

# Kah Bee Chow and Simona Dumitriu

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**What do ‘structures of support’ mean to you and how do they work in your daily life and artistic practice? Do they have a physical body, social form or other manifestations?**

Simona: In my daily life I find structural support in remembering the force and work my mother and my grandmothers and great grandmother have put out throughout their lives. I have the privilege of coming from a lineage of cis women with fantastic strengths, who all survived and thrived with faint to no presence of cis men in their lives (although they did have spouses from time to time) and who built houses and safety with their bare hands. So I feel I embody all the strength of the world in my mind and my determination, in my self-assurance. And that comes from knowing bits of their stories. I also find support in the queer activism that preceded me, in the words, the poets and the martyrs of queer liberation... The body of my partner, holding and dancing with my cat, these kinds of clichés...and witchcraft, that I partially come from, although that’s another story.

In art practice: the bodies and minds pulling through working side by side to finish an exhibition and having good knowledge of these bodies and minds, of their experiences. I refuse certain people around me because I always compare them to the ones I used to know and work with. I think my two models in ethical thinking and cultural labour would be artists Ileana Faur and Marian Dumitru, two of the members of the collective I was part of, as organisers of the fantastic, mythical and defunct Platforma Space in Bucharest. I am grateful beyond imagination to them.

Structures of support can be equated with institutions too—I mean how is a funding body or an archival body not a structure of support? But there are different sets of eyes and rules, when it comes to (established, well-funded) institutions. Can we even call what they do *support*, or is it rather a bureau- cratic reflex of their sheer existence? I mean the word is used to its ends and beyond, right, since each project benefiting from a bit of money or some other in-kind contributions needs to write that it was ‘supported by’ this and that institution, funding body and so forth. So in that sense, they could be thought of as perennial (?), stable (?) and equidistant (?) givers of ‘support’. This wording is quite wrong, because it endlessly implies a benefactor angle, and not an employer/recruiter angle—this could be a vestige from the Renaissance model of relationships between artists and their ‘benefactors’, which were, in fact, then as now, their employers. Except, of course, these benefactors did not take it upon themselves the tasks of ensuring pensions, health benefits etc.—oh, that’s an article in itself.

I am now also rethinking the question under the influence of an article, a transcribed conversation between Lara Khaldi, Yazan Khalili and Marwa Arsanios, ‘What We Talk about When We Talk about Crisis: A Conversation, Part 1’, published in eflux journal 111/Sept. 2020. With this in mind, I am coming back and thinking again about the neoliberal cultural institution or cultural organ- isation as a sort of ‘structure of support’, which it claims to be, while equally being a structure of selection and permission, a taste maker in contemporary art, a pedagogue of the zeitgeist and so forth. A museum, a konsthall or a funding institution are, for better or worse, structures of economic support, through stipends, paid jobs, fees for ‘projects’ and so forth. They are the visible structures of support, the opposite of my first thoughts or examples. They are the ones that can also be held accountable. Reading through the long, thorough, hitting- right-home conversation between Khaldi, Khalili and Arsanios, it becomes obvious to me how much these structures act as ‘benefactors’ rather than employers, in the deep capital mindset of today. Why does one constantly feel their wrath or fear their hidden agendas? In the conversation, Lara Khaldi compares the Palestinian situation with that of the Soros-financed centers for contemporary art

in the SEE after the fall of communism. I have witnessed this process of creating a structure of support in the making of Bucharest's CSAC (later CIAC – Soros Center for Contemporary Art, later, after the Soros financement ended, renamed the International Center for Contemporary Art). That center had a mission, exactly like Khaldi underlined, to get rid of any lingering communist thinking and boldly direct art toward liberal, capitalist agendas, while also shaping the elite of the local arts. And wow, for a relatively small institution, it did exactly that. It shaped the bosses of today's art scene– the former director of CSAC/CIAC is today the director of AFCN (the Romanian Agency for the National Cultural Fund), which is the main and only nation-wide financing institution for the visual and applied arts, and all the other artists close to CSAC/CIAC are relatively visible internationally, some of them are heads of Arts University Faculties, one of them is the current director of the MNAC (National Museum for Contemporary Art in Bucharest) and so on. This is not entirely a critique, because both CSAC/CIAC and the persons behind it and supported by it, while teaching themselves and others some neoliberal ways (the Romanian version, of course), establishing power at the turn of millenia and being part of the patriarchal systems woven in the societal canvas, were also fighting against a heavy undertow of traditionalism, deeply ingrained 'grandpa' style corruption and generally did support experiment, performance art, queer processes and so on... So, see, this is a fascinating study on its own, the fights for dominance between various structures of power (and support).

