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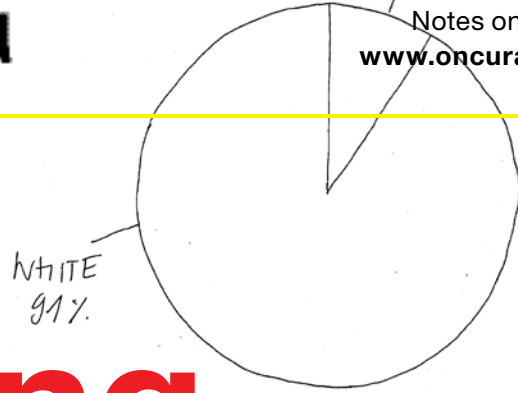
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ONCURATING

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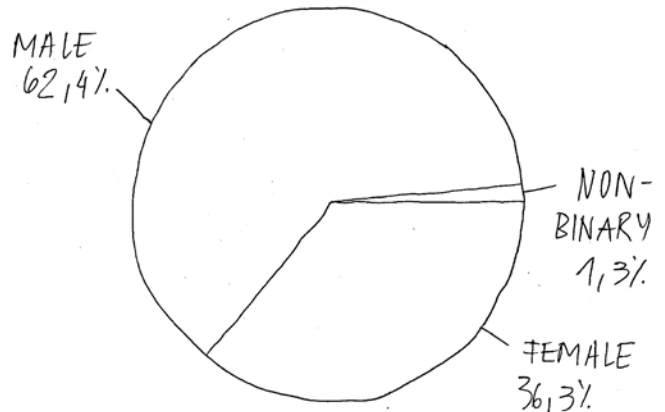
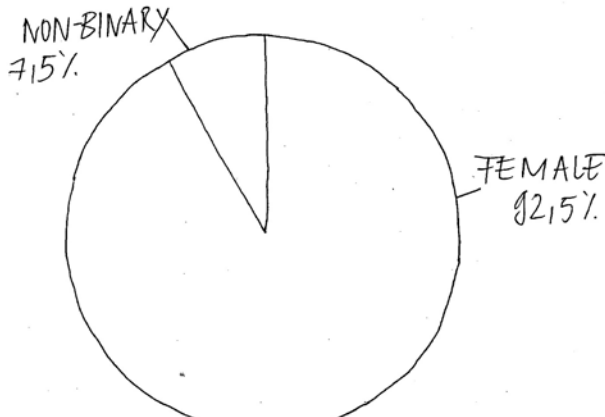
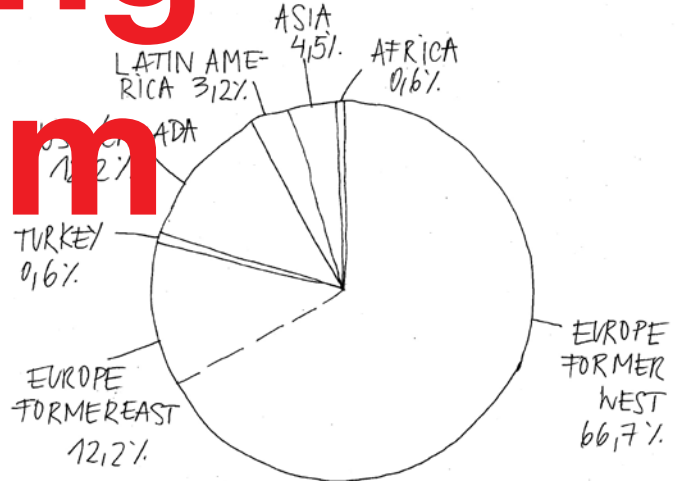
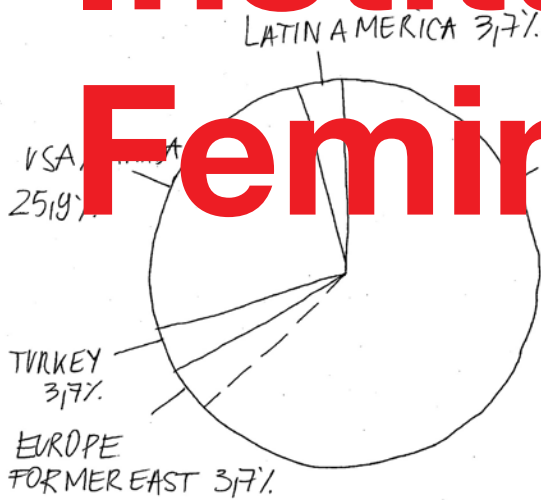
Notes on Curating

