



History(s)
of
MEANTIME

MEANTIME

FOREWORD
Charlotte Cullinan

History(s) of MEANTIME charts the progress of the small and experimental artists space conceived, run and organised by Sarah Bowden. The story encapsulates and describes the provisional and contingent nature of the project and smaller intricacies folded into the wider socio-political issues and values of its time. MEANTIME takes an existing building in Cheltenham more-or-less as a readymade, and re-uses its historical function as a workshop.

The MEANTIME project seems to me to embody and apply a feminine and non-competitive approach to the understanding of making art. Rather than being un-categorisable I regard the MEANTIME project (taking capital letters to their utmost limits of acceptability – we are usually told to “lay off” them) as a chance to ‘collapse’ other spaces or ‘replay’ other minor art events in my mind – many of which are mentioned in Chris Kraus Semiotext(e) publication *Where Art Belongs*. I read Sarah’s ideas concerning ‘knowledge through practice’ as an extension of artistic research – a practice that defines art as its object in one way or another.

In *History(s) of MEANTIME* Sarah’s description of the MEANTIME project leads us through such an approach as she gives detailed accounts of related projects and references including Hakim Bey’s *Pirate Utopia*, encouraging us to “reach too far”. With the mention of Bas Jan Ader’s practice of falling through trees, Sarah evokes a sense of theatricality and staging of events, so that a trip to Falmouth becomes a kind of crazy meals-on-wheels, and there is a palpable sense of Shakespearean post-tragedy in the description of Sarah drinking a bottle of wine at an unattended film screening having just won an award. I enjoyed the deadpan hilarity in much of the description – the “underwhelmed” local MP’s visit and the town meeting poster that asks us ARE WE OK?

This publication recalls events which unfolded over seven intense years, identifies their philosophical implications and future potentials, and includes the voices of people new to the project alongside those of participating artists. Helen Frosi’s introductory essay evokes a passionate rallying cry for independent art spaces and artists. An in-depth polemic by artist Kate Lepper questions the complexity of MEANTIME’S relationship with artists’ labour. Martin Wooster’s involvement in the early development of MEANTIME helped locate a position that was purposefully ‘unformed’. In his text, ‘The Impossible Other’, he reflects on MEANTIME in the context of wider political and philosophical debates. In ‘Writing as Occupation’, artists Neil Chapman and David Stent have taken the performative and improvisational approach to their MEANTIME residency of 2012 that explored how art and ideas occupy public contexts, and have applied it here to their writing as artwork.

I never got to visit the MEANTIME space, and *History(s) of MEANTIME* allows me to understand it at a distance, like a radio play. Thank you Sarah for allowing us to enter through this account.

June 2021

MEANTIME: a necessary making-with

Helen Frosi

1 Nan Shepherd, excerpt from 'The Living Mountain'

*Knowing another is endless. [...] The thing to be known grows with the knowing.*¹

2 Helen Frosi, adapted from 'Of Square and Oval Windows'

*Let us begin then. Right here. Let us unlearn what we know and explore what it is to think and to be in collaboration with this new world we find around us... A new world that constitutes many cells and many bodies, and within that myriad universes...*²

Saturday 5th May 2007 was an auspicious day. It saw the opening, or blooming into being, of MEANTIME, a concept, site and locus for creative thinkers and doers to ponder, agitate and reflect on new models of bringing forth. This fruiting body formed over time and not without challenge or frustration stemming from contemporaneous socio-cultural, economic and political systems and the stickiness of pecuniary dependency.

At the nexus between art and life, resilience and resistance, community, and cultural production MEANTIME challenged economies of attention and worth, questioned established epistemological and ontological orders and resisted fixed states and hierarchical structures by purposefully embracing a fugitive position, a state of contingency and a civic surface both fluid and permeable.

An historic workshop nestled at the edge of Oxford Passage, Cheltenham, pinpointed the unexpected site of MEANTIME's occupancy. Over the 2,610 Earth days that marked MEANTIME's lifespan, its workshop walls – already primed by the negotiations and consequences of previous tenants³ – worked itself transparent,⁴ porous and highly resonant.

3 Note the Stone Tape Theory and notions of place memory: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stone_Tape

4 A nod to Nan Shepherd writing in her chapter Being in 'The Living Mountain': "one walks the flesh transparent. But no metaphor, transparent, or light as air, is adequate. The body is not made negligible, but paramount. Flesh is not annihilated but fulfilled. One is not bodiless, but essential body."

