

Limehouse Town Hall and the Living School

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Following his talk/demonstration on squatting, Chris Jones from 56a Infoshop leads us over to the piles of material collected around the front of the bar. Wood. Netting. Tarp. Old bicycle rims. Rope. Tools are laid out on a table. Drills. Saws. Nails. Screws. We can use what we want and do what we want. How do we begin? What are we beginning? How do we organize ourselves? There is a brief collective pause and then the building begins. Banging. Drilling. A frenzy of activity. People work alone or in pairs to put up their structures. As the building session winds down a couple of people walk a makeshift flagpole up from the ground. A City Dockland property sign rises upward, higher and higher, into the space just below the peeling blue ceiling.

The grand hall quiets. Light shines dimly through the grand windows. The City Dockland real estate sign looms above us, sitting atop three wooden beams hastily drilled together and stabilized by two other beams that lay across the wooden floor. The hand written words on the property sign are obscured by red mesh. The 'TO' appears faintly crossed out with a black marker or paint. An apostrophe and an S added to the word 'LET'. And the word LEARN is scribbled in at the end.

TO LET
TO LET
TO LET'S
TO LET'S LEARN

I – Introduction

Reflecting on the Living School's participatory session comes out of both my theoretical interest in how being together is imagined, valued and realised and my practical work as an artist, community organizer, researcher and teacher. As the flagpole rose in what were to be the final moments of the Living School's building workshop at Limehouse Town Hall I expressed uneasiness to those around me. While I appreciated the symbolic gesture it seemed, for me at least, woefully at odds with the broader material realities the session raised. And, on an individual level, the impact of seeing a real estate sign rise up into the heavens of the grand hall may have resonated differently for me than for many of the other cultural and arts workers in the session visiting the space for the first time. I am one of many who work, volunteer and participate in activities at Limehouse Town Hall. My contribution to this pamphlet reflects my own views and experiences.

Right now, for those of us who think about art and politics, questions of co-creation and co-production and how they might function to support forms of organizing and living that differ than those promoted through state violence, global



The Living School, Limehouse Town Hall, May 2016.

capitalism and fear of otherness are key concerns. In accounts of activist-arts and social arts the privileging of the symbolic and its communicative potential is common. Scholarly discussion, artistic funding and practices focused on the formation of networks of anti-authoritarian participation and production have tended to prioritize the event, how it feels and what it can communicate over the conventions, modes of support and mechanisms that reproduce its appearance. In this short contribution I want to trouble this tendency to over-identify with the potential of the temporary and the symbolic. I want to push critical consideration on how social art practice might be deployed to support strategic planning and long-term structural change, and consider the challenges that come with that aim.

II - The Town Hall

Limehouse Town Hall is a former nineteenth century civic building in East London. Although used only briefly as a town hall (the parish boundaries changed before it was completed) it has served as a civic centre and the nation's one time Labour History Museum (before the collection moved to Manchester to become the People's History Museum). In 2004 the arts charity Limehouse Town Hall Consortium Trust began managing the grade II listed building as a work and gathering space for artists, cultural workers, community arts organisations, activists, Bengali women and young people, amongst others. The low cost geography of the area supported the varied groups aims and aesthetics, which for the most part eschewed capitalist economies and development. Improvements to the structure of the building repaired the leaking roof and mold ridden rooms and the Trust continues to maintain the building for use. The former Victorian Town Hall offers reasonable rent and its mild dilapidation a productive aesthetic mix of grandeur and marginality.

The Trust formed through varied community and diy arts and culture organisations already in the building banding together to take over the lease from the local council. Adopting what is now a relatively widespread organizational form for the arts, the not-for-profit company turned charity, the Trust is governed by a range of mechanisms, conventions, rules and scripts that shape the way the organisation functions. The institutional form of the charity and the grassroots collective management of the space by its users and the varied communities they serve has been fruitful. However, the ongoing affective and reproductive labour - the emailing, the shared lunches, the toilet paper buying, the listening, the hours filling out council rate relief forms - that maintains the building and keeps its activities and relations alive on a daily basis, requires an immense amount of time, energy, and organisation. For example, 55 emails and three pre-production meetings with Brandon and South London Gallery went into making the Living School appear at Limehouse. The money to use the space for the session went into the building's rent and the



1. Exterior of Limehouse Town Hall. 2. Monthly Bike Workshop @ Limehouse Town Hall. Courtesy of the Tower Hamlets Wheelers. 3. Performance Workshop. Photo by Christa Holka.