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Instituting

Feminism



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ARTISTS IN COLLECTIVES 22.9%

ARTISTS IN COLLECTIVES 9.6%

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SOLD ARTISTS 90.4%

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Helena Reckitt and Dorothee Richter

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Crossed Perspectives on Collaboration

Ève Chabanon, Anna Colin, and Madeleine Planeix-Crocker

This conversation brings together Ève Chabanon, Anna Colin, and Madeleine Planeix-Crocker, three collaborators, art-workers, and friends. Anna and Ève met in 2016 at Open School East (OSE) first located in London, then in Margate, Kent; Anna was co-founder of the school, and Ève, an associate artist. Their collaboration with Madeleine really took shape in 2018 at Lafayette Anticipations, a private foundation dedicated to artistic production in Paris. There, Anna served as associate curator; Madeleine, head of communications; and Ève, a guest artist, invited by Anna, for the group show *The Centre Cannot Hold*.

For the purposes of this article, Anna extended her *OnCurating* invitation to Ève and Madeleine, to discuss three different projects in which they acted as artist, curator, facilitator, researcher. Though Lafayette Anticipations served as a space for their three-way encounter, the projects introduced below mainly stem from other locations—namely, OSE for Anna's example, Women Safe for Madeleine's, and a consortium of venues (both physical and immaterial) for Ève's. These relational spaces reflect the contributors' hybrid commitments to initiatives outside of dedicated art institutions and, most importantly, to the people who help co-construct such projects. They also bear witness to the authors' changing roles in their personal histories.

The situated and collaborative qualities of these projects serve as adhesive when considering them in dialogue. What they question in terms of community-making and social justice transformation, specifically through an arts-based practice, sheds light on the challenges and possibilities of such initiatives. By intersecting these perspectives through the following conversation, Ève, Anna, and Madeleine are curious to observe what (un)learnings, strategies, and paths might emerge and converge from these projects, and inform others to come.

Let's start by introducing our projects and situating ourselves within them.