5 Read on philosophical dualisms here: https://www.informationphilosopher.com/problems/one_or_many

Over time, MEANTIME absorbed, responded to and sang in response to the atmosphere, lifeforce and animated matter of its current residents, transient visitors, air currents laced with water vapour, bacterial plumes and pollen waves.... solar radiation, imperceptible geological shifts and other vibratory beings worked at its surfaces. In this, MEANTIME troubled the entrenched philosophical concern of the one and the many.⁵

As host (in its every sense), MEANTIME nested and nurtured activities from exhibitions, film screenings and live performance to community forums and workshops. In a walking analogy, one would note the journey came before the destination in that the process of production held forth; the cultural object was perhaps only there for critiquing and troubling presumptions. Residencies and multifaceted projects interrogated the assumed singularity of the individual, relying on the warmth and promethean friction of collective activity and collaboration. Flipping notions of the internal and the external, there was always a stirring, a process of fermentation. Entering into the portal of MEANTIME was always a speculation, an exchange and a stepping out into territory unknown, or renewed.

In a responsive sociality propagated and supported by nurturing structures necessarily polymorphous, symbiotic⁶ and sympoietic (making-with), MEANTIME breathed as vibrant matter, its complex body shimmered with vital materiality, co-constitutive of the ecology around it.⁷ If we imagine MEANTIME as a body with a pulmonary system, its interchange with the environment around it and the many-layered context in which it was enmeshed, was what kept it fugitive, provisional and ambiguous, and yet by the same token, vital, nimble and dynamic.

Under the microscope MEANTIME could never be atomised, split into constituent parts. Being not quite something or another, an interstice between and always becoming, MEANTIME, would of course crumble if pinned down or held in the hand. This interconnection between the vibrational relation of space, place and what we might call bodies was not limited to the skeleton of the hosting architecture: the workshop. This proliferated body became company (companion, one who eats bread with you) to be shared, and appreciated across time-space, always in communion.

What unfolded from this intense time and site of gathering was a symbiogenesis⁸ of sorts. A synergy, in close relation, of lively matter in relay and mutual exchange with the social relations, political pressures and cultural outlets that had both created and undone its milieu. This response to ever-shifting circumstances has been an unravelling, a re/genesis and continuity for subsequent projects and community activity.

MEANTIME has never been a discrete object. It is an organism that inexorably extended itself. Its end is but the necessary beginning of another. Vaporous, proliferated, entangled and ultimately inseparable.⁹ The energy that brought it initially into being might not now be seen, but then *what is essential is invisible to the eye*.¹⁰

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Across subsequent pages meanders an elliptical history of MEANTIME, in multilogue with multiple actors across its span.

You are warmly invited to delve deep, dally a little, ponder on and be active within the meanwhiles of MEANTIME. In this reading, be in the moment, not to categorise or settle on a fixed definition of what MEANTIME was, but instead to reinvigorate its multitudinous, sonorous and untetherable becomings.

You have an active part – take MEANTIME’s spores and blow them into the wind...

6 Further information on Lynn Margulis and symbiosis: <https://theconversation.com/symbiosis-and-cell-evolution-lynn-margulis-and-the-origin-of-eukaryotes-87220>

7 Note: “If matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimised, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated.” In Jane Bennett, ‘The Force of Things: Steps Towards an Ecology of Matter.’

8 Linking “threads of biologies, arts, and activisms for multispecies resurgence,” read further on sympoiesis, in Donna Haraway, ‘Staying with the Trouble’: Making Kin in the Chthulucene: <https://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/27/chapter-abstract/97667/SympoiesisSymbiogenesis-and-the-Lively-Arts-of?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

9 For theory on nonlocality and attention to difference without presupposing separation, see: Denise Ferreira da Silva, ‘On Difference without Separability’: https://issuu.com/amilcarpacker/docs/denise_ferreira_da_silva

