



GESTURE

KEEPING UP APPEARANCES: LABOUR AND EXCHANGE

Independent Dance (ID) has been invited again to contribute to *Material*. For ID this is an opportunity to discuss in/visibility in the sector, and to maintain its own visibility as a partner of Siobhan Davies Dance.

This contribution addresses challenges artists face in the maintenance of a visible profile, and in fulfilling their role within the labour chain of marketing that organisations require of them, while resources are scarce and survival is precarious. We re-produce an excerpt from *'A Common Sense: Workshops and the Independent Sector'*, a talk given by Elyssa Livergant in Crossing Borders 2017, in which she considers the support systems in London's independent sector. Elyssa invites us to consider how these challenges artists—and other workers living in the city—face could engender solidarities across sectors.

Elyssa Livergant:

I work in the 'new work' sector and have done so, in a variety of roles, for almost 25 years. I use the term 'new work' to denote a collection of practices that cut across and challenge conceptions of dance, performance, visual art and theatre. I also use the term because it is productive on a theoretical level, highlighting wider contemporary shifts in post-Fordist labour practices as one aspect of a radical recasting of the relations between state, capital and social control. My participation in the sector is from a place of privilege, as a pseudo-professional white woman with a PhD who has grown up with economic advantage.

As the cost of living in London continues to rise while access to decently paid work continues to diminish, I feel deep anxiety about how to survive in this city and have a life that I value – one not tied to accumulating wealth but content with gathering together enough so that I can eat, pay rent, make beautiful things with people and re-imagine social relations as efforts that might undo capitalist production. However, the rhetoric of survival in the independent sector needs to be rethought, moving away from framing artists and arts organisations as a 'special' category, and encouraging solidarity across a range of marginalised people who continue to have their common means of survival expropriated through capitalist urban transformation. Doing so means addressing the contradictory aspects of working in the arts and the broader cultural sector, where associations of freedom and communality rub against conditions of self and institutional exploitation that promote and demand individualised narratives of self-hood.

14

I present the following example to further implicate myself in these considerations.

After being invited to speak at Crossing Borders, and agreeing to my freelance fee of £100, I got an email from Ella, who works for ID, asking for a few materials to support my talk. These included:

- Copy describing the talk
- 2-3 high res images to illustrate the talk
- 1 high res headshot

The last time I had a head shot was 2001, when I was working as an actor in Toronto. Anxious at how I should address ID's request I call my friend Lorna, who is an excellent photographer. On the phone, she tells me how busy she is. She barely has time to breathe. She's about to move out of the inhospitably cramped garage turned newly renovated flat she shares in Ladywell. She moved there a year earlier after being pushed out of the house near Peckham where she had lived for over a decade. Supposedly the Peckham landlord wanted to move back; unsurprisingly, once Lorna moved out that house went back on the market a thousand pounds dearer with nothing but a quick paint job.

Lorna and I talk about exhaustion and anxiety. In her late 30's and having just finished an MA in graphic design she doesn't have enough work and isn't sure where she's going to live next. She keeps taking work that doesn't pay well enough, and doing favours. She feels the pressure to stay visible; to stay connected.

I explain that I need a favour, a head shot, because I'm being asked to make myself visible. And I need visibility that's going to help me on the labour market. I'm 44, a self-employed artist and cultural worker, and on a part-time contract at Queen Mary University. I've spent that last four years volunteering on a long-term project - an independent community arts and activist space in Limehouse. I'm a renter and living just above the poverty line.

Even though Lorna is overwhelmed and about to move she offers to help. When I arrive, I help her shoot her MA portfolio so she can put it on her website. She then runs around the house trying to get the light right for my photoshoot. I am grateful for her help while simultaneously feeling resentful about the amount of time and energy we're both putting into making myself visible for the market.

We first try doing something a bit tongue and cheek. Like Holly from the late 1980s British television show *Red Dwarf* - a floating head of artificial intelligence on a screen. Later that night, I show the picture to my flatmate Myka. I think it's funny. It's a 'head' shot. She asks me to consider if I'm playing a game or playing the game. I choose the back-up photo we took instead. I feel a bit dirty.

In mobilising my friendship with Lorna, I approached the headshot task as an investor caring for a brand that might produce dividends in the future, based on its appearance in the present. And yet, this investment in my entrepreneurial self is just a mask for a wage relation: an expression not only of mine and Lorna's conditions as workers, but also of the vast growth of those insecurely and 'entrepreneurially' employed.. What game are we playing at when underemployment, crappy jobs and dispossession of access to the means of survival continue to increase?

'New work' labour markets rely on deep micro-political entanglements of social and labour relations, while simultaneously demanding disassociation from the realities of our shared material conditions and their common transformation. It is difficult to resist the intense pressure to demonstrate one's value in speculative markets in the face of austerity, wage stagnation and increased costs of living in London. And yet, it is this very pressure that precludes political considerations and concerns around the labour-capital relations that underpin the independent sector, considerations which are key to addressing the scarcity that many artists, arts organisations and wider communities in the city face.

You can listen to Elyssa Livergant's full talk via <http://www.independentdance.co.uk/programmepage/media/audio>
Photos: Lorna Allen

15