Crosscurrents in Culture

Variant

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Performance Review

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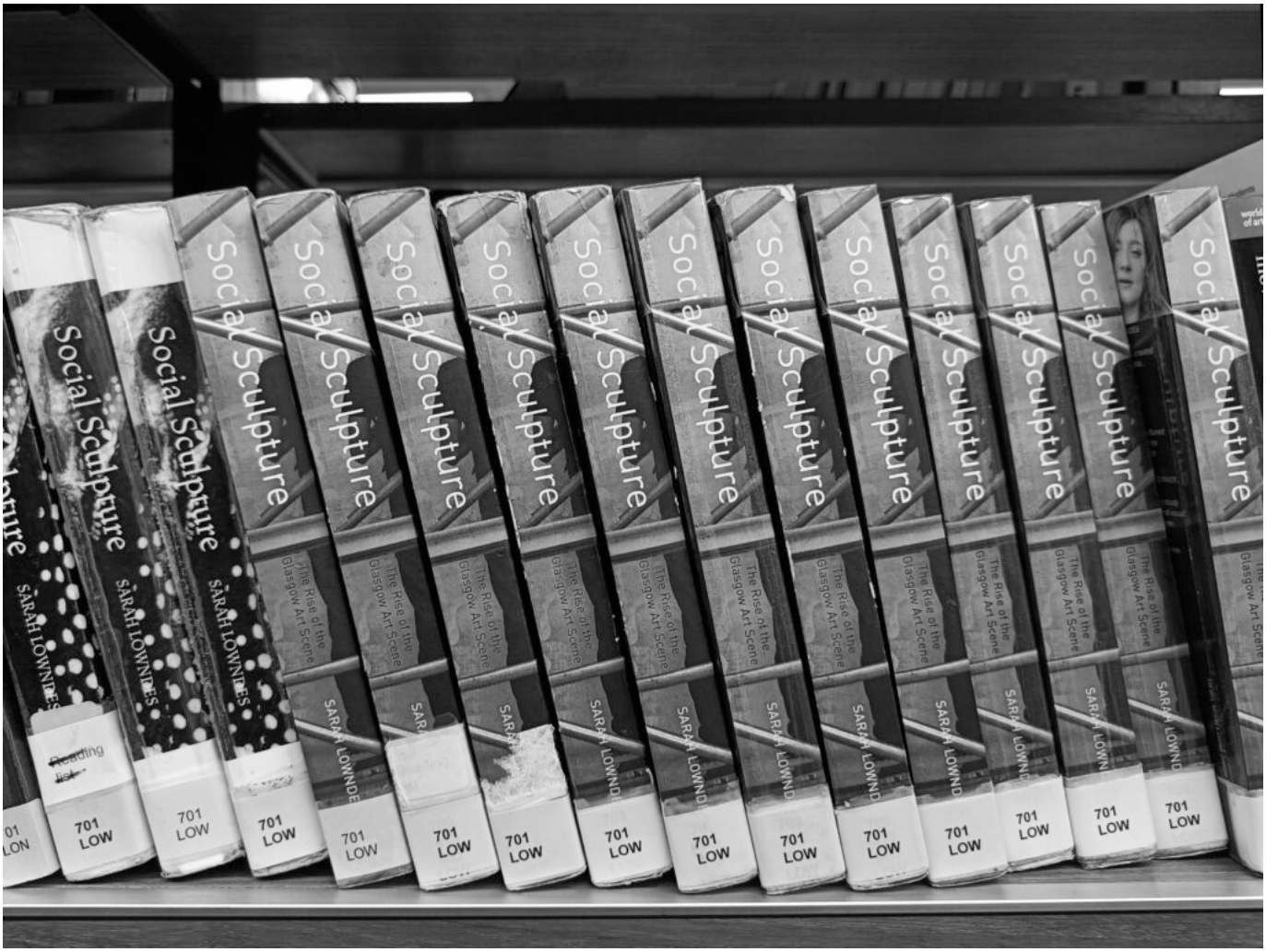

When they hear the word Culture, they reach for their management tools.
Leigh French[1]

No-one I know makes work unless there's a Creative Scotland logo on the poster.