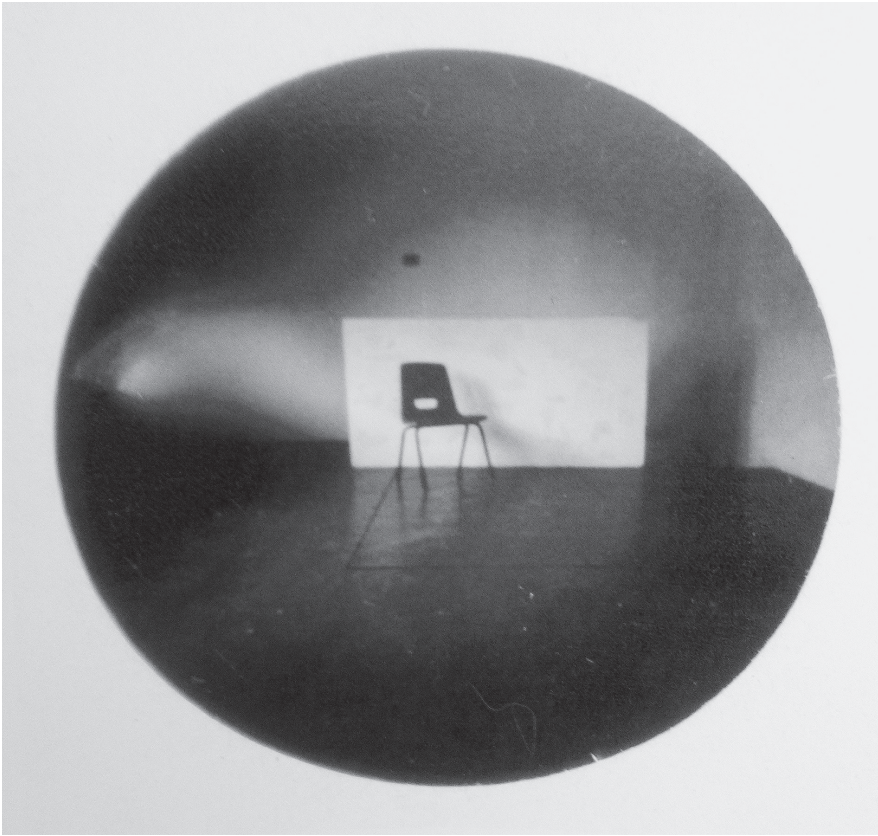
10 Saint-Exupéry, in *The Little Prince*.

History(s) of MEANTIME

I

This document sets out to explore the dynamics of practice that established the experimental art-space MEANTIME, to create a more comprehensive understanding of the context and conditions that affected the arc of its existence and reflect on its catalysing influence and legacy of informal knowledge and spontaneity. The document will provide no definitive conclusions, in part because the nature of the project resisted fixed categorisation; a radical opportunist, it adapted and reformed at will. Instead, the document intends to initiate a dialogue that calls on some of the people who were present in the realisation of MEANTIME, who were part of the dreaming, to share their thoughts, memories and mis-remembrances; no single truth, many truths. Others have taken the request into new lines of thought and enquiry. Each section reflects on aspects relating to the *idea* of the project, largely without reference to individual residencies or projects that took place, which are documented elsewhere.¹ This document has provided an opportunity to reinhabit a moment in time, if a moment can last for seven years. Part review, part revision, part exposition, this is a story about a space in time.

Sarah Bowden



Lynda Whitehouse, 25A Oxford Passage upper floor, from a series of portraits, 2014



2

I arrived in Cheltenham in 1998 to study at the art college in Pittville. At the time of my graduation, the town's local art centre and studios, The Axiom, had recently closed due to financial mismanagement. I asked around to find the group attempting to reopen it and joined them. We worked for a number of years advocating for the centre to raise capital funding, however Cheltenham Borough Council (CBC) took the decision to sell the Winchcombe Street site and the group ceased campaigning. A couple of us continued looking for buildings that could become studios and exhibition spaces, inspired by places like Stroud Valleys Artspace, where I'd had a studio for a while.

Sometime later, and still looking, I noticed some interesting storage facilities behind the Lower High Street, and tracked down the owner, a local shopkeeper and landlord. He dismissed the water-logged storage facilities and showed me another building, through an alley around the corner, then in use as the site-office for a new retail development on Cheltenham's former brewery. Mike, the building's owner, was keen I buy the place off him, for a good price. I organised to take on a rental lease. By the time I moved in, Mike had sold the building to his friend Ken who was keen to maximise its commercial potential. He accepted what I was able to muster with the support of the Arts Development Officer at CBC, Paul McKee, whose budget covered the first six months' rent. It was 1 April 2007. The builders left a hard hat and a faulty ladder.

