

ART

Monthly

No. 443, February 2021 £6 €8 \$9

Jill Magid

Interviewed by Gilda Williams

Art as Evidence as Art

Stephanie Bailey

Looking Back in Anger: Part Two

Morgan Quaintance

Jamie Crewe

Profile by Conal McStravick

Collaboration over Competition

Emma Edmondson and Warren Harper argue that, like lichen, smaller arts organisations should work together in order to survive and thrive.

In 2020 we learnt to live among ruins – simply put, the art world is broken. We have been existing in the debris for a while, and the chasm of inequality continues to grow wider. The Old Waterworks and The Other MA are located on the Thames Estuary at an intertidal zone that is in flux, a place that demands strength for survival and collaboration. We have been gleaning a rich history of creative resistance and ways of working to form new collaborative relationships.

Our collaborative model is lichen-like, an experiment with the natural order of business as usual. Lichen is a specialist at surviving in harsh conditions through collaboration, a role model for small arts organisations like ours. Lichens are a composite organism of two species, algae and fungi. They live together in a mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship sharing moisture and nutrients. They tend to work together in this way when times are tough and resources are scarce.

The starting point for our collaboration came from the estuary; a joint application for a commission from Creative Estuary, a consortium of public sector and cultural organisations across Essex and Kent. We were tired of competing for the limited resources available to us, so we decided to apply together. This was the catalyst, creating a form of mutual aid for both organisations and the artists we work with.

This project, ‘Precarious straits - Survival on Southend’s new coast, Southend-under-Sea’, will include a public exhibition, events, workshops and artist commissions. We have been thinking about the precarity of working in the arts as well as the current climate crisis. At the core of the project sits research from Climate Central, a group of scientists and journalists in the US who argue that by 2050 much of the world’s coastline will be underwater. Under this projection, a large portion of Southend, where both our organisations are based, will be lost to the sea. Our physical spaces lie on disappearing foundations, the land mimicking our organisational statuses.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic struck in March last year, the arts sector has seen an increase in redundancies. Larger organisations have been laying off their most crucial yet precarious workers. Alongside this there has been a rise in projects seeking equity and transparency within the sector, one example being the Department of Accountability (@d.o.a.u.k), which publishes details of ACE-funded National Portfolio Organisation employees’ salaries exceeding £60,000 and specifies the percentage of each organisations’ funding that this represents. From these conditions the rallying cry has risen: there should be no redundancies while institutions are paying some of their senior staff £100,000 or more.

We kept thinking about this disparity; alongside our peers, we are frustrated that some take home a six-figure salary while others struggle to make ends meet. Many of the junior roles in arts organisations are poorly paid, making it particularly difficult for working-class people to maintain a job in the arts, especially in cities where the cost of living continues to increase while salaries stagnate. Additionally, when class



James Ravinet, *Thames Estuary*, 2020



Precarious Straits, promotional video by Gabrielle Milanese for The Other MA and The Old Waterworks, 2021

intersects with disability, gender and race, which it often does, other difficulties come into play. Work as an artist is often supplemented by the jobs that have been hit by redundancies the hardest. This means that family support or strong pre-existing networks are incredibly important for survival.

We are tired. We want the relationships we foster to move away from the neoliberalism which forces us to operate in a way that is hyper-individualised, hyper-competitive, alienated and concentrates on organisational growth. But we also acknowledge that we are not operating outside capitalism and that all need to earn money to survive.

Something that we have initiated, which could be useful for collaborative models, is a shared rate card (Artnotes AM440). All workers, from directors, project managers and artists to educators, assistants and cleaners, get paid the same amount: £150 per day or £18.75 per hour. This is our modest attempt to try to redress the drastic disparities in pay for arts workers. We want to integrate this kind of transparency and fairness further into our organisations. While we acknowledge our rates fall short of Artists’ Union England’s recommendations, this is one step at the start of our collaborative journey. Becoming truly collaborative under capitalism is a process of undoing, unpicking and restructuring. Importantly, it is a way to acknowledge that all work is valued.

Other aspects of this relationship have included sharing spaces, opportunities and funding applications, and also financially supporting one another. These exchanges can also simply provide a space to vent, to share experiences, to read emails – and to write this article. As we know, many small artist-led organisations are run by just one or two people, typically delivering so much more than the resources should allow. This inevitably leads to burnout.

We are setting out to try to strengthen our foundations together. We are under no illusions that what

we are doing is new, but it is timely. Collaboration is a peer sentiment: the sharing of the 2020 Turner Prize; the decision by artists to collectivise the Jarman Awards funding; and the recently formed Solidarity Syndicate in response to ACE Emergency Funding all demonstrate this. Each of these calls for an acknowledgement of shared instability and aims to make things more about collaboration than competition. This way of working acts in opposition to neoliberalism and seems alien, but perhaps it is not so strange when you look towards the natural world, which inspires us as organisations and as organisms.