Andy Grace-Hayes[2]

Continuing a tradition of commentary on the subject that has been a hallmark of this publication since its inception, I consider here the options available to self-organised artistic activity in Glasgow presently. The intention is to reflect upon trajectories of professionalisation warned against in these pages in decades past, which I regard as now not only endemic within financially supported activity, but also baked into presentational formats purporting to be informal, or outside the financial operations of an art world proper. A specific focus is the choice made by some involved in programming exhibitions and events, myself included, to willingly limit interactions with either funding bodies or commercial opportunities; a decision that comes at the cost of financial stability or long-term operational prospects. What I want to articulate, albeit from the vested position I occupy in these conversations, is the rationale behind that choice and the perceived risks it mitigates.

The number of enquiries into the subject of artistic labour and its relation to the broader financialisation of culture have continued to grow since *Variant* had its funding withdrawn by Creative Scotland in 2012. One could point to the breadth of conversation generated by the publication of 'Structurally F*cked', a 2023 study conducted into institutional agreements in the UK which has added granular testimony to a longer history of critical reflections on the topic.[3] Surveying overlapping terrain, Artist-Run Initiatives in Britain was a research group studying how external factors have dramatically altered the situation faced by members of longstanding, committee-run gallery spaces. Discussions facilitated by the group as part of the project reflect the pressures faced by younger artists running organisations established in moments when access to forms of social welfare were more readily available, and the cost of living was significantly lower. A striking element of accounts given at an event I attended in November 2023 is the way in which more venerable grassroots institutions change as they have aged, requiring an adaptation, or in certain instances full-scale removal of working practices seen as no longer fit for purpose. In particular, an engagement with constitutional models of artist membership and the custodial maintenance of archives are elements that have been openly questioned in these appraisals.

What also becomes clear in this and other surveys is an as yet ill-defined and sometimes fluid relationship between what is classed as an 'artist-run initiative' (often referred to using the corporatised acronym ARI) and other 'self-organised' projects.[4] There are many points of comparison between the two in terms of scale, programming decisions, and in some instances their use of voluntary labour. However, as the artist and

researcher Rabindranath X Bose observes, 'artist-run initiative' is also 'a term for funders', indicating its applicability to those pursuing more formalised arrangements that in turn might yield subsidy.[5] Such distinctions have a clear utility, in that they allow us to gauge a degree of investment in a projected image of institutional monumentality. Nonetheless, they present a troubling antimony: in order to qualify as artist-run using these criteria an organisation must first be in active dialogue with the state, either through applications for cultural funding or the registration of financial operations. As such, the label is technically not self-assigned, but is rather a mark of legitimacy conferred by the latter.

Locally, debate concerning the recognised thresholds for government sanctioned activity coalesced in January 2025 around Creative Scotland's announcement of Multi-Year funding, and the higher than anticipated quantity of smaller arts organisations that have been included in this new scheme.[6] In many cases, an attempt to qualify for this new avenue of funding has substantially altered how organisations envisage themselves as operating. This has led to an increased need to actively consider the role policy plays in programming decisions.[7] The placement of smaller, artist-run organisations in the same category as major institutions purports to provide a greater degree of stability to those otherwise obliged to request support on a project-by-project basis. In doing so however, this decision will render in even sharper relief the contributions made by those who are and are not in receipt of official support, and will result in an ever greater alignment at a community level with governmental imperatives surrounding sustainability and audience engagement.