The building occupied two stories roughly 45 square metres each. The upper floor was light and open with exposed beams and two sets of windows facing east and west at the front and back of the building. Downstairs there were no windows but two sets of arched double doors that opened to the street. The lower floor had been divided into an office, toilet and meeting room when remodelled as a site-office, stud-walled and plasterboarded throughout, painted magnolia and carpet-tiled. Outside there was no paving and the building fronted directly onto Oxford Passage, a narrow cul-de-sac off the north stretch of the Cheltenham ring-road that attracted traffic looking to cut through to the high street. Opposite stood the backside of the new Brewery complex: offices and apartments, their picture windows with rear views of Bennington St and parking bays.

25A Oxford Passage had no official name, number or postcode. It was one of two adjacent buildings, around 200 years old, both workshops connected to the rear of terraced houses in the parallel road, Bennington Street. Unofficially it took the 25 from Bennington Street, occupied by J. & R. Printers.



During Adam Burton's residency project in February 2008, we began talking to the printer, Roy Harris. Roy had been working in Bennington St for over 30 years and would make letterpress publications for different projects with us for the next year or so. They were part of his trade. 25 Bennington St was completely unmodified since it was first built in the mid-1800s. We discovered that the boarded-up trap-door in the floor of 25A was a brick-lined tunnel that connected to the cellar of the print shop.

When he retired in 2009, Roy asked if we could crack open the plasterboard that covered the back wall of the ground floor project room at 25A. Behind the plasterboard was a door and small covered passage leading to 25 Bennington Street. This was the way the printing presses had gone in. They trolled them out and the scrap merchant craned the giant presses onto the flatbed lorry. Roy wasn't sentimental

about leaving, he was pragmatic, and it was a final revelation to see the building as it once functioned: porous, an extension, a workplace.

JULIET MACDONALD The history and layout of the building (with its subterranean tunnel to the print workshop) was significant to the work I made at MEANTIME. I became slightly obsessed by a crack in the concrete floor of the downstairs room. The crack led to a locked hatch. My project was concerned with a buried history, that of a particular chimpanzee, Alpha, who was a laboratory animal in Florida in the mid-20th century. The residency enabled me to take the project out of storage in my attic and to physically work it out, testing various arrangements of objects, drawings and texts in order to graphically retrace aspects of Alpha's life. I wished to investigate her shifting status as 'almost human' and to recreate her part in a drawing experiment.

The dimensions of the windowless downstairs room were equivalent to those of a standard animal cage at the laboratories. That became a site in which to consider her stark living quarters, and more generally, the enclosure of experimental animals, and our own sublimated animality. The upstairs space was comparatively light, airy and open, and lent itself to thinking about Alpha's child-like status when she briefly lived in a scientist's home. I created a domestic and study space here and imagined Alpha emerging from the archives and swinging from the rafters.



It felt urgent that the building, the space, should be named in order to exist. And that the name should refer to temporality, something that sounded provisional, something open and ambiguous. It felt like a project that hovered above the town, a project suspended in its own time and space. There were no reference points to the space in the town. When people found it, they couldn't believe it was there. In some ways the name determined the project: nominative determinism. At some point I grew to dislike the name; it began to sound apologetic. People on the outside struggled to understand what MEANTIME was, what it stood for, what it did; as a name it was both too abstract and too suggestive. I don't remember why I went for all-caps.

RUPERT HOWE You say you don't know why you went for ALL CAPS when styling the name. I'll hazard a guess. Because it made the name appear as an object? Capitalised it becomes more obviously a sequence of letters rather than a word with an already fixed meaning. From there MEANTIME can come to stand for whatever you want.

DOMINIC THOMAS I think it must have been the 'farewell' show - *Where Were We?* - maybe, to which, as a past contributing artist, I was invited to submit a work; you'll remember better than me. Being stressed and distracted by many things not art I emailed an A4 pdf with just the letters NOTIME in what I hoped was the right font.