### **What does it mean to be part of the structure of support for someone else?**

Simona: Responsibility, fear. I am supporting my small family, both financially and just by being in close contact with my mother who is living alone and getting older. So it is a lot of fear and I guess egoism, as I and we try to build ourselves a bit out of the semi-safe precarity (I deeply dislike that word) ... and then into what?

Kah Bee: I agree that it can be heavy on both sides, I tend to think of these relations for me, as being grounded in mutuality, with varying degrees

of unevenness. We have talked of this daily contact you have with your mother before, I have also observed this with other friends whose parents live elsewhere—for example, our friend A would pick up a call from his father in the middle of dinner, and really talk, really check-in and remain very much a part of each other's lives even if they live in different countries, entirely different contexts and so on. This has always amazed me because it's something I struggle to do myself. My family and I have been speaking much more frequently via video calls since we learned of the diagnosis this summer—on my end, I feel I am the one who needs them, I need to know, I need to google search all the terms and procedures I do not understand, I need to sense some measure of control over what I absolutely have no control of and I need to impart that I care in spite of my location; one could say that this care has equally as much to do with my own guilt and need for control as much as care. Yet the frequency of our long-distance calls also provide a sense of steadying, a holding in place in this process, in our mutual confusion and concern, more so than I initially understood. The lack of self-sufficiency can also in turn become a structure of support, a way of containing the unknowables. I am still pretty terrible at phone calls but I'm working on it.

Since the pandemic, I would say going to work in my studio collective here in Malmö and meeting my friends and colleagues there almost on a daily basis has been an important source of constancy—it has always been, but markedly so over this period. I want to acknowledge the kindnesses and generosity I am fortunate enough to have around me. None of this just happens, it takes a very specific constellation of existing support structures and people who care enough to make it possible. In this case, there was already another collective in the building, Alta, with people who had established a good relationship with the landlord who drew out the possibility of us even working in this space. There are among other funding structures, a studio grant which Malmö artists can apply to every two years from Malmö city which help subsidise the rent to a degree. Also there is the fact that there are enough of us who want to work together in the same physical space; and value being part of a community. None of this is a given.

At the same time, I would also caution against romanticising the collective or positioning it as a kind of magic pill towards all ills; it is important and necessary to work together, to talk together and to live together; it can also be extremely difficult, it is also maybe not an option evenly available to all. I remember laughing out loud when I read this tweet earlier this year:

*'very few of you have actually live [sic] in a commune type situation so let me be the first to tell you that actually, it fucking sucks. it is a full time job. everyone is rude and irritating and no one cleans the fucking kitchen. every large commune of the 60s collapsed the same way'*<sup>1</sup>

It's a little wholesale for sure but it's also familiar. I wonder if we can speak for the need for community without exalting it? Or without idealising it as a From Eliza Gauger's twitter account: "i was in an illegal oakland warehouse art commune a few years ago. 'hey man the quiet hours are very clearly stated in the house rules, please use headphones' became a massive mailing list argument. again, i must emphasize this: no one cleaned the kitchen utopian wet dream?"<sup>2</sup> I am not advocating a solitary life in the forest but I want to acknowledge the inevitability of conflict and of sharply coming up against conditions upon which this togetherness or alongside-ness is possible, where the difficulty can also be unevenly distributed. Simona, whenever you speak of Platforma in Bucharest—forgive me if I completely miss the mark—I tend to have this picture of everyone in the courtyard seated around a long table, discussing ideas, arguing passionately, endless debates, strong disagreements but also still motoring the dialogue on and on. It feels like a form of vital work, maybe acting in the Arendtian sense, which also takes place in a very specific kind of space, I mean a space where I am not expected, for example, to sit at the same table as my ex's racist grandmother and argue for my right to personhood—although I understand this is precisely the kind of conversation many would expect me to undertake in the interest of...?