From a markedly different perspective, gallerist Jamie Kenyon has recently reflected on the character of alternative spaces in Glasgow (including, it should be stated, one that I am myself involved in programming). Writing in *Frieze*, Kenyon commented:

> A new generation of galleries and artists are finding ways to do world-class projects with increasingly dwindling resources and against a background of over-professionalization and demands on creative practices from funding bodies and a lack of real support for experimentation or sustainability.
>
> The people resisting this institutional capture are, in my view, doing some of the most exciting things in the UK just now. Galleries like Celine, Ivory Tars & Cento and Listen Gallery are beginning to find a different model of how to be a 'commercial gallery' that was not perhaps possible a few years ago.[8]

While this assessment of the current climate feels accurate, and it is flattering to be credited with anything approaching a different model, it is worth examining the presumption that resistance to institutional capture might be defined as 'commercial' by

default. The question that arises is how might organisations who have never sold an artwork be understood as being driven by those principles, much less doing so successfully?[9] One possible answer is that a current lack of financial viability is simply representative of being part way through a process of accruing sufficient cultural capital that might in due course be converted into its economic equivalent. Or in other words, an initial investment of time and resources against subsequent returns.

This is now a conventional logic borne out in a variety of contingent examples formed in the previous decades that have gone on to become significant landmarks, and is hardwired into the narrativised accounts the city understands itself using. Glasgow is consistently characterised as having built a scene from the ground up, constructing itself through the transformation of subcultural energy into internationally validated exports. In this regard, our established commercial and state-funded entities share the same foundational accounts: retooling a strand of Bourdieusian thinking that once served as a critical instrument of the left as a neoliberal rationale. Crucially, whether one considers themselves mercantile or civically minded, this notion of accumulating cultural capital would have us treat our decisions as a strategic address to a more successful version of ourselves, located somewhere in the not too distant future. As opposed to tactical gestures made from a desire to momentarily affect change in the present.

What might be perceived in light of the above examples is a mindset that, both in Scotland and the UK more generally, now acts to condition grassroots activity that is in the process of formation, or that has yet to occur. This mindset presents already choreographed movements towards either the commercial market or state support as the only long-term prospects for those seeking to display visual art. Despite representing markedly different routes to fiscal stability, and arguably opposing poles of a moral dichotomy regarding art and its role in society, both of these 'pipelines' require the acceptance and willing implementation of professional standards not required of those working in more provisional settings. And both, it bears stressing, presume financial recompense indexed against operational costs as an essential pre-condition upon which activity takes place. Neither can countenance that which operates outside those parameters, choosing to regard it as either illegitimate or yet to reach maturity.

The types of project spontaneously occurring in vacant shop units and tenement flats in Glasgow—presently, historically, as of course everywhere else—which apparently contain no such strategic ambitions, appear to run counter to such a zero-sum equation. This naturally prompts a discussion of how this creative substratum might be financially supported, if not through conformance to governmental imperatives, or by an affluent base of collectors accessed through the matrices of international trade. Accusations of

amateurism will inevitably be accompanied by speculation concerning the independent means of those able to operate in this manner. In reality, a lack of external financial support is as much if not more likely to be reflected in a series of factors—including the average age of those able to maintain alternative spaces, the frequency with which they are able to mount projects, or the shortness of an organisation's lifespan—as it is in veiled manifestations of affluence.[10] Sustainable losses are just as likely to be anticipated and incurred by those who believe in art's exceptional value than those who imagine a more concrete form of return. A worldview dictated by a rigid series of checks and balances is unable to fathom how desire can readily outweigh reason. Many simply act on instinct to redress what they regard as absences in a hegemonic order, prior to asking permission from that same order to do so.

How this relates to struggles over appropriate remuneration for visual artists is a matter that cannot be overlooked either. It is imperative to militate for fair pay and the parity of its provision, especially in instances of extreme asymmetry between funded institutions and the precarity of the artists they are entering into contractual arrangements with. Recently published data only reinforces how structurally ingrained this inequity is, and it is an issue that must be urgently addressed. What is perhaps elided in these much-needed campaigns though is that if awarded at appropriate rates, after over a decade of austerity-driven cultural governance and a private market trending towards conservatism, the amount of funds that can be realistically distributed will inevitably fall short of what would be required.