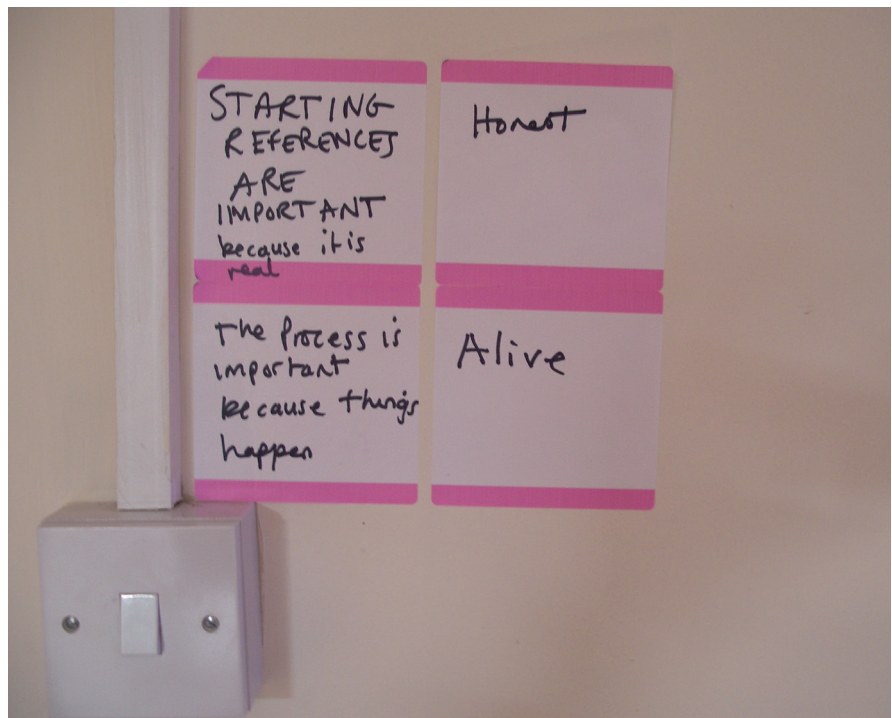
'People on the outside struggled to understand what MEANTIME was, what it stood for, what it did' - but this is the

trouble with trying to invent a different way of being. People like things that fit the dominant narrative. We have been trained to understand the world beyond our private lives as fitting into simple categories like employment, shopping or entertainment. And yet from my inside/outside perspective MEANTIME seemed to embrace a wide and diverse 'programme of artists' presentations, discussions, live music, curated film screenings, and so on'.

MEANTIME launched with an implicit question: how would Cheltenham, the town, its people and institutions, engage with an experimental space for artists? There was no long-term strategy. It was conceived as a temporary proposition, to be open and responsive. This was both a pragmatic and a critical decision. There were no groups or scene to

support a gallery for contemporary art: art students graduated and moved away, and I didn't know of any communities of artists in Cheltenham, nor in Gloucester, only in Stroud, 15 miles away. The few artists I knew I leant on enormously. Plus I had young children whose lives the project, the building, the work, had to fit around. It was going to take time.

RUPERT HOWE Having personally moved to Stroud in 2006 with an idea of connecting with an artistic community - and almost immediately doing so - it was interesting to then discover Cheltenham didn't have something similar going on. The first times I visited MEANTIME it wasn't clear how it was going to evolve, but Sarah seemed very clear-sighted. Though I do remember meeting her son Dylan - who was around 10 at the time, I think - and wondering how she was going to balance family life with this new project. But one of the great things about MEANTIME was that it made the boundary between artistic practice and so-called real life more permeable.



Helen Hardaker residency, 2007

Two decades earlier I had been a squatter and activist in south London, organising collectives, demos, zines, events. Something in the self-determinacy of these projects resonated and I began to see MEANTIME as an extension of that time, an offshoot germinating under the right conditions, at an angle to existing structures. I drew on squatter methodologies and the creation of intentional communities, spontaneous environments, and people-made places in formulating its mission. MEANTIME was a form of direct action, a commons, a thought-experiment, a temporary autonomous zone:² open, permissive and hospitable. Trying things out to see what happened; saying yes to whatever came along.

RUPERT HOWE It somehow seemed appropriate that Oxford Passage was a dead-end street. Somehow 'off the map'. What with Sarah's background in radical LDN, which I was only dimly aware of at the time, and the building's abraded exterior it now gives the whole period in memory a Laura Oldfield Ford 'edgeland' quality. I also agree that the scale of 25A made finding new purposes seem possible, achievable. That dim downstairs room with the double-doors? Make it into a camera obscura.

DOMINIC THOMAS Coming originally out of the Hackney squat scene and then taking on various empty and abandoned buildings in Stroud and Gloucester for the making of art, 25A came as a seamless but welcome development. Another empty but resonant space for the imagination. I made it into a camera obscura for Gavin McClafferty's ...? group show. Ah yes, thought it was you!

JULIET MACDONALD Your background in activism and squatting seems like a significant part of this history. MEANTIME was grounded in an understanding of improvised ways of living, acting and questioning established orders of knowledge.