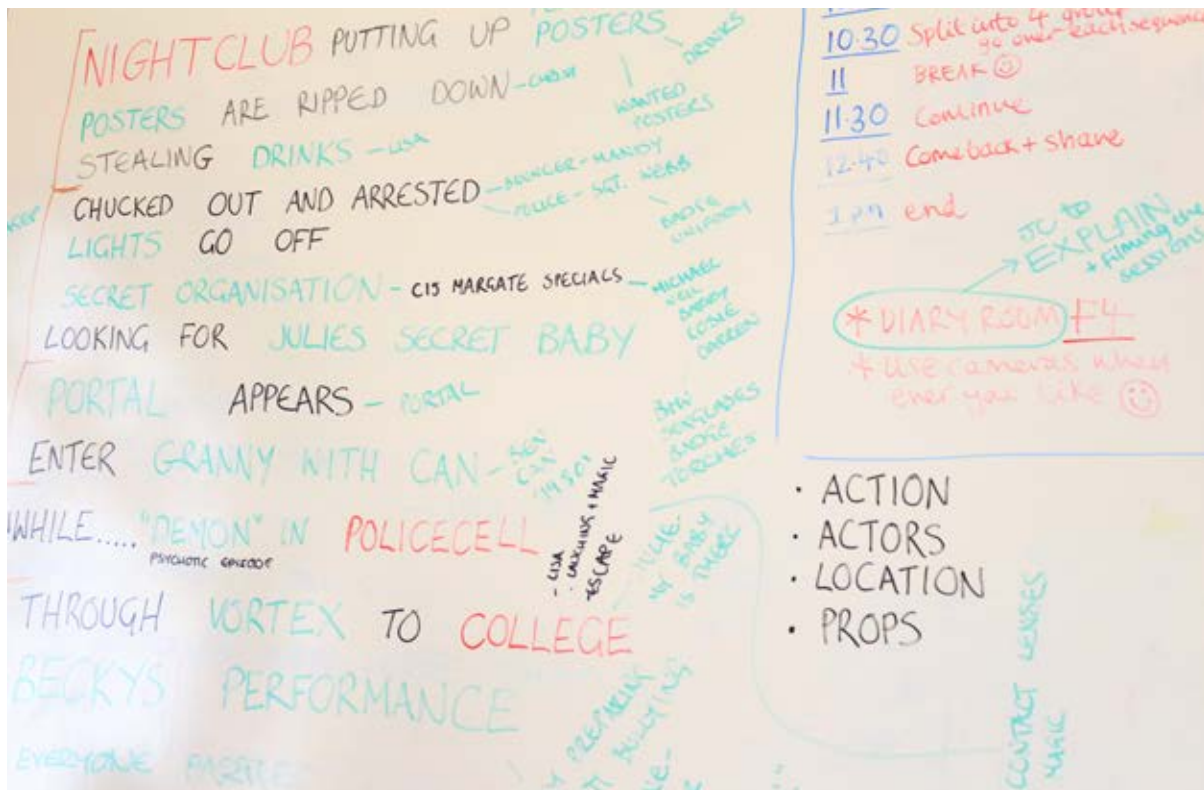
Madeleine Planeix-Crocker (MP-C): The project I'd like to turn to is an ongoing collaboration with Women Safe, a safe space for womxn survivors and/or witnesses of violence founded in 2014; since 2017, children have also been welcomed in this not-for-profit organisation. Located in greater Paris, Women Safe is dedicated to accompanying victims toward a personalised reconstructive process by providing free services and care, including psychological, medical, and legal consultations. I came to Women Safe in 2017 as a performance and gender studies Master's candidate with long-term experience in community-based theatre-making, and as someone who had also experienced sexual assault. Through my research project, I hoped to study the role an arts practice could assume in a post-traumatic reconstructive process for womxn. As a volunteer at Women Safe, I was able to develop a creative writing and theatre workshop. Though the group was shapeshifting in number, a core cohort of six participants showed up every week for this experimental project, the research component of which was disclosed in full from the onset. I shared the hopes and hypotheses of this action-based research endeavour with the group and asked for their consent to participate in it. The group's age range was twenty to seventy years old; its participants had experienced a spectrum of intersectional violences based on gender, race, class, and physical disability, such as psychological, economic, sexual assault and/or harassment. I'm referring here to the first chapter of a project represented by two years of fieldwork and volunteering at Women Safe, leading to a community-based performance devised with the workshop participants.

Ève Chabanon (EC): Similarly, *The Surplus Of The Non-Producer* was designed as a long-term project. Started in 2016 in Paris, the project revolves around the economic category of surplus. "Surplus" in economics is a term that refers to the difference between the amount a producer would be willing to accept for a good and what they actually get by selling it following the market

price. The project gathers craftspeople, artists, and other cultural workers who find themselves in exile due to migration, and thereby encounter difficulties in pursuing their profession. After several years, six participants are still closely involved: Nassima Shavaeva, a Uighur dancer and singer from Kazakhstan; Olivier Iturerere, a film and television producer from Burundi; Aram Ikram Taştekin, an actor from Turkish Kurdistan; Abdulmajeed Haydar, a Palestinian scriptwriter from Syria; Abou Dubaev, a stuccoer from Chechnya; and Yara Al Najem, a graphic designer from Syria. Together, we set up a kind of informal cooperative, a “think tank” geared toward transcultural exchange of knowledge and skills; it also served to help in the development of a community. With time and multiple steps, we have shaped a range of collaborations manifested by objects, videos, workshops, and writings.

