

On support structures in art and cultural work

2020 OCTOBER BY JOSHUA SCHWEBEL AND ERNESTA ŠIMKUTĖ

Josh: I have chosen to invite you to have this conversation about support structures because of your invaluable support for my piece, *Accommodations*, and your involvement in the overall preparation of the *Other Rooms* exhibition. I was introduced to you as an intern working for Rupert who was available to help me find used couches in Vilnius and negotiate their purchase in Lithuanian. I was not given much more information about your background, vision, or experience, or about how you would be compensated or credited. Through this conversation I have learned about your significant experience as a cultural worker and our intersecting interests in institutional critique and structural reflection on the prevailing models of arts administration. I wanted to ask you about whether you experience a contradiction in that you are supporting an exhibition about support structures from an invisible, uncredited and unremunerated position?

Ernesta: With this question, you touch upon the issue that many cultural professionals face in their career development, and that is an experience of unequal pay or ‘free’ labour across the cultural and creative industries. Those who can volunteer or do unpaid internships in their early career are often coming from a position of privilege. Before answering your questions, I must admit that there are some privileges in place with my involvement at Rupert as an intern.

When you know that your labour will not be remunerated, the main motivation becomes learning, building networks and thinking of the ways to use this position. On one hand, if interns are treated with respect and are allowed to develop their own ideas or get mentorship, it can be treated as the support for the inexperienced or young practitioners. (I must admit, this way of thinking might be the product of the system itself, as such ‘opportunities’ are often an excuse to decrease support.) On the other hand, as someone who wasn’t able to

do an unpaid internship earlier in my career and volunteered at multiple art institutions without getting fair acknowledgement, I think that this universal institutional practice is on the whole exploitative and unsustainable.

I applied to work as an intern at Rupert because I was curious to learn about the different programmes that they provide both within their local and global position. To answer your question about my experience supporting you and making *Other Rooms*, on a personal level I do not feel invisible or used. The internship is embedded within my MA programme, so I could not get credits without doing a placement like this one and Rupert have credited me as one of the exhibition coordinators. So maybe the attention should shift towards the accepted norm of unpaid internships or traineeships that not only art institutions and companies offer but also to universities, academies and colleges that propagate this culture. I believe that the most effective way to oppose this and other exploitative practices is through activism and collaboration. For instance, in 2018 workers who were members of MoMa Union organised a large scale protest as a response to the institution not providing contracts and a lot of the workers had no job security or low wages. After months of strikes, MoMA eventually negotiated with the union for a museum-wide raise. Another collective action that raised a lot of eyebrows was when in 2019 museum workers around the world shared an open access document stating their salaries online and through this highlighted the vastness of inequality. Speaking of different activist actions and interventions, I was wondering how your work responds to problematic institutional habits. As you work alone most of the time, do you feel supported?

Josh: Yes and no. I attribute my survival as an artist to the public arts funding system in Canada, which has supported my practice and fostered a wider culture of independent, non-commercially dependent art and artist run centres. Because of this base, I can make work that is critical of many hosting institutions, since I can build my practice with more of a buffer from the local discomfort it might produce. So while I have encountered hostility, outright censorship and interpersonal misunderstanding, i.e. I am not always supported by the

institutions that host me, I have the immense privilege of access to an arts funding body and culture of artistic solidarity that sets a precedent of professionalism and establishes the value of my work.

Due to the Canadian funding that I have been awarded I have been able to pursue projects that criticize how funding, or lack thereof, structures the art field. In 2015, as the work I completed while in an artist's residency, I used the total budget allotted to my upcoming exhibition to compensate the otherwise unpaid interns working in the office of the residency administration at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin (*Subsidy*). By compensating the interns, my intervention questioned the normalisation of the incorporation of non-waged labour in the arts, and implicated the residency management within my artwork, and within the process of devaluing their own labour. Through this action I also wanted to examine whether internships in arts institutions are in fact support structures coordinated to manifest learning opportunities to benefit the intern's development as a cultural worker, or if they are a direct expression of hierarchy and class barriers for those who cannot afford to work for free.