At the same time as setting up MEANTIME, the collective *a.group*, comprised of myself, Dominic Thomas and Rupert Howe, were attempting to locate an artistic practice appropriate to the time we were living in. This was, amongst other things, a time of intractable world conflict reverberating to the low hum of the failing New Labour project. *a.group* employed negotiation, discussion, dispute, debate and contradiction as practice. Our first outing began and ended at MEANTIME, a road-trip to take part in a weekend of live art events in Falmouth. On the way we talked, wrote, sang, bought food, swapped glasses and collected flowers on the motorway verge, a lived experience forensically recorded. Once at the venue and framed within that context, the intention was to replay the documentation and leave space around the table for people to join us in conversation, a case of getting ourselves into a situation to see what happens.

Much of this activity was influenced by Jan Verwoert's publication on Bas Jan Ader, *In Search of the Miraculous*, particularly the passage where Verwoert discusses Ader's technique of 'bringing about a decision by provoking a crisis'.

Following the logic of the crisis, the practice of getting yourself into a situation is about creating a situation of contingency. Basically, there is no need to climb up this tree, no one told Ader to do it, just as no one can tell an artist what to do. So what do you do when anything goes and nothing matters? You get yourself into a situation which is bound to lead up to a point of no return, where nothing goes anymore and everything matters, be that alone at sea or high up in a tree.³

Although Verwoert here was discussing Ader's practice of falling from trees and his fatal Atlantic crossing, the idea produced a context for collectively exploring notions of contingency and failure as resources for practice. Ours was what Charles Esche might call a 'modest proposal',⁴ a model of small-scale critical engagement with existing conditions through mechanisms of improvised exchanges. *a.group* maintained an indeterminate and fluid position towards artistic production, examining the complex nature of a collective practice, hierarchical structures within the context or site of production, and the conditions of authorship and spectatorship as an extended, or suspended narrative.

JOHN WALTER I never heard that quote. Brilliant. I can definitely relate to that in my own practice, from crisis to crisis – I induce these things, which you might call outcomes, as a way of visualising the invisible work that is going on in a continuum.

² <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/hakim-bey-t-a-z-the-temporary-autonomous-zone-ontological-anarchy-poetic-terrorism.a4.pdf>

³ Jan Verwoert, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 2006, p.28

⁴ https://www.academia.edu/2450774/Modest_proposals_or_why_the_choice_is_limited_to_how_the_wealth_is_to_be_squandered_



A description of a road trip to Live Art Falmouth (LAF), June 2007.
 Fellow travellers Sarah B, Rupert Howe, Dominic Thomas.

THE STATE OF AN ENTRY HERE

Domestic, the original meeting, suggesting a group of collaborative approaches, and invited Sarah B, Celia Glyn, Rupert Howe, Connor Oliver and Laura Tripp to participate in a collective project. Sarah B initially took up the invitation and she and Dominic proposed an advance which included the following note regarding what the approach might be:

The form of the work consists of the following elements:
 1. A collective of artists, writers, designers, musicians, dancers, filmmakers, etc.
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 3. A collective of artists, writers, designers, musicians, dancers, filmmakers, etc.
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This was intended to operate as a framework rather than a constraint, though it quickly became clear we were not going to do things in quite the way intended. It was a point of departure, a starting point, a place to begin, a place to explore, a place to experiment, a place to play, a place to learn, a place to grow, a place to change, a place to become.

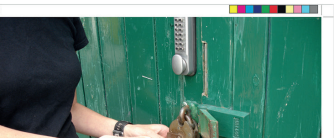
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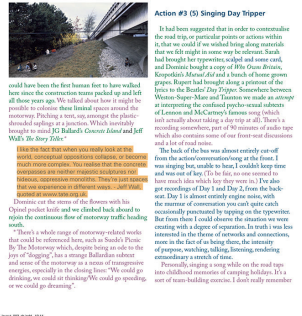
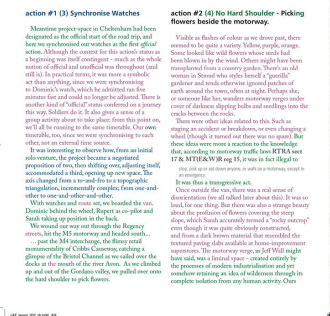
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a.group document, unpublished, that interweaved discussions, journeys and references, 2008

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 In his text from 2009, *Maybe it would be better if we worked in groups of three*,⁵ Liam Gillick states: 'The discursive is the only structure that allows you to project a problem just out of reach and to work with that permanent displacement.' The thing with *a.group* was that the problem was unnamed, indeterminate. In fact the problem was art-making itself, and so the discursive in reproducing itself, for its own sake, took a trajectory that spiralled inwards, and in 2009 activity was indefinitely deferred.