Dorkbot @ Limehouse Town Hall.

majority of time spent preparing for the session's arrival was unpaid. The ability to give this time and energy is still just possible for me, a relatively privileged pseudo professional white woman, but is increasingly challenging as the ability to sustain a life in London becomes increasingly difficult for more and more people.¹

Over the years the Trust has developed to support the exploration of ideas, processes and actions that challenge dominant socio-economic and political practices; a place that values the cultural knowledge and aesthetics of the periphery. As a deepening understanding of the need to focus as much on the infrastructure that supports its practices as the practices themselves, over the last two years the varied communities that use the space have begun in earnest to develop cross conversations and collaborative activities that extend beyond the building. The building itself is a relatively modest, as former Victorian civic buildings go, and modest in scale as a current cultural producer. However, its impact on the appearance of an alternative performance of the civic in London has and continues to be significant. In September and October of 2016 alone the Town Hall's creative residents, including its largest entities the Boxing Club and the community arts charity Stitches in Time had: co-hosted fundraisers for other London based arts and culture organisations and spaces associated with left of left cultural production including anti-work, labour and anti-fascist organizing; co-organised the first ever exploratory project on Basic Income in the UK; launched a peer to peer arts and sewing network led by unemployed and underemployed Bengali women from the surrounding area; and continued to host the Tower Hamlet Wheeler's monthly DIY bike workshop. Concurrently the fascinating social history of the building - its relationship to not only state administration but also pleasure, activism, labour relations, and anti-racism

has come further to the fore. As a multi-purpose space the building's programming has been driven by the activists, artists and cultural producers in the building. It is a slow, and at times fraught, process; an unfolding of conversations and events comprised of more and more people. It is a complex process, one that values inefficiency and celebrates conviviality while attempting to attend to the uneasy economic realities of making something together. And as broader understandings of the desire for structural change embodied in and by the Town Hall come forward I have been drawn to wonder: What effect can an anti-institutional institution have in a city like London today?

III- City and Docklands

Limehouse Town Hall sits on the edge of a local catchment area with one of the highest indexes of multiple deprivation in a local authority with the highest rate of child poverty in London (and the second highest in the UK). According to local government reports, Tower Hamlets also has one of the most diverse populations in the UK, including the largest Bangladeshi community. The building sits a short walk west of Canary Wharf, where average salaries are the second highest in the UK after the City.² Canary Wharf, bought in 2015 by a Qatar and Canadian partnership, is one of Qatar's most significant recent real-estate investments in the city, and its new proposed eastwardly expansion one of the largest privately owned mixed use development sites in London.³ Just days before departing from office and leading Brexit's leave campaign the former Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, approved a plan for private developers to build high rise towers on the Isle of Dogs. The Isle of Dogs sits just to the south of Canary Wharf and is now forecasted to become the most densely populated area in Western Europe. As I write this there are several property developments in the immediate vicinity of the Town Hall (near completion or in the planning proposal stage). Local traders on the road leading from the canal to the Town Hall have recently been notified of 100% increases in their rent in the coming year. Across from Limehouse Town Hall is Locksley Estate, a housing estate on council owned land identified as an 'in-fill' site; a site that has been earmarked for further residential property development.

In a 2016 marketing brochure for City & Docklands Property Group, the area around the Town Hall has been rebranded 'Canary Gateway', a 'new quarter' in Limehouse. The promotional material explains:

Canary Wharf is not only an international landmark for urban regeneration, but is home to many of the world's most prominent business organisations, institutions and professional services. [...] Today, Canary Wharf is so much more than a business destination - it is a corporate lifestyle in itself - and one that will continue to support the ever growing demand for high quality living space within its immediate surrounds.⁴

Many are familiar with how this story of gentrification goes. I've seen it happening throughout urban areas in London at rapid speed. Places identified by government as 'opportunity areas' for development are mobilized through the repetition of terms like underutilized space, dereliction and vulnerable and the displacement of existing, often marginalized, populations replaced by professionals and creatives moving into a 'new' part of the city. All of this is supported through policy and legislation and lack of affordable housing. As the City & Docklands brochure declares, the financial centre is committed to making space for a corporate lifestyle that must meet its demands for space.

Might the Town Hall leverage claims to social art's civic promise in order to critically engage itself and others in the current shifts at play in its locality? In what ways can its imagined anti-institutionalism work in concert with the conventions that it rests on to organize and support structural change?