Ernesta: Your actions, such as paying interns from the exhibition budget and inviting me to do this interview, are generous and provocative interventions but it makes me wonder what it does for the institutions in countries where economic, social and cultural rights differ. As an artist who works independently, you are not attached to these institutions and your fast reaction to long term issues can shock the system but it does not necessarily achieve long-term positive changes, as the majority of cultural institutions depend on public funding which is often insufficient. As smaller spaces are struggling to survive in the capitalist economy, they are pressured to employ volunteers or unpaid interns. Sometimes I think that until policies change and larger institutions such as MoMa or Tate and other major galleries will be restructured and those in power be held accountable for their exploitative actions, we won't feel a lot of changes in the arts. On the bright side, smaller institutions and independent spaces have power to challenge these institutional habits and in many ways, this is what you are doing within your practice. Do you think actions like these can have an impact long term?

Josh: That's a really good question, and certainly something that I think about often. In the work of trying to hold art institutions accountable there is a need for multiple approaches and strategies. Too many of our institutions, with the larger ones setting the precedent and the smaller or more independent ones resisting despite lower or insignificant budgets, have acquiesced to the exploitative practices demanded for survival in capitalism. I see this devaluation of cultural labour as undermining the political imaginary and practices of myself and many of the contemporary artists they exhibit. My work reflects on what art does and what art institutions do, not only what they represent in the controlled environment of a gallery, but how they apply these representations internally. I challenge institutions to transform their actions and values by addressing my work not directly to the public, but to the administrators, directors and staff of cultural institutions.

My work deliberately operates on multiple registers—the personal, the public, the practical and the symbolic. So while I recognise that the kind of structural change that is needed is still in process, I think that there is also a value in putting the need for these changes under the noses of the administrators capable of making them happen, and I also think that as an artist I have the platform and the responsibility to raise these issues from a different place in the hierarchy, with the additional leverage of the public visibility of an exhibition. This leads to different outcomes than activism and organising, perhaps individual cultural administrators might approach the daily negotiations of their job with more awareness of their own negotiating power to advocate for those with less status, or the work might create chances for greater solidarity amongst working people within cultural institutions.

Ernesta: Artworks also reach a wider public that sometimes is unaware of issues existing in other disciplines or the context in which culture and art is produced. What I also have noticed is that alternative management methods that can have long-term impacts are mainly applied by smaller institutions or self-organised spaces. For example, the Index Art Foundation in Sweden. While it's run by only three or four staff members, they have regular board members and

have formed the Teen Advisory board, which is an important way of including younger voices. The Director Marti Manen and Curator of Learning Emmeli Person invite teens to constructively question how Index is organised, how public funding is distributed and discuss the importance of contemporary art in Stockholm, Sweden and abroad. It not only challenges the vertically oriented management style that we are surrounded by but also prepares future cultural producers to think critically. I am aware that Sweden is different because of the better social security and funding opportunities that artists and institutions receive but I wish more contemporary art spaces and museums would experiment and be open to receive critique. It probably sounds utopian but I think that by adapting new ways of working and unlearning bad habits, we *can* fight classism, racism, ableism, sexism and other forms of oppression.

Josh: I agree. For me the biggest problems we currently face as arts workers have to do with class and access, which intersectionally dovetail with race, gender, and ability. The internalization of unwaged labour normalises a paradigm of entrepreneurship and amateurism that is only sustainable for those with privilege. Who else can afford to work for free and cover their own living expenses for months, or years, as more and more internships lead only to a more prestigious internship, and most emergent cultural spaces operate with no budget. Only those with support from external sources, ie, class privilege, can access paid work in culture if internships and connections are its prerequisites.