⁵ <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/02/68497/maybe-it-would-be-better-if-we-worked-in-groups-of-three-part-1-of-2-the-discursive/>

RUPERT HOWE / DOMINIC THOMAS

It's funny when you see yourself named in a document. You start to think, Was that me? Was that me? Or another 'me'? Then you start to think about what happened, how you experienced it and what your place was in that experience. The thing about recording experience is the way it attempts to fix things in time and space. Even though ostensibly the 'groups' collective practice was about recording the minutiae of our own discursive and improvised activities, ultimately nothing was fixed and virtually no trace was left. The thing about using failure as artistic practice is that you are bound never to really succeed... Yes, though as an experience travelling to Live Art Falmouth in June 2007 was also a lot of fun 'in the moment'. I'd never really lived art before so the whole thing felt a bit like taking a holiday while high on relational

aesthetics. Also Dom's well-travelled white VW camper van was a bit like MEANTIME on wheels. Somewhat precarious but adaptable and a place where creative things could just happen. It was also surprisingly reliable – it never broke down. I particularly remember being on the M5, Sarah's typewriter tapping away in the back. I had a portable Sony tape recorder with me and began recording bits and pieces. Road noise, conversations, more road noise. I have that tape somewhere. The Liam Gillick text is also a key reference point for me. And re-reading it, still is. That sense of contingency being integral to the 'work'. Also the opening quote from Philippe Parreno: 'Some people are the motor of the event...' Was this Sarah? Working to move things along, sometimes in the background like a visitor 'observing the party' (Parreno again), but always present and a part of whatever was happening.

9
 Collective production, collaborative working, the focus and enquiry of *a.group* created a context in relation to conceptual practice that directly informed the development of MEANTIME. It led to the formation of a curatorial practice investigating the function of art in a social reality, asking questions of artistic methodology, production and presentation, examining how and why art is made and shared. Knowledge through practice. The experimentation at the heart of the project extended to artists with an open-ended invitation to work with not-knowing, to try out new ideas and processes.

I remember talking a lot about collaborative working as art practice around this time, though it didn't always work. For instance, when Sarah writes about 'the collective *a.group*', I think, Was that really the name? Did we ever formally decide on 'a.group' as a name for whatever it was we were doing? But in the end, it didn't matter since things seemed to happen anyway.

Early on it became clear MEANTIME was to be a site of production, rather than presentation, an offer of time and space for speculative or negotiated outcomes. This made sense of the building's historical function as workshop, it made sense of the discursive framework, it made sense of holding or occupying space. It also allowed for a process of being in and moving through a particular space, and of hanging around as a form of production. Artists would work to a proposed project with outcomes diverging, dissolving or occasionally remaining stable to original intentions. My role would shift from residency to residency to engage in the context around different artistic processes. For some the experience was cathartic, for others working through their practice was a kind of critical reckoning and they resolved never to make art again.

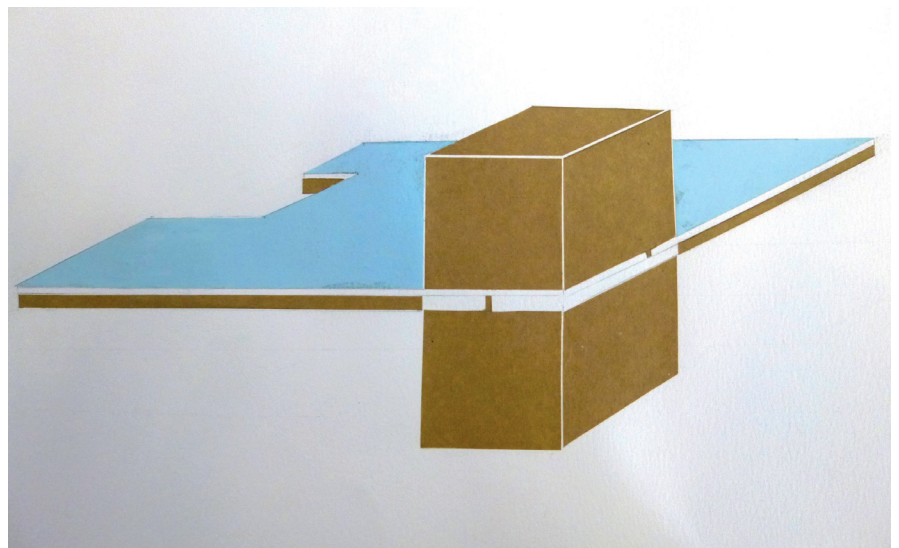
ELAINE FISHER My first experience with MEANTIME was during an MA Residency in March 2014. I submitted a brief to explore new ways of working (substituting photography with drawing and collage to research and remember form from the inside out) and examine, as form and space, the structures and supports that made MEANTIME a platform for artists and artistic practice.