Anna Colin (AC): The project I’ll talk about is more short-term than yours, but it did have longer-term ambitions, which I’ll return to later. The project involved the making of a short collaborative science-fiction film over the course of three months, during the summer of 2019, by and with a dozen members of Getting On with Learning Difficulties (GOLD),¹ a group associated with the charity East Kent Mencap (EKM) in Margate.

A few independent participants, also with learning difficulties, joined the project when it kicked off in July, but were not part of the initial conversations. The project was a partnership with Open School East (OSE)—an independent art school and community space also based in Margate, which I co-founded and was directing at the time—and with artist Jemma Cullen, who had recently joined OSE’s year-long development programme. If I was involved in the early conception of the project, I did not participate in its delivery (Jemma handled that part), which positions me differently to the two of you again. My role in comparison was more institutional, and, in fact, the project was born out of a desire for two organisations, EKM and OSE, to work together. The GOLD group had attended a workshop at OSE the previous year and had complained that the structure of the day and the way it was run were wholly inadequate for people with learning difficulties. We had therefore agreed to meet to discuss how OSE could make itself more accessible and whether we might work together in future. I came to that first meeting accompanied by Jemma. In the space of two hours during which the GOLD members made recommendations and expressed their desires as well as wild ideas, the terms of the collaborative project² were set.



Whiteboard notes, week 5 at Open School East, 2019. Photography by Louis Palfrey

Let's unpack some discussion points and common themes that might connect our respective projects. Shall we start with the projects' qualities and modalities/processes, set-ups/mobilised tools?

MP-C: Certainly! To begin, let me mention one of the workshop "constants," namely the time dedicated within the group to shared readings of plays, as well as of poetry, essays, manifestos. We also listened to songs, and watched films. Then, based on some of my training in feminist theatre practices, I was able to propose specialised improv and live action role-playing exercises, as well as physical and vocal warm-ups to nurture confidence in these embodied practices, which were initially met with fear, shyness, or shame. Indeed, when dealing with physical assault, for example, the body can be experienced as a "borderland"³: a knowledge site with feeling memories of times before trauma, and of times after. The shift between these moments, where violence serves as the cruel pivot, is razor-thin. I also devised exercises to facilitate the transposition of orally expressed memories, impressions, and convictions into written words; the participants would choose what subjects they wanted to tackle, pertaining to their personal experience(s) of violence, or not. Starting with individual words and slowly making their way to sentences and then to fully-fledged texts, the participants finally composed original monologues.

EC: On my part, when I started working on *The Surplus of the Non-Producer*, I was in the process of finishing two significant projects. One was *G Body Work*, a two-year project involving a group of young men studying to become auto mechanics in a vocational high school in a Parisian suburb. *G Body Work* was built on intensive, collective research on self-determination in labour, using moonlighting as a pretext for discussions and actions. The other project was the culmination of a residency at The White House in Dagenham, greater London, where I had been invited to spend six months after "graduating" from OSE. *Anti-Social Social Club: Episode One, The Chamber of the Dispossessed* took the form of a public debate on the topic of dispossession in the Council Chamber of the nearby Barking Town Hall. The event involved a cross-section of the local community and brought into conversation the problematic nature of authoritarianism and crowd manipulation often used in public meetings. By doing so, the project questioned democratic processes and the power of "the public." When Lafayette Anticipations commissioned me in 2016, they put me in touch with Thot, a French language school for people in exile in Paris; in a way, this

gave the project its starting point, as I ended up volunteering for Thot for six months. Through this experience, I realised that most of the learners were unable to practise their original trade, as their identity was reduced to being "migrants". So, the first impulse of the project was to try and facilitate access to labour for people in exile and more especially from my community, that is, from the fields of art and culture. This led me to set up an informal network of Paris-based social workers, lawyers, activists, and thinkers working for the social, legal, and professional enhancement and survival of this population in exile. The project came together slowly, and with a lot of questions regarding my role or even my presence in this particular context. So, it was much less spontaneous to what you seem to have experienced, Anna.