IV - Participation

To even begin to approach these questions requires a taking up of the issue of participation. Since the early 2000s there has been a steady increase in talk and championing of participatory theatre, performance and visual art practices civiness in the global north. In December 2016 the Royal Society of Arts in London hosted the launch of an inquiry into the civic role of arts organisations initiated by the UK Branch of the philanthropic Galouste Gulbenkian Foundation. Andrew Barnett, the Foundation's UK Director, explained that the term civic might be most usefully employed to describe the emotional fabric of a town, the thing that binds us to one another.⁵ Funders, lobbyists and arts organisations are not the only ones mobilizing the term civic to stand in for affective and hyper-local cohesion that participatory art seems to promote. Theatre scholar Jill Dolan's work on utopia emphasizes the 'modes of embodied civic engagement' demonstrated by theatre and performance that should be capitalized on.⁶ And American artist activist LM Bogard calls upon Boal and Debord to help promote a model a playful and participatory civics that can be realized through tactical performance.⁷ Given the varying uses, rationales and cadences for deploying the civic it seems almost impossible to pin down what the political and moral discourse of the civic actually is in relation to socially-engaged contemporary art practice. In truth, I'm less interested in finding out what the civic truly is but rather how mobilizing civic feeling tends to obscure broader socio-economic forces.

To do so, let's take a short detour to sociologist Sharon Zukin's critique of Jane Jacobs and her influential 1961 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Zukin argues that Jacobs' critique of monolithic urban planning of the 1950s misfires through focusing its attack on planners rather than the actual drivers of urban change, the developers and financiers. In doing so, Jacobs mobilized



The Living School, Lincolnhouse Town Hall, May 2016.



a community-based approach to city building through an idealized version of the hyper-local authored by middle class tastes that neglected key concerns of economy and infrastructure over the power of affect. This lapse converged with the racial bias and systemic disinvestment at the base of urban development. Jacobs' championing of the feeling of authenticity and vibrancy associated with 'the local' did not include practices of zoning, rent control and economic commitments to deprived suburban areas. Subsequently, Zukin argues, Jacobs' legacy finds itself more at home in the contemporary place-making activities driving gentrification.⁸ Approaches which appear to have absorbed and sterilized the communitarian activism Jacobs espoused. Jacobs' blind spots echo the challenges for social arts practices and those who reflect on them in the tendency to prioritize the symbolic or communicative over the conventions, structures, modes of production and mechanisms that (re)produce its appearance.⁹

It is worth noting that the visibility of the participatory in arts practice and urban gentrification emerge together in the 1970s. Practice of and writing on participatory, social, relational and place-based work continues to grow as the effects of deindustrialization have become a central issue for liberal states; as aggressive disinvestment in social welfare, wage stagnation and an increase in the cost of living has intensified the challenge of reproducing livelihoods of individuals, families and communities; as global flows into urban centres have continued to diversify and increase their populations; and as the legacy of western imperialism plays out through increasing racial, class, religious and environmental tensions and violence.

The temporary gatherings of theatre and performance experimental workshops of the 1960s and 70s are a useful object for considering the character of alternative civic participation engendered by social arts practice. These workshops sought to create anti-institutional and risky assemblies that liberated individuals from the market and the state, if not from the type individualization linked to both. A shift toward a paradigm of performance in the 1960s and 70s emphasized the liminal, co-presence and 'the real'. It sought to create anti-authoritarian assemblies while still holding fast to an ideal of a shared space of participation and creativity that was so basic to liberal order that it seemed to go without remark. Workshops, sites historically associated with work and labour, were divorced from their socio-economic character and reimagined as sites of unalienated labour and community. With its emphasis on psychic liberation and communal feeling workshop practices of the 1960s and 70s sought to break from the rigidity and repression of administrative production toward a more flexible, free and self-managed subject position. Isabell Lorey and others have written on this position of anti-institutionalism, highlighting the ways it is not just critically resistant to the historical conditions of the time but also conditioned by them.¹⁰ The performance of anti-institutional assemblies, like 1960s workshops, can also be seen to operate as a training ground for the skills increasingly

demanding by the capitalist labour market. And 1960s workshops' performance of reproducing sustainable social relations under capitalism might serve to preclude the contradictions of capitalism from being made visible.

V – Living School

In reflecting on the uneasiness that characterized much of my time in the participatory building session, I have been fortunate enough to continue taking up the Living School's offer to 'wonder aloud as to the future of public living'. Prior the building session I've been writing about here, Chris Jones had staged an opportunity for Living School participants to negotiate how we might live together in a newly occupied space. He had set out the outline of a building on the floor using pieces of wood. They mapped the floor plan of a building he had once squatted. As we stood outside the building's outline, Chris guided us through how we might go about entering the unoccupied building. Once we had tentatively made our way in a kind of paralysis took hold around how we might move forward together. This immobility was markedly different from the playful industriousness that followed in the building period. Throughout the building exercise our activities skirted along the boundaries of the symbolic and the actual. We built things with our bodies in time and space. But what we built was primarily symbolic. In performing the construction of a temporary community, we moved far from the actual material practices highlighted throughout the rest of the session: the difficult co-operative work and strategies of squatting discussed by Chris; the Berlin garden based project Prinzessinnengarten & Neighbourhood Academy mentioned by Brandon as a frame for the session; and Rural Urban Synthesis Society's presentation on their housing project in the borough of Lewisham. We also relied heavily on the imagined progressive politics of participation and moved away from considering the actual social relations that underpinned this appearance of the Living School at Limehouse Town Hall, including South London Gallery as a player and who might be privileged in this kind of wondering aloud about the future of public living.

