Renée Akitelek Mboya and Hera Chan

Renée: Hera, I wanted to talk to you about this idea of structures of support specifically because I think this last year has challenged both of us in the way we think, the people we turn to when we need support and the ways in which we've learned to articulate the types of support we need. At the moment, for example, we are both living new dimensions of our diasporic selves, though they are somewhat tempered by the homogeneity of the so called 'international art world'. What are structures of support for you?

Hera: What I have come to define as 'structures of support' has been largely influenced by the ongoing movement in Hong Kong which began in 2019, my work in community journalism, and in activist-oriented organisations in Montreal. 'Structures of support' are concomitant with 'community', yet should not be conflated. What many now like to call the Be Water Revolution of Hong Kong taught me many things, mostly that there is another way to do a revolution. A friend recently reshared a Tweet by Kelly Hayes. It said: 'Think of your politics as something you practice, rather than as an identity or personality, and you will be much better positioned to process criticism, and when necessary, adapt or shift your practices accordingly.' For me, there is no difference between my daily life and my artistic practice. I want to be grounded in the political reality of the now. When you ask me if the structures of support have a physical body, social form or manifestations, I have to answer affirmatively, and perhaps in the most militant way possible. In the movement, we were a physical mass on the street. In a social form, we created ways to enact forms of direct democracy in minute detail, hosted mass conversations about inclusivity and ways to move forward—we have since shared these tactics with others. As a manifestation, the fight for freedom still continues. I feel that I am always running out of words to describe the concrete examples of how the movement created a vast

network of mutual aid. It was guided by intuition and planning and history. It was the essence of what it means to 'be water', to be reactive, to take care. All I can say is, if I fell down on the street, I knew that someone would catch me before I hit the pavement.

Renée: As you say this, it immediately makes me think of what Mumia Abu-Jamal calls the 'industry of fear' – that there is a coercion industry (i.e. the courts, the prisons, the police) that is responsible for promoting and reinforcing the state's coercive apparatus of 'public safety'. In the last year, I think that the political and cultural conditions which kept us fearful in those ways have started to collapse. This might be because we have nothing—and certainly nothing left to lose—but I think it's also to do with the strategies we're learning from each other and from movements around the world that are really exemplifying new ways to show up for each other and for our communities. Hong Kong, Belarus, Sudan, BLM, BDS: these movements are all in the streets yes, but also in kitchens, on farms, on ballot papers and in discussions around breast milk. For me a structure of support, ultimately and finally, is intersectional. I want to support you in things that are mundane and colloquial in the same way we strategize over how to hack state surveillance. What does it mean for you to be part of the structure of support for someone else?

Hera: To avoid being overly general, I would say it depends on the situation you are in. I worked for the last two years and more in a new contemporary arts museum in Hong Kong. As a first timer in this scale of an art space, I experienced a sharp learning curve for the bureaucracy. Every bureaucracy is designed, edited and adjusted differently. The bureaucracy myself and my colleagues experience or continue to experience within the museum was also enmeshed in the wider bureaucracy of the city. Bureaucracies extract life energy, rendering its human machinations feeling powerless, slowly eroding the ability to dream of real change. Under that rubric, I found myself pouring myself into establishing real relations not in spite of that system but within it. I found myself organising my time around figuring out how to make my colleagues feel seen within that system, to veer away from seeking affirmation from that system, saying: 'no,

you do not have to confess your identity and give your identity to the institution'. I think often of what Fred Moten and Stephano Harney said about being on a pirate ship. In all, I do not think I was successful at building an actual 'structure' of support within the organisation, though I hope that I contributed to a sense of camaraderie among my peers. Even now, I feel as if my actions had an impact on the symptoms, and hopefully helped create a larger psychic space to imagine, but an actual structure of support would require a much larger upheaval.

Renée: 'Why are some structures of support invisible or ignored in the first place? What does it mean to make them visible in the artistic work or an exhibition? How and what frames exist to make them visible?'

I think this is first and foremost a question to do with whose labour is acknowledged, and by whom it is acknowledged but also which and when folks fall out of citation and who has the power to choose ignorance over speaking out about a thing. It's all well and good to imagine that art has import and some kind of structural power, but I think we know by now that often in exhibition contexts, in contemporary arts contexts the inequalities are built in.