AC: The project is different in that GOLD is a ready-made community, but it did feel spontaneous, as you say; it was as if we all knew that collaboration would only work if it was to be steered by the participants. During that first meeting, every member introduced their learning and creative interests, and one member circulated the results of a survey they had recently undertaken about the activities the group was keen on pursuing. Filmmaking being on top of the list, we discussed working on a movie together. A few members shared their love of the British TV programme *The Undateables*, which follows people with a long-term health condition on their dates. The conversation quickly drifted towards the necessity for more storytelling platforms for people who are invisibilised on account of their disability. The film would give voice not only to the life stories of the GOLD members, but also to their imagination and creativity. So, it was quite an organic process, and while we were waiting for the funding to come through, we had back and forths about the structure of the project: how often would we meet (once a week for three hours) and where (would OSE, as a new environment, feel safe enough?); what specific skills and steps were required to make the film happen (e.g. camera skills, scriptwriting, storyboarding, location scouting, costume and prop-making, role-playing, etc.); and where would the film premiere. Gemma took on the role of creative organiser, facilitator, and cheerleader, and invited other OSE artists with relevant skills to run sessions on film- and costume-making, prop and stage design, and acting. The film was a quasi-complete collaboration; editing had to be done separately because twelve three-hour long sessions weren't enough to do that work.



Project participants, artists, organiser and MC at the screening of *A Night to Remember*, 2019. Photograph by Anna Colin.

Can we discuss the outcomes of these projects so far and how have they been shared?

MP-C: Similarly to what you just described, Anna, the Women Safe participants also made a collective decision: to proceed with a live performance of their monologues for their families, friends, and facilitators. Thus began the collaborative staging of their texts. Labouring within the safe space and with zero budget, the group chose to inhabit the offices of consenting staff workers. Rehearsing during the staff's lunch breaks, the participants re-entered these spaces where they had been welcomed by care-workers and service providers. New imaginaries were born from scenographies crafted with the participants' selected props: family photos, bedside books, talismans, and candles were placed near OBGYN pamphlets, on top of the massage table, in front of the French penal code. The participants' monologues spoke to these objects, through these objects, that served as anchor or proof of a time, a feeling, a wound. During each rehearsal, the participants took notes and exchanged feedback. We could sense the group shift into a shape of shared intention, marked by mutualised resources and fuelled by desire, fantasy—another name for “community.” Or, a manifestation perhaps of seeing-being seen in solidarity. As described by the participants, it was the radical gesture of opening,⁴ sharing their stories on their own terms with guests that allowed them to step more assuredly into their survivorhood.

AC: I'll jump in here because I recognise some similarities in that the project participants also used perfor-

mance—in their case, in film—to express themselves in ways they had not necessarily been able to before. By choosing to make a wacky science fiction film, they were able to tell a different story about—and present a different image of—themselves, and break the stigma surrounding their persons. The film, titled *A Night to Remember: The World Turned Upside Down*, premiered in a beautiful room of the theme park Dreamland, in Margate. The premiere was for the participants, the organisers, and the artists who had led sessions as well as their friends and families. It was quite a spectacle: the group wanted it to be like a cinema experience as well as an award ceremony, so we had popcorn cones, a red carpet, speeches, flowers, and official photographers, and a master of ceremony handed everyone their award. It was a highly emotional experience.

EC: On our side, the first step was to find a way for everyone to express themselves without having to talk *about* themselves. The first outcome was the collaboration with Abou Dubaev, a stucco master who was then working with La Fabrique Nomade, an organisation dedicated to the professional rehabilitation of craftspeople in exile. At the time, Abou was producing a variety of small decorative objects, but his ability and experience resided in creating stucco palaces in Russia. I took on the role of facilitator between Abou's skills and Lafayette Anticipations' political, media, and artistic power. After helping him source materials and set up a workshop in the institution, we created a table made of an artfully marbled stucco panel on plywood stands, which was so versatile in form and tonality that Abou was able to use and demonstrate his range of techniques through it. As



Ève Chabanon and Abou Dubaev, production still, 2018. Courtesy of Lafayette Anticipations.