Moreover, advocating for the value of cultural labour should be seen as self-interested advocacy on the part of those who are paid for their work in culture. As Leigh Claire La Berge describes in *Wages Against Artwork* (a book I am reading thanks to your recommendation): ‘we do not have a term for the state in which our formal labour is devalued to the point of wagelessness while we are still doing it’ (p. 4). What I mean is that the incorporation of unpaid work within the field actively devalues the labour of those who are paid, since it introduces the presence of qualified people willing to engage and contribute without remuneration. If only institutions and their funders could understand that it is both radical and ultimately self-serving to

pay artists and to pay their staff, that it is so important to compensate artists for their work, to value what we contribute and to help us continue working, and to advocate for artists fees whenever possible. Organising for funding artists and cultural workers is organising for access, since it opens career paths for contributions from people with experiences other than white, cis male middle or upper class privilege, and for an art world that isn't defined by competition and capitalism.

Ernesta: I think that art residencies could be a great way for institutions to learn, exchange and change. You have taken part in quite a number of art residencies, so I am interested whether in your experience they have been well-utilised and supportive.

Josh: I agree that the open-ended possibility of arts residencies have much potential for institutional learning and exchange. The governing premise of a residency should be to offer time to fail to the artists, without expectations of productivity or success, but equally that staff should feel a certain amount of structural flexibility to re-organise around this premise. Of course this is an idealized vision, and interpersonal dynamics require constant negotiations. More difficult, perhaps, is how the worlds of work and art intersect in the management of art. How does the aesthetic influence the management of a residency, and conversely, how does 'professional' work culture constrain the responsibility of managing space and time for artists? In seeking non-hierarchical forms of working, or more horizontal approaches to organising cultural work, does the organisation turn further inwards and forego supporting visiting artists? Or can an experimentally structured institution more effectively intersect with invited artists? These are hypothetical questions that emerge when we reflect aesthetic-idealistic concerns onto structural ones.

In my experience, however, too often residencies model themselves after pre-given institutional structures and metrics, rather than asking the artist what support they need, experimenting with collaboration and collectivity, thinking through horizontal organisation structures, etc. In my mind, failure and non-productive time is not wasted: more is learned from failure than from repeating an already-familiar technique, despite perhaps not producing measurable outcomes.

I understand that residencies are often themselves precarious organisations, dependent on insecure funding, but I regret when arts administrators succumb to the pressures of eliminating risk / producing measurable outcomes. In my experience, the majority of residency programmes have far too many expectations built in, although since these programmes are relatively new, there is effort being made to standardise what is offered, but nonetheless each has had different strengths and weaknesses.

One final question: How would you restructure artists residencies and cultural work to achieve a more supportive, caring and healthy culture?

Ernesta: Haha, it won't be easy to answer this question concisely, but I will give it a shot. You know, I had to do more research on the history of Art Residencies and it seems that since the 90s, artist residencies have become closely linked to the professionalisation and globalisation of contemporary art. It is expected that artist residencies must provide the space that is often difficult to access for artists and curators to work independently or collaboratively. While many residency models exist, there are two types that I want to distinguish: a) residencies that provide space for research and experimentation, and b) spaces focusing on production and presentation of the final product. I guess the choice of residencies depends on what an artist wants to gain. But the fact is that the turnaround of artists in these spaces is fast, and as you mentioned earlier, there are high expectations to produce quality research or artworks in a short period. I am more interested in research and process-based residencies, where artists can experiment and play, and where locality and their position is equally important to address.

In 2009, curator Megan Johnston wrote about Slow Curating, which 'embraces methods to facilitate deep connections to community, locality and reciprocal relationships (between people and between art/objects and audience) and evolves over time'. In the fast-paced art world, where institutions and artists are always trying to stay relevant, any art institutions, including art residency programmes, could benefit from taking and providing time for building connections and

collaboration. This curatorial method has a more caring and sustainable approach towards the art production, collaboration and education. I might be speculating now, but maybe application of this and similar self-reflective methods could remedy the cracks in the system and would create more caring and healthier work culture.