The largest size that a lichen can reach is that of a dinner plate. We do not need to be an endlessly expanding managerial monolith that does it all. We are learning how to work together for fleeting moments, sharing specialised skills and pooling resources rather than becoming bigger and wider. We have been drawn together and collaborate out of need, like lichen. We operate independently but are partners in crisis. Writer and botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer reminds us that interconnection and mutual aid become critical for survival in a world of scarcity. Funding in the arts is highly competitive and subject to cuts (see 'Lottery Lives' *AM442*), so small arts organisations, artists and curators need to be more like lichens.

There must be something in the seawater. Southend is a seaside town. It is hard to survive here during the winter because work is service-based and seasonal. It is even harder to survive in a Covid-19 summer. But the Southend art scene, though small, is supportive; we merge and emerge and split only to reconnect again later. We share. We influence each other on a hyperlocal scale working with other artist-run visual arts projects, such as the Agency of Visible Womxn, Bas-Arts-Index, Grrrl Zine Fair and Sugar Storm Studio, Southend Borough Council's Beecroft Art Gallery and our two local NPOs: Focal Point Gallery and Metal. We share opportunities, resources, ideas. We teach together, we talk, we support, we do not compete. Our bonds have grown stronger in perilous times. For this fleeting moment, we are all lichen-like.

We are very aware that the collaboration between our organisations was born of a problem. This means we may not need to collaborate in quite the same way in the future. When resources are plentiful, the algae and fungi of lichens do not combine in a petri dish; instead, they happily share the same space like room-mates. In a small town such as Southend, resources are often scarce. The art world here is a petri dish, funders often being our feeders. If scarcity is the order of the day then we must mimic lichens, acting as smaller bodies/organisms working together here and there rather than endlessly expanding.

We don't know what future problems there may be, but we will be ready to adapt. This is not a how to manual, simply a speculative call and response, mapping the terrain of Southend through collaboration over competition, transparency and fairness over exclusion. We are learning, always. We will get things wrong but, as artists, curators and makers, we know failure is part of the process. Like the lichen we will lay dormant until needed again, in whatever form.

Emma Edmondson is an artist and director of The Other MA (TOMA), Southend-on-Sea.

Warren Harper is a curator and director of The Old Waterworks, Southend-on-Sea.

Adapting to the Pandemic

Lauren Velvick reports on how three organisations that support experimental and cross-disciplinary work have developed new ways of programming in response to the Covid-19 crisis.

In the midst of a profound crisis, how can arts organisations operate humanely and programme with relevance? This is not a question with an easy solution, nor is there any recipe for programming success in the midst of a pandemic. The three organisations profiled here – Cafe Oto, Tusk Music festivals, and Berwick Film and Media Arts Festival (BFMAF), which share a longstanding commitment to experimental and cross-disciplinary work – have attempted to bridge the crisis with new adaptations and approaches to arts programming. The circumstances in which they have been operating this past year expose a deeply inequitable and unsustainable cultural terrain; previously obscured priorities have been exposed across the industry and organisations are having to reassess their public presence on a structural level. These three organisations, however, share a desire to destabilise hierarchies, both in terms of working practices and in how work is curated, yet this ethos is borne out in very different ways through their programming choices in terms of form, content and delivery.

Oto, Tusk and BFMAF have always operated on the relative fringes, and are dependent on both public funding – with all the administrative overhead this entails – and ticket sales. During the current crisis they have pursued commissioning, the distribution of new work and the hosting of live performance in ways that take into account audiences' changed circumstances. While it isn't helpful to pit different types of artist or organisation against one another in a competition over who has had it toughest, it is notable that these organisations' pre-pandemic programmes were dominated by the kind of public events that have been rendered impossible since the pandemic hit the UK in March 2020. Previous iterations of the Tusk and BFMAF festivals, which are based in the North East of England, involved audiences gathering to experience audio-visual work together, whereas east London's Cafe Oto is primarily a performance venue. This means that in order to sustain the character and quality of their programming, if not the exact form, their commissioners and producers have had to consider what it is about their approach that must endure, and what has been revealed to be arbitrary.

The Tusk Festival, which is usually hosted by Sage Gateshead, for its 10th edition last year became Tusk Virtual, with events streamed online over a two-week



Tori Kudo, *Archive*, 2020, video

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Jill Magid, *Tender*, 2020
public artwork

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www.artmonthly.co.uk
twitter.com/artmonthly
facebook.com/artmonthly
instagram.com/art_monthly_uk

ISSN 0142 6702

Art Monthly is published ten times a year

Subscriptions

subs@artmonthly.co.uk
Current rates online - digital
subscriptions start at £9.
Call or email with payment details,
or buy online artmonthly.co.uk/buy

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Published by Art Monthly Foundation,
Registered Charity 1173171, Company
Number CE 010907. All editorial,
advertising and subscription enquiries to
Art Monthly, 12 Carlton House Terrace,
London SW1Y 5AH, +44 (0) 20 7240 0389,
info@artmonthly.co.uk. Printed in
Great Britain by S&G Print Group,
Goat Mill Rd, Dowlais, Merthyr Tydfil
CF48 3TD. Distribution: Central Books
Ltd, Freshwater Rd, Dagenham
RMS 1RX, +44(0)20 8525 8800,
orders@centralbooks.com.

The views expressed in Art Monthly
are not necessarily those of the publishers
or editors. The electronic version of Art
Monthly is available on the Art Index
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Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