Ève Chabanon and Abou Dubaev, production still, 2018. Courtesy of Lafayette Anticipations.

part of the arrangement, Lafayette temporarily employed Abou and put him on the payroll, using part of the budget earmarked for the exhibition. This contract not only provided Abou with the necessary documents and funds to access social housing and further employment, it also allowed him to dedicate himself to his art production, while creating a surplus. The table, which was shown in a group exhibition, became a monument, a territory in common, a stage, a conversation piece where we could gather and start the second part of the project. This was a film that would weave together the respective abilities of the members of the informal cooperative, while providing them with an income and the paperwork that came with it, thus proving helpful for their asylum-seeking

applications. I commissioned Abdulmajeed Haydar, who used to write TV series and films, to write a script that would bring together his favourite characters featured in his career. Then I asked him if he could find a way to make them meet in a story where the other members of the project could perform. We also studied the repertoire of singer and project participant Nassima Shavaeva in order to compose a soundtrack. In parallel, we organised and filmed a few events which, at one point, would feature in the film. One of them was a private encounter and conversation, around the stucco table, between the group members and Katherine Gibson, an economist internationally known for her research on rethinking economies as sites of ethical action.



Workshop participants and Madeleine Planeix-Crocker at Women Safe, 2019. Photograph by Maxime Fieschi. Courtesy of Le Parisien.

Shall we now discuss the challenges of these projects?

AC: The challenges we met, both social and spatial, have made me reconsider the responsibilities of social practice and of institutions engaged in it. If employees and volunteers of EKM were present at the sessions, it did not make up for both Jemma's and OSE staff's lack of experience in working with adults with learning difficulties. As I've mentioned before, there were also a few independent participants who did not have the support structure that GOLD members had, due to their affiliation with the group and EKM. Certain situations were hard to handle, and the fact that we sometimes had trouble accessing a breakout space for participants to let off steam, gather their thoughts and emotions, or talk to someone in private, created difficulties. This experience highlights what I see as a major challenge with social practice today, which is the inadequacy of artists and art institutions' ability to work with vulnerable individuals and communities. And I only blame institutions for it (my own including), as they have been pushing artists into territories that bear no relation to their base of knowledge and experience. In the UK context, this tendency is a direct consequence of the fact that the government has made it a condition of their funding that art institutions and artists take on a socially useful role in order to make up for the decline in welfare provision. I believe that without substantial training and/or experience in social care—organised and paid for by institutions for artists

and art-workers—meaningful and sustainable engagement between artists/art-workers and underserved groups can neither take place comfortably, nor safely.

MP-C: That really resonates with my project experience, Anna. Indeed, as I'm not a trained art therapist, I relied on close collaboration with my colleagues at Women Safe, namely the psychologists, to better understand and learn to address some of the individual difficulties that arose within the workshop. On this point, I'd say that the writing part of the journey was particularly fraught, electric, and ultimately galvanising. No word was taken for granted, as it could be the site of a personal battlefield, triggering suppressed hurt, or pointing to shattered dreams. We could witness together the pervasiveness of violence in language itself. In the end, each participant chose to "stay with the trouble"⁵—to embrace what arose, to expose, to re-place—as they discussed an experience of violence in their monologue. Instead of proceeding to a testimonial as is (forcibly) required by various re-traumatising institutions of law or medicine, they turned to the examples of performative disidentifications⁶ explored together in our readings. These examples served as protection and inspiration for the participants as they made new (read: their own) meaning of lived events. It's also important to note that each step of the writing process was shared with the other participants, through personal readings, followed by extensive and mutually supportive discussions.

EC: I think it's interesting to point out that you and Anna are working from the inside of organisations. You are acting in collaboration with professionals in the social care sector. Personally, I'm working on the outside, or rather in the continuity of what the organisations I met at the beginning of the project already provide. Also, to go back to the question of challenges, I would say that there is a never-ending list of interrogations that we have continuously grappled with. The most recent ones would be: How does cultural and artistic work actually manifest itself? Does it necessarily result in an end product, an object through which the value of the work can be attested and measured? How do you measure the right level of inclusion and participation? Working in a collective requires constant questioning about one's motivation and intention; in other words, identifying and weighing individual risks and power relations on all sides. Systemic imbalances and internalised patterns of thought and behaviour can be overcome only through self-reflection and tireless reshaping.