Hera: One of my favourite models of a structure of support that is largely invisibilized outside of its networks are the family association networks that essentially established the first wave of Chinatowns around the world. Many of them were rooted in villages in China having a branch outside—as in Hong Kong, or San Francisco, and so forth. If you were from that village, you could seek out this association of community members and they would help you with the immigration process, settle in, introduce you to people. Early immigrants struggled or were flat out denied access to opening bank accounts and taking out lines of credit. There were groups of people who would each put in a sum of money each month, then once a month one of the members would take it all out to start a business, and pay it back to the group with interest. My maternal grandfather started as an unlicensed taxi driver this way. He bought a car. Networks like this have permeated into art as well. Like Godzilla. An

Asian-American network that sought to help artists find opportunities in New York. The artist Bing Lee, a founder, is a much better storyteller than me, so you should ask him about all the adventures they had in 90s New York sometime. One of the things Godzilla did was appeal a decision made by the NEA—or National Endowment of the Arts—to revoke a grant to Mel Chin.

I'm not sure these networks are necessary to make visible. Sometimes, it is the invisibility of it that lends it its power. I've always been interested in exploring this kind of economic model, or any others for that matter, in the arts. I think one of the reasons why there are not strong structures of support within the arts is because everyone is relying on the patronage model—whether that be the government or collectors. The structure of the arts is largely built to create a coexistence of artistic production and its patron, a tough job as it is, meaning it is not designed to give life to many of the art workers. I feel like I am not exactly answering your question. I suppose what I want to say is, I'm less interested in exhibition work that illustrates possible models for structures of support, and more interested in time spent actually creating those models. The work can illustrate one thing but the processes behind it can be something else. This micro-political is important here, and visibility—on most fronts—is not my personal political aim.

Renée: 'What can we do to make these structures less fragile, resistant to 'self-interest' and individualism which is being constantly fuelled by neoliberal capitalist agendas. Instead, can we think of the role of structures of support to increase collectiveness?'

Hera: I'm in a reading group—or wine club?—called Chromium Groupsome. I laugh even as I type that. But the name comes from how we ended up describing the first book we read, which was *Crash* by JG Ballard. We are essentially various Asians dispersed across various places. This week, we are reading *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* by David Graeber. He wrote:

'Even if one compares the historical schools of Marxism, and anarchism, one can see we are dealing with a fundamentally different

sort of project. Marxist schools have authors. Just as Marxism sprang from the mind of Marx, so we have Leninists, Maoists, Trotksyites, Gramscians, Althusserians… (Note how the list starts with heads of state and grades almost seamlessly into French professors.) […] Now consider the different schools of anarchism. There are Anarcho-Syndicalists, AnarchoCommunists, Insurrectionists, Cooperativists, Individualists, Platformists… None are named after some Great Thinker; instead, they are invariably named either after some kind of practice, or most often, organisational principle."

I am increasingly interested in the physicality of structures of support, which are ultimately invested in a platform politic. An ex-lover once said to me: 'if you don't give someone all the information, you leave them no choice.' It's not just about what we are communicating, but what we are communicating with. Everyone in a structure should be informed, help others be informed, and take it on themselves to be informed. I have been most impressed by open-source developer groups that built a police action live-tracking app in Hong Kong, or hacked into another app to denote all the pro-democracy establishments in the 'buy yellow' movement.

Renée: I've been looking at a lot of recordings, for years now, of court proceedings of incarcerated freedom fighters during Kenya's Mau Mau Revolt—trials that happened at the height of the conflict between 1952 and 1960. One thing that has always been a problem in how information flows in Kenya's court system—and I assume this is deliberate as a century is a long time to leave something like this unresolved—is that when you enter a plea in Kiswahili, the question the advocate asks you translates as 'do you accept the charges' not 'how do you plead, guilty or not guilty'. Do you accept the charges is a yes or no question, and what it actually sounds like in Kiswahili is something like have you heard the charges or do you understand that you are being charged. So you say yes, because you know and you see where you are, but what is entered is a plea of guilty. It's exactly what you said, 'if you don't give someone all the information, you leave them no choice'. I think ultimately a structure of support is one in which there is an equitable distribution of information and people are

able to make choices—good choices, bad choices, any choices—and be upheld in those choices.