The installation I created for the end of residency exhibition was a triangulation of my investigations in which the three-dimensional fabric and space of MEANTIME (floor boards with plaster-cast model of the imagined space between) and the two-dimensional documentation of its projects (the same space collaged using promotional material from MEANTIME's past residencies) pointed towards a fourth dimension, a video work in which the experiential aspects of MEANTIME were explored.

Positioned inside the cavity of a boarded-up window, looking into the building 'as if' from the outside, the video records and shows, on a seemingly never-ending loop, the opening and closing of a work space (the window cover dropping down to form a cantilevered desk) each day, between each residency, between MEANTIME's identities as working space and gallery.⁶

11

For this informally produced practice to have any relevance MEANTIME had to build a community around the work. Audiences weren't a given; there was and continues to be a conspicuous underdevelopment of the visual arts in Cheltenham's cultural infrastructure. It was slow-going. In those first few months, people attended events in tragically small numbers. On 8 May 2008, during a series of events commemorating the legacy of May '68, I received notice from the Arts Council that my first application for a year-long programme was successful. That evening was scheduled a screening of *Society of the Spectacle*. No one came. I opened a bottle of wine and watched the film.



Elaine Fisher, 2014

MARTIN WOOSTER MEANTIME fought its battles against the rising tide of capitalism's production of images, which in reality was never just a retreat from the madness of capitalism's hyper-activity but a necessity to form a resistance against being the best participants in its game. If capitalism continues to champion the need to maintain the inner peace of non-thinking our resistance had taught us to concentrate on those unsettling forces, whatever the risks of this operation, because to

choose to be radical in the search for freedom already knows that not-knowing lies at the very heart of thinking and necessarily leads thought into the night. Thus, to embrace negativity is not to revel in the nihilism of our age busy contracting the political space in its destructive reproduction, but to discover in its performative use a means to open a different path of freedom, both individual and collective, and as such one less vulgar, less all too human.

⁶ <https://youtu.be/tyyA35v8vkU>

Finding allies in musicians, cine buffs, lecturers, students, people looking for people, people wanting to perform or show their work, people looking to get involved in a collective endeavour, the community gradually expanded. Visits and conversations with Peter Stiles, visual arts officer for the Arts Council in the south west, plus support through the former ALIAS scheme – a hugely important advisory service for the development of artist-led groups in the SW – provided back-up, resources and shared knowledge. This worked as a kind of brace for the climb; the more it was discussed the stronger the project emerged.



Kate Lepper residency, 2012

MEANTIME was an important location for locally based practitioners – artists, musicians, writers. With its restless programme of artists' presentations, discussions, live music, curated film screenings and so on, it provided a form of sustenance otherwise unavailable over a wide radius. It addressed a need for a space that was available, open to experimentation, and open to the idea that the roles of audience and producer were permeable, able to be flipped. MEANTIME was a place of exchange. It was a space of invitation to practitioners and audiences that attempted as far as possible to flatten conventional cultural power relations and extractive practices.

Early funding proposals talk about the building itself as a catalyst for activity. This was fundamental: MEANTIME as a shell, a boundaried yet porous entity, a construct with the capacity to change and transform. Its presence addressed the purpose of occupying space: what can/should be done with it? It destabilised the fixed position of the art-space or gallery and expanded the resources offered, who and what it represented, with a pluralist approach. This was negotiated with the people who occupied and attended to it, by the accumulation of time invested, and interest.

JOHN
WALTER

I think this is what was unique about MEANTIME and what made it urgent and important in that place. A real lifeline. Certainly for me it was a test site. In retrospect, my project at MEANTIME was one of several projects that I did with spaces outside London around that time and what they enabled me to do was put big experiments to the test, which was not a possibility elsewhere.

RUPERT
HOWE

Yes, MEANTIME's 'restless programme' felt like it opened up a space that was as energising for participants – who could just turn up