What is the legacy, or next steps, of these projects, if any?

MP-C: So much has happened since the first chapter of this project! Each workshop participant was able to move toward other activities outside of Women Safe, another positive step within a reconstructive process. I'd also like to point out another outcome of the project: the resources explored in the workshop were pooled collectively and gave shape to our "Bibliography in (Re)Construction," perhaps our own version of a "feminist toolkit" as imagined by Sara Ahmed.⁷ Though my Master's is now complete, my commitment to the workshop remains active to this day. To my great joy, a new cohort of participants has come into existence. On a personal level, this collaborative experience particularly challenged my locatedness as an intersectional feminist research-practitioner, and an "intimate insider."⁸ Through it, I learned—am still learning—to "stand with the colleagues"⁹ met along this co-constructed journey, which inspired my PhD topic pertaining to community-based performances. For this thesis project, I chose to shift research contexts and to focus my attention on initiatives programmed *within* art institutions—a partial result of my new responsibilities as associate curator at Lafayette Anticipations. This is how I came to explore your collaborative project, Ève, as a PhD case study. Indeed, as you describe above, *The Surplus* is in constant negotiation with art institutions, but also with the "art institution" as a normative concept, rife with tensions and, at times, possibilities.

EC: *The Surplus* was presented in exhibition form at Bétonsalon in Paris and at the Westfälischer Kunstverein in Münster in 2020, and this was very challenging partly for the reasons you are pointing out, Madeleine. However, the exhibitions also brought attention to the project and, as a result, we managed to get a few grants which will hopefully help us finish the film. This final outcome will be about the project as a whole; part-fiction, part-documentary. We are also working with the abovementioned institutions on a book gathering the extended community which made the project possible—a book that you are both part of, for that matter. While the film project was on pause, we all stayed in contact; I guess friendship took over, which also brought a different tonality to our collaboration.

AC: Unlike your projects, the one I've been discussing had a fixed temporality, but as the project went along, it became clear that all parties wanted to take the collaboration further. Those invited to share their professional skills during the sessions and not already employed by EKM and OSE—i.e., Jemma and four colleagues of hers—had been paid for their labour. As the participants acquired new skills and gained in confidence, they would sometimes jokingly say that they should start charging for their expertise and participation in the film. The participants' comments about free labour prompted a conversation about the economics of participation in the arts and, much inspired by Ève's own thoughts with *The Surplus*, we discussed the possibility of setting up a cooperative for GOLD members and the non-affiliated project participants to deliver creative projects for and with a range of institutions—universities, local councils, arts organisations—for pay. This idea also came out of the fact that, on the back of the film, GOLD was contacted to participate, unremunerated, in projects which they had had no input in conceiving. The members were being instrumentalised by organisations in a blatant box-ticking exercise. The idea with the cooperative was to get funding for a couple of years for GOLD members to first undertake specialised training in areas they wished to develop skills and knowledge in. A website would then be built to advertise the services the cooperative would offer, and outreach to a range of institutions to seek commissions from would be done. The cooperative would not only be a way of mutualising resources, but also the vehicle through which members could invoice and draw dividends without affecting their State benefits. Legal advice would be sought to ensure this. However, this project, at least in the form just outlined, did not go beyond the stage of initial discussions

between EKM, one member of GOLD, OSE and Jemma, and wasn't put to the whole group. Covid got underway and more urgent wellbeing work took over what was deemed too complex a project. That said, the collaboration between EKM, GOLD and Jemma continues to this day. Jemma is currently employed by EKM, and the idea of the cooperative, albeit in a different form, has been reactivated. In addition, last year Jemma worked with another artist and a few GOLD members for an online project on the subject of care at Almanac in London.¹⁰ So, the initial project has a multi-layered legacy.

What learnings have you gathered from these initiatives that might resonate with the project of "instituting feminism"?