Simona: Haha, that's funny, it is a romanticised open air image but a beautiful one. We didn't have much of a courtyard, I mean there was

an asphalt parking yard where we could and did sit to smoke or have coffee, on a lateral staircase. Otherwise the space itself was large, light sometimes, dark at other times, always sort of dusty. But yes, it contained the privilege of such conversations that you're imagining, sometimes (not all the time though).

I am also familiar with the conflation: community, commune, commonality, what is it that we have in common and so forth. From my increasingly separatist experience, there is a thread through all of them. And I am coming back more and more to the word *commonality*, out of them all.

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

Simona: This question makes one think about separatism and the very many reasons why groups that are generally subjected to discrimination have to create separate, safe(er) environments for themselves. Uh, making them visible should not be in any case a purpose for the sake of some art (I know at this point I am conflating community, collective, commune—but uh you get where I'm going) or other. Such groups may themselves decide to present themselves in a specific way and that's about the only ethical way to make these structures of support visible: when they themselves decide to become so and to whomever they decide to become visible to. Any other attempt to 'make them' visible would equal forced visibilisation.

Kah Bee: In terms of separatism, there was this one part of Eli Clare's talk (as part of the events programme for this exhibition) whereupon after describing a real-life encounter, he preemptively counters, 'and I am not making this story up, I am not confabulating details, I am not even exaggerating it. I couldn't make this kind of crap up even if I tried.' I deeply recognised this reflex: this anticipation of disbelief, the expectation of scrutiny and suspicion, that the questions to follow will question your capacity to speak of your lived experience

without an attendant paranoia, without madness or bias. Will your version travel across the chasm to better adhere to their version of reality? I think separatism can offer, even just momentarily, relief from having to relentlessly accommodate someone else's preferred certainty.

**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?**

Simona: I don't really relate to this question. I believe real structures (or groups, or persons) of support are very strong and resistant to context. And if they are defeated by context, there is nothing an outsider can do to prevent that in any case. Maybe one good thing would be to stop mimicking them, to not suggest that some semi-hipster 'woke' (this word is now getting super instrumentalised) artsy group running an artist-run space in some hip space is equal with people that actually do the work and build safe environments for themselves (or at least try to do this work and often get drowned and muddled in the over-vocalisation of the former). So all of (us/me) hip people doing art should at least work from this perspective of respect and difference.

Kah Bee: David Graeber cites the work of Peter Kropotkin as representative of an alternative school of Darwinism which emerged in Russia (in the early 20th century) positing cooperation rather than competition as the driver of evolutionary change, suggesting that 'animal cooperation often has nothing to do with survival or reproduction, but is a form of pleasure in itself.'<sup>3</sup> Suppose one is not naturally a 'calculating economic actor trying to maximise some sort of self-interest', suppose we are not inherently selfish creatures and we actually enjoy helping each other. One wonders how deeply internalised this ascribed selfishness has come to be.

Within the art context, the narrative of individual exceptionalism is so deeply instilled and entangled with our value systems linked to our perceived chances of survival. How wedded am I to it? As a recipient

of a two-year working grant from the Swedish Arts Grants committee myself, isn't this the reward system that enables me an income as an artist? How am I paying the rent?

