis of permaculture is to reconsider time and space in ingenious and optimising ways. Désanges is proposing to apply ideas of sustainable agriculture rather than intensive monoculture to the space of the Palais de Tokyo. For example, he draws inspiration from permaculture zoning, a technique for dividing land according to crops, activities and rotations, in order to redefine the institution's spaces and diversify their uses :
● spaces for the slow germination of ideas and projects ;
● spaces for more intensive use (by people/by objects, e.g. a printing press) ;
● spaces that can be private for a time, then semi-public or public for another time afterwards.

To me the most interesting ideas that are put forward in the pamphlet are the:
● the regular recirculation of existing forms, practices and ideas, going against the grain of restless innovation ;
● Intellectual compost: how the ideas and research that are generated in the lead up to a project or exhibition but are not used can be stored somewhere digitally or physically to be amalgamated, infused, fermented and composted, in order to potentially re-emerge in some form in the future.

This felt speedy and barely scratching the surface, and for that reason far from permacultural if we want to stick to that term, but I am hoping that with each of your contributions, it will create a space for debate. I will now leave everyone else to share their contribution, and introduce themselves at the beginning and will be a keeper of time. Over to you Ros.