

Who Cares Symposium Q&A Session 2

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

histories, work, communities, arts organisations, arts expertise, mutual aid, care, organising, audience engagement

SPEAKERS

Katharine Stout, Jemma Desai, chaired by Dr Sophie Hope

Audience question

My question is for Jemma: this is from reading the paper that you wrote, and also talking to you. When you were speaking, it struck me that the real violence that can come with audience development, what does it mean to invite people into these spaces where their identities are being co-opted, or that are just actually quite hostile? I think that also includes when you are maybe the only one in the workplace of your background, how you want to bring more people in, but then you're like, Oh, my God, I'm luring people into this hostile space. So maybe this isn't really a question. I guess this also needs to be a part of the conversation about audience development.

Jemma Desai

I think it relates to what Igor was saying that it really does. I read this book called *The Nature of The Beast*, which is written by Richard Hylton. And it talks about the Art Council's diversity policies, across I think, a 10 to 15 year period. And there is one bit where he actually articulates that diversity policy is born at a time when the hostile environment is kicking into gear. And so when we understand that, when we understand that connection, whether it's conscious or not, that culture becomes instrumentalised, that time when the material conditions of people are actually going down. And that's when we understand why these spaces continue to be hostile because they aren't connected to the experiences outside. And I think that research circulating last year taught me so much. It was in its circulation that I learned more about how the art sector works, because last year, the arts sector tied itself so inextricably to social justice, and some movement organising. They've done that now; they've gone publicly on record. They all posted black squares, and they all said that they care about black liberation. And I think that is very interesting, as we go back to the so-called normal to see how words are inevitably being co-opted, but people are not doing that because they are liars. Everybody is well meaning, but a structure isn't in place to make that true. So it can only be dissonant, and we can only ever get burned out.

So really as a cultural worker, I circulated *This Work Isn't For Us* because I wanted people not to collide with that knowledge in that painful way, but to maybe have the experience that I did when I read the Richard Hylton book. I didn't know this, and now I understand why I felt this way and why it was so hard

and why it was so painful. So it's more about how we are honest about these histories. I told the story about Clore (Leadership Programme). I've benefited so much from Clore but there is a history to that programme that is important for us all to discuss. Who was it for? Why does it exist? Because those histories do their work in the present regardless of if you change the director of something or if you change the speakers and then or whatever, those histories are always doing their work. Those histories live in the buildings, they live in the structures, they live in the board structure and the organisational structure we have. We have boards for our organisations because of The East India Company. So how can we be more cognisant of it and not just think, oh, we've just got to engage more people. The way that we're engaging people, it has all this backstory and we need to get better at understanding extraction, transaction. This idea of hosting and inviting and what all of those things are loaded with when you do them.

Audience question

I'm here as a local resident, and I am also a participant in the exhibition. People talked about managing expectations on both sides of the work that's being done. And the complexity and diversity of communities, taking the time to engage with and understand that. It's a question about the idea of reciprocity. And I suppose I'm interested in the examples that people have for the ways in which the expertise, experience, knowledge and skills of participants have enriched those participatory projects. And it's not always a happy experience in terms of there's sometimes tensions, but it is that emotional reciprocity, and how that enriches the project.

Katharine Stout

I suppose for us, each project we do is a learning experience. That was for us the programme in 2020 which has been about reflection and listening. So I guess every project we do is learning and thinking about when we can be most useful with small resources, which is time and money. We want to go to where we can be of most use and even now, we're probably doing too much, but then there's always that ambition. But for us, it's also about partnerships. So for example, the project with South Essex Homes came out of long conversations with one of the managers there. She knew the needs of her residents, and also what they were trying to do and what would be beneficial. And then we brought our expertise of working with artists. Through those conversations, but also through empowering those persons to have their stories heard, that process can create maybe a confidence building in some ways to try new things. And it meant so much. We had a launch on the big screen and the mayor came, and for those residents that was great. To have that moment where they saw themselves. That carries through and also gave the managers working at the care homes some ideas of what to do, because this struggle of just surviving, and particularly in the care homes, but then to work with them on a project about what can be developed now. it's always about partnerships and saying well, we can bring this, but you have this expertise, so looking at new partners to do something different.

Jemma Desai

I was just thinking about the period of time that we've all been reflecting on during the lockdowns and I learned a lot about mutual aid during that time. The lessons of mutual aid. And really the lessons that I take is that knowledge of what skills are in the room isn't like this thing that you do on the side, you just know. So when you talk about community actually know what everyone has to offer. And I think that as

community engagement has become this side thing that organisations do and obviously some organisations are doing it at the centre of what they're doing, but oftentimes it's a side thing, and it's a person that's added on during the community engagement. That becomes less centralised. I found this book, *Mutual Aid* by Dean Spade, really useful to read because it's really applicable. It's really easy to read. It's really practical. And I just think that there are all these lessons from organising that have become very relevant because of Coronavirus, and this idea of mutuality makes me think that actually, maybe mutuality now is just, and this is something that I heard said at an event by an activist called Hassan Valder. If we care about engaging communities so much, why don't arts organisations just swapped budgets with the local organisation that they're trying to engage? So what would it look like for Focal Point to just swap budgets with a local care home for a period of time. What would they do with that money? How would that liberate the resource in a different way? And what would that do to the work of that gallery? Maybe it just has to be like that. Maybe that's how it's led by the community.

Audience question

The Arts Council has an easy read version of their documents. And I'd love to see if you had an easy read version of your report, which could then be encouraged to share to people because I think your work does extremely important for people who are too lazy to read, it would be absolutely lovely to have something really accessible. What's your take on this?

Jemma Desai

I think the *Arts In The Sunken Place* essay is the shorter version of it, and one of the things that I kind of resisted in *This Work Isn't For Us* is, normally in a document like that you'd have this easy read, the thing that you put in front of a busy person. I don't think I care about that. If you can't be bothered to read it, then maybe you don't care that much. And actually, it's really complicated. There's all these different elements to it. And some of it is just someone's experience. I think that it is really important that all those different registers have the same weight. And it isn't hard to read, I don't think I write in a way that is too academic. But it's interesting to me that that's what some people said, and I think sometimes in the arts, we occupy ourselves with a certain language that is actually quite detached from the issues at hand. So, why is it that we will read books, or go to see an artwork or sit for a whole performance, but when it comes to the nuts and bolts of what we do, we can't read a document that's actually not that long. That was something I thought about a lot. And I thought about who I wanted to read it and actually realised that I just wanted the people that couldn't be bothered to read it to read it. And that's how it will do its work. But *The Arts In A Sunken Place* one is a much shorter version, and it has a lot of those issues as well.