So I found out today that you had already written an essay on this in 2018: and wow I actually think the essay addresses all of these questions we have been presented here with so much more specificity and care than I would know how to do—I am tempted to just cite it in full honestly... In the following, you write about the Swedish Arts Grants accounting report from 2017, deducing from the figures of how many might operate, even temporarily, as an 'ideal artist': for imagining the limits of the MU agreement and the descriptors of a few hundred solitudes which feed the solitude of the others. A maximum of 300 artists in Sweden, each in their own name, with a contract in their own name and a practice strong enough to stand alone in front of a jury and receive a grant. 300 solitudes, I would call them, in order to clarify what I mean by the word solitude in the economy of my narrative so far.<sup>4</sup>

I wonder how is it possible to re-arrange these solitudes? Perhaps these grants are also awarded in good faith that the solitudes redistribute in infinite ways<sup>5</sup>—is this a realistic expectation or is this a convenient way for me to frame my own reward and guilt?<sup>6</sup>

What are the privileges accorded in every successful application, every acquisition, commission, invitation? What are possible ways of sharing, rethinking and questioning these advantages? This is certainly not a new question—and I want to say that I do already see my friends putting into practice these questions on a daily basis, affording others their care, time and resources; whether it is O documenting his friends' exhibitions, L doing the dishes after our afternoon coffee, I producing and publishing books for her friends. I learn from them everyday. I know these examples seem minute in the face of the omnipresent structuring logic of capital. All this is also not to serve as an excuse for complacency, but to pay attention to these already ongoing considerations and lived practices—what is possible for us to build on and expand upon? We already do this and we have

the capacity to do this; supporting and helping each other as an end in itself.

Can you bite the hand that feeds you and care deeply for it at the same time—beyond acts of convenience or as a kind of grandstanding employed in a forum like this? A good friend told me recently, ‘critique can also be an act of love. And love is often very difficult and a lot of hard work.’ I received this message at a time when I really needed it and I really appreciate that this love or care is also not easy. I mean, nothing is easy, why should it be? And then also to return to David Graeber again, who says critique itself can also become a trap in that ‘if you apply the logic of critique too consistently, you create this almost gnostic notion of reality, that the one thing we can do is to be the person who realizes the world is wrong.’<sup>7</sup> He goes on,

‘But it strikes me that radical theory has always been caught between that moment and the Marxian moment in which you try to understand the rule, all the hidden structures of power and the way in which every institution that might seem innocuous contributes to reproducing some larger totality, which is one of domination and oppression. And so, if you take it too seriously, critique rather loses its point because it becomes impossible to imagine anything outside. That’s when you end up needing, relying on, the logic of total rupture. Something will happen, I don’t know, a really big riot, and then during the effervescence a new world will just come into being. There are insurrectionists who say that outright.’<sup>8</sup>

I think we have spoken about different versions of this before in our work together: the desire for immediate gratification, the pull of romanticising radical break when the pace of change— not superficial change—is some- times painfully snail-like, incremental, perhaps invisible, with no explosive gestures to mark one side from another. The quality of the work can be boring and terrifyingly banal, Arendt would probably disparage us as bureaucratic failures, but this is also our political reality of what might help shift.<sup>9</sup> Even though I am a complete bore myself, I would also disagree with what Graeber says here in denigrating the value of a big riot (I mean this is also in

2012)–we have seen in recent times the efficacy of exactly such ruptures too.

Simona: I am, if you will, a model of disruption that is forever faced with its demise. I agree and posit that without critique (in a sense of public self-awareness, public self-positioning within the context one is part of) there is no possibility of commonality, collectivity or change. Without a space for anger to be released, a group or collective is going to suffocate in its own soup of politeness and lies. So if the original question was whether support can increase collectiveness, I would argue that dissent increases collectiveness.

**What structures of support are about maintenance (keeping things going, just trying to live) and which are about change? Why do we value change over maintenance especially in the arts?**

Simona: There is change and then there is change. For instance, if in, let's say, five years, a big cultural institution would decide to just purge its insides under the influence of Black Lives Matter and actually hire BPOC (with a representative amount of QTBPPOC too) in higher up positions, that would mean valuable change (also that would mean we already live in a dream-like utopia where white supremacy and heteronormativity ceased to exist, so...). But if, let's say, a (big) cultural institution decides to destroy structures which already existed within it (in its crevasses, or margins if you will) or people who already transformed the institution by seeding in it the very instruments of good change, that means destructive change, painful instrumentalisation and a void in the end. I've lived through that several times even, and I have seen others being affected by the bitter claw of maintenance.