That leaves a stark choice: to either conform to externally imposed imperatives in order to compete for these limited resources, or to abandon such an approach in favour of other, more uncertain and piecemeal arrangements. Waiting for conditions to improve before resuming operations feels naïve. Conversely, there is the sobering prospect that by going it alone organisations may fall prey to another, equally insidious attempt to make visual art independent, and thus no longer requiring the support it deserves. This has long since been a danger, as in protecting a concept of autonomy, we may simply be reinforcing what Andrea Fraser once called "the mythologies of voluntarist freedom and creative omnipotence that have made art and artists such attractive emblems for neoliberalism's entrepreneurial 'ownership-society' optimism." [11]

Responses to this conundrum vary. In the same month that Kenyon's article appeared alongside a number of similar pieces promoting the 2024 Glasgow International Festival of Contemporary Art, an exhibition not included on the official biennial programme was mounted by the Glasgow-based artists Roisin Rowe, Victoria Smith and Isabella Widger in a flat in Govanhill. The title of this exhibition, 'Mary Mary Mary', was

in part a reference to Mary Mary Gallery, a commercial space operating between 2006 and 2019, which had itself been started in a domestic setting by three artists living and working in the city.[12] While Rowe, Smith and Widger's choice of title was to an extent arbitrary and in no way intended as a direct commentary on this previous enterprise—two of these artists were not resident in Glasgow during the period Mary Mary Gallery was in operation, and were only partly aware of its programme—this gesture still speaks volumes about the legacy of self-initiated project spaces and their persistence in the imaginaries of the present. These past exploits remain with us in some phantasmal capacity, and their parodic invocation is a means of reflexively acknowledging this.[13] It is a way to signal an awareness of existing narratives, but also to cast them as a hindrance to be moved beyond.[14]

It is understandable why many younger artists would prefer not to become embroiled in conversations around cultural policy, reserving their energies instead to carve out a meaningful space in which to operate. And it is not my place to speak on behalf of others with divergent but equally trenchant opinions on how remunerated and unremunerated labour in the visual arts have come to relate in the way that they have. What I do feel confident in suggesting however is that two models of grassroots autonomy now share the same space. One is an ersatz version of the other, whose governing logic is predicated on a stable, transactional framework that its historical antecedents could not guarantee. At stake here is what we want from to derive from our shared past: a spirit of independence or an existing architecture to render ever more mannered. My own inclination to eschew this more professionalised artist-run format, and to gravitate towards a patchwork range of things operating on a deliberately provisional basis, is due to a suspicion that the former has been conditioned to speak to the priorities of others before its own.

An exhibition in an artist's bedroom is a gateway that has already—in another place and time—opened onto an art fair booth. Contingent alliances of creative practitioners have many times already, somewhere else, hardened into organisational structures capable of attracting governmental subsidy. It is beside the point whether these outcomes occur in any given instance. They are a set of potentialities now irrevocably bound up in the limited range of presentational formats available to those who find themselves labouring outside of officially validated channels. These are routes to longer term viability that have been staked out for us in advance, but they are also recognised sites of extraction. The aporia that needs to be contended with is how to evade codification within established narratives, remaining active yet resistant to co-option.

No act of institutional critique ever takes place from a point of exteriority. It instead forms part of and contributes to a collective shaping of what our institutions might subsequently become. This is especially pertinent here, as whether an official account acknowledges this or not, the grounds on which it has been established is made up of more than a select number of organisations that it regards as legitimate. It is equally indebted to a groundswell of activity that cannot be so easily apprehended, and which acts as its vital reprimand.