The temporary and the participatory as aesthetic categories have their limits; like the civic they can serve to amplify culture's social character while simultaneously divesting it of its economic and conventional constitution. Eschewing the material realities of bodies and embodiment while promoting an individual's feeling of agency in being together requires putting to the side the mundane, the conventions, the institutional and the economic conditions that support its appearance. It is this turning away from the administrative, economic and organisational and over-identification in an imagined authentic and experimental togetherness, that has characterised so much anti-institutional cultural practice since the 1960s. Practices that throw into relief the ways capitalism is particularly adept at creative repurposing.



The Living School, Limehouse Town Hall, May 2016.

In his writing on theatre, innovation and Brecht scholar Michael Shane Boyle points to the biggest challenges for those who are interested in the future of public living. Boyle explains that for Brecht there were two types of innovation. The first experimented with form or content, renovating a thing so it could survive and/or thrive in its historical moment. The second sought to transform the social function of a thing (in Brecht's case theatre) so it might move society beyond capitalism. It was the latter approach Boyle explains that was, for Brecht, the true innovation. This true innovation embraced the necessity of the total transformation of the thing itself to enable it to work against the social reproduction of capitalism.¹¹ How such a transformation might work and what it might bring is far from certain.

And so, I return to the refurbished property sign looming high above our construction of a temporary community. It is, I propose, an urgent signal to refocus attention to the conditions of production for those, including Limehouse Town Hall, claiming a progressive politics. Perhaps it is in the uneasiness I felt during the Living School building session that I can find the most productive way forward. Bringing occasions of affective co-relation into direct dialogue with the socio-economic and psychic conditions that determine the possibilities of its appearance is difficult but necessary. Doing so means living with the ambiguities and discomfort that such an approach brings to the fore. And doing something about it means finding ways to continue without collapsing into immobility or charging ahead through

a facile productivity. This is by no means an easy feat. However, should Limehouse Town Hall want to intervene imaginatively in contemporary urban transformation to change the conditions of its possibility then a great deal more time, energy and attention is needed to address the co-determining relationship between culture, the valorisation of civic feeling and the current economic and political system.

Notes:

1. I am currently a part time casualised lecturer at a university in London and generate other income from art work.
2. Office of National Statistics (ONS), 2015.
3. Neil Callan, 'Qatar, Brookfield Take Full Control of Canary Wharf Group', *Bloomberg*, April 20, 2015, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-04-20/qatar-brookfield-take-full-control-of-canary-wharf-group> [accessed 01 October 2016].
4. Canary Gateway, 'A Brand New Quarter', City & Docklands Property Group, p. 10.
5. Andrew Barnett, 'Introduction to the Inquiry', *Place, Politics, Power: What is the Civic Role of Arts Organisations?*, Royal Society of Arts, 08th December 2016.
6. Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 13.
7. L.M. Bogad, *Tactical Performance: The Theory and Practice of Serious Play* (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 64.
8. Sharon Zukin, 'Jane Jacobs (1916-2006): Why Neo-Cons loved communitarian urbanist Jane Jacobs', *Architectural Review*, October 26, 2011, <https://www.architectural-review.com/archive/reputations/-jane-jacobs-1916-2006/8621634.article> [accessed 01 October 2016]
9. Howard Becker is a key reference point for examining the complex networks of co-operative activity involved in producing an 'Art World'. Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).
10. Isabell Lorey, 'Virtuosos of Freedom: On the Implosion of Political Virtuosity and Productive Labour', trans. by Mary O'Neill in *Critique of Creativity* (London: MayFlyBooks, 2011).
11. Boyle's argument is much more nuanced than it appears here. In his article, Boyle explores the relationship between postdramatic theatre and Brechtian innovation. The questions he raises about experimental forms like the postdramatic might be usefully applied to visual arts embrace of the participatory and theatre's move towards socially engaged practice. This would be a welcome area for further research. See Michael Shane Boyle, 'Brecht's Gale', *Performance Research*, 21.3 (2016), 16-26.