The strongest structures of support are both about maintenance (just trying to live) and about change, or by their very existence they represent change and I am thinking here even about mid-size independent institutions, such as Savvy Contemporary in Berlin.

**What is the relationship between curators, artists, institutions? What are our roles and how do we support each other? What can**

## **we change in the way we work, communicate, curate exhibitions and create institutions in order to be more supportive?**

Simona: Supportive of what? There are so many things one can be supportive of and fight against... This is indeed the problem: cultural institutions go with the flow and the latest trend, corporate organisations that they are. If it's about climate change, we do it like that. Or we get ourselves at the forefront and support the BPOC fight for an exhibition or two. Two years ago it was all about memory and poetry and circumventing abstraction. Somewhere in the West. Could a museum decide overnight to become a non-hierarchical, consensus-driven, dialogue-based collective? Could a konsthall decide overnight to become a dancing school if that's what's really needed in the area? Would any big institution stop grasping for their role in forming what art is (or at least for their role as educated mirrors of today's society)? What would we change then? The same mid-sized and small independent organisations which function more and more as nothing else than CV-builders or practice grounds for the well-meaning ones or the future elites? I am too sour perhaps or rather I have been confronted recently with either monolithic or mythic models so my mind is somewhat shut when it comes to the vast middle ground out there.

Thought exercise: how would a big institution look—say a contemporary or modern art museum—if all of a sudden it became a collective, non-hierarchical entity, with each employee having its equal share of responsibility and benefits, with no one fearing for the safety of their jobs, with a governing body made of every employee and a governing system based on consensus and dissent; while functioning still as an institution, rather than an artistic project, a peculiarity...? My mind often travels to where societies are rebuilt from what was in novels or rather it travels to Octavia Butler's famous trilogy *Xenogenesis*, or Lilit's *Brood*.

Would such an institution be a battle ground? What would happen to its collection/s and archive/s, both already existing and in the future? What would access and support look within such an institution? Would the eventual racist or sexist employees be finally kicked out

of its collective body by consensus or will they just become ‘justiciary’ versions of themselves?

I dreamed once of a place like that—or was it a real place in the capital city of Republic of Moldova? A big, derelict museum now filled to the brim with random stuff pulled out of its vaults and dungeons and hanged in every musty corner. With employees sitting by a campfire in its courtyard.

<sup>1</sup> From Eliza Gauger’s twitter account: “i was in an illegal oakland warehouse art commune a few years ago. ‘hey man the quiet hours are very clearly stated in the house rules, please use headphones’ became a massive mailing list argument. again, i must emphasize this: no one cleaned the kitchen”

<sup>2</sup> (I know at this point I am conflating community, collective, commune—but uh you get where I’m going)

<sup>3</sup> Graeber, David (January 2014) ‘What’s the point If We Can’t Have Fun?’ In *The Baffler* no. 24 thebaffler.com

<sup>4</sup> Dumitriu, Simona (November 2018), ‘Translating Experiences into Space: Pedagogies with and without Money. In *Paletten* #312-313 published in Swedish as ‘Att omsätta erfaren heter i rum: pedagogiker med och utan pengar.’

<sup>5</sup> It is also important for me to stress that Konstnärsnämnden is an extraordinary support system for artists in this country, not only because it has been a crucial lifeline for myself and so many other artists, but also as we now also see this potential collaboration between right-wing and center parties in Sweden working together to present a budget and one can see also how easily these existing support systems can be dismantled. So I acknowledge my own bias here too, in wanting to care for it, protect it yet rethink it at the same time.

<sup>6</sup> SD: Well, in my calculations I was not really thinking about dismantling the structures of support but rather considering the fact that, within an ideal model of the lone applicant with perfect perspectives, a specific model is built, one that does not find a place for deep, long-term collaborations or collective thinking. KBC: Definitely, and I agree, and I am maybe (trying to) also imploring artists to not accept this model as a given and to question this solitude too.

<sup>7</sup> Sorry so much David Graeber in this. Graeber, David and Kuo, Michelle (2012), ‘Another World’. In *Artforum*, Summer 2012. Available here

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Why do I keep imagining Arendt terrorizing me?