1 Leigh French, 'Contracted Culture', *Variant* Vol.2, No.12, Spring (2001): 26 ↑

2 Andy Grace-Hayes, 'The Faux-Naïve Professional,' *Another Gay Handout*, April 21st (2022). https://andygracehayes.substack.com/p/faux-naive-professionalism ↑

3 Weindustria, 'Structurally F*cked: A Report into Artist's Pay and Conditions,' *a-n*, March 12th (2023). https://www.a-n.co.uk/research/structurally-f-cked/↑

4 See also the more open definition of 'artist-run' activity offered in Chris Biddlecombe, 'Artist-led Organisations in Scotland: Surveying and Mapping of Activity', *Scottish Artist Union* (2023) http://assets.nationbuilder.com/artistsunionscot/pages/1051/attachments/original/1698071171/Artist-Led_Organisations_in_Scotland_Report_041023.pdf?1698071171 ↑

5 Rabindranath X Bose, 'Slippery Questions,' in Nikki Kane, Rabindranath X Bose (eds.), *Where to Begin?: Researching Artist-run Initiatives*, (2025), n.p. ↑

6 See Creative Scotland, 'Multi-Year Funding Outcome Announcement', January 30th (2025): https://www.creativescotland.com/news-stories/latest-news/archive/2025/01/multi-year-funding-outcome-announcement ↑

7 See Crystal Bennes and Tom Jeffreys, 'The State of Arts Funding in Scotland,' *The Penitent Review* , February 24th (2025) https://thepenitentreview.com/2025/02/24/the-state-of-arts-funding-in-scotland/↑

8 Jamie Kenyon, 'Glasgow According to: Jamie Kenyon of 47 Canal,' *Frieze* June 18th (2024). https://www.frieze.com/article/glasgow-according-jamie-kenyon-47-canal ↑

9 One might examine the varied approaches taken by the spaces listed by Kenyon. On one hand, Cento would the same month as these remarks take part in June Art Fair, a satellite of Art Basel, and could be best aligned with this reading. On the other, as a self-described 'grassroots, non-profit organisation' Listen Gallery is committed to acts of mutual aid, and is unlikely to pursue anything resembling a commercial model. ↑

10 It is no coincidence that many of those operating alternative spaces without recourse to funding in Glasgow are now frequently in their late thirties or above, and as such have access to more stable incomes and historic rental agreements. A not inconsiderable number of these individuals have also previously served on committees of Scottish ARIs like Embassy, Market, Rhubaba or Transmission Galleries, and are as such familiar with yet disinclined to employ a similar framework in more recent activity. In this sense,

generational privilege must be acknowledged as a contributing factor, as a destabilisation of living conditions have led to it becoming increasingly difficult for younger artists to replicate these arrangements. ↑

11 Andrea Fraser, 'From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique,' *Artforum* Vol.44, No.1 (2005), 105. ↑

12 Originally located in a 2nd floor flat on Bath Street, and programmed by Sara Barker, Hannah Robinson and Harriet Tritton, Mary Mary Gallery would present early exhibitions by, amongst others, Karla Black, Lili Reynaud-Dewar and Joanne Robertson. From 2007 onwards, with Robinson as sole director, it would become one of the internationally visible commercial spaces in Scotland. ↑

13 Ivory Tars, the gallery space that I co-programme, re-mounted a version of this exhibition in Köln on the invitation of the artist-run gallery Clementin Seedorf as part of *Art Isn't Fair*, a project that took Alan Sekula's film of the same name as its starting point. It bears mentioning that at the conclusion of this project all works remained unsold. ↑

14 As an aside, it is worth remarking here that younger artists appropriating the names of eminent commercial galleries that begun their lives as experimental platforms is nothing new, although this gesture has in Glasgow been largely contained to music groups formed by art school students. Take for example The Modern Institute, the electronic noise act established in 2010 by Richard McMaster and Laurie Pitt. Or the 2006 decision of dance-punk band Shit Disco to temporarily rename themselves after the gallerist Sorcha Dallas in order to perform at the Sub Club, in doing so bypassing council guidelines around profanity on posters appearing in public. ↑

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