MP-C: I suppose Women Safe could be an example of an intersectional feminist institution, not by self-proclaimed definition, but in action; specifically, it is a place in which a community-based art practice found its place and, most importantly, its purpose.¹¹ Perhaps this is a way of shifting our attention to other specialised spaces that impart their own located learnings, namely with regard to establishing safe practices *with* vulnerable participants. For the Women Safe workshop group, similarly to your projects, Ève and Anna, this meant negotiating limited or non-existent economic resources to create a performance, and thus to focus on other typologies of commons (individual and group know-how, desires, time, and available space). As such, having devised our own "emergent strategies"¹² in action and armed with their teachings, we might then return to the dedicated art institution, where we also work, ready to unlearn its doctrines and doings. This is what I hope to do within the space of the *Warm Up Sessions* I curate at Lafayette Anticipations, an embodied, collective, and all-level practice shared by the participants with a guest artist. My goal is to use this privilege and the platform to which I have access as a resource for inviting, collaborating with, and paying artists, while welcoming participants. Perhaps this is a way to both perform self and institutional critique, and to inform different modes of commoning—with artists, art-workers, and audiences.

AC: I feel at home with the term intersectional feminist institution and such an institution, to follow Sara Ahmed, is helpfully imagined as an organism. If one organ thrives, the others are well positioned to thrive, too; in turn, if one fails, the others will sooner or later start feeling the effects. In my PhD research, I am

looking, among other things, at holistic institutional approaches in the UK from the late 19th century to the present, and they appear to be hard to come by. In the UK context, non-profit arts organisations relying on public funding are unlikely to manage any form of holism; at best, their projects and programmes are bold, but they will always be in tension with the organisation's business, funding and reporting plans. Organisations I have been studying, which have managed a semblance of holism, if only for a time, were unsurprisingly cooperatives; this is, for instance, the case of the bookshop, café, and civic centre Centerprise (1971-2012) in East London, which was run as a cooperative between 1974 and 1993. The feminist art institution's code of practice, put together by Tereza Stejskalová, outlines, among other elements, the need for consistency between the institution's internal operations and its public/programming output; to be (self-)critical; and to pay attention to "feminist theory attributes to care."¹³ I think that summarises our interests, efforts, and struggles, but I would reiterate that care cannot be thought of in purely conceptual terms and that the remuneration not just of freelancers and artists, but also of participants—who cannot always afford the time to engage with art institutions, and yet add significant social capital to them—is a necessary conversation to have.

Notes

1 The structure and outcomes of the project (film and making of) can be viewed here: <https://openschooleast.org/events/what-do-art-and-music-have-to-do-with-life-stories-and-dating-june-september-2019/>.

Accessed 15 February 2021.

2 Ibid.

3 See: Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (California: Aunte Lute, 2012, 25th edition).

4 See: bell hooks, "CHOOSING THE MARGIN AS A SPACE OF RADICAL OPENNESS," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 36 (1989): 15–23.

5 See: Donna J Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2016).

6 See: José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

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Madeleine Planeix-Crocker (b. Los Angeles, 1993) is a French-American researcher and curator, currently based in Paris. She is associate curator at Lafayette Anticipations where she founded the *Warm Up Sessions*, a series of public and participatory gatherings around spontaneous and experimental practices in performance. She has also proposed the *Dérives* cycle that hopes to contribute to the writing of new histories of art through co-constructed dialogues with contemporary artists. Her interests rest namely at the crossroads of research and curation of feminist, queer, and intersectional performances. Madeleine is also co-director of the “Troubles, Dissidences et Esthétiques” Chair at the Beaux-Arts de Paris and is a permanent member of the Scientific Committee on Research at the ESAD de Reims. She received her Bachelor of Arts in cultural studies from Princeton University as well as a Master’s in Media, Arts & Creation from HEC Paris. Her second Master’s at the EHESS was an arts-based research project on feminist performances and brave spaces, led at Women Safe, where she still organises a theatre and creative writing workshop. Madeleine is currently pursuing a PhD at the EHESS (CRAL), analysing contemporary community-based performances programmed in French cultural institutions. She has been training in dance and theatre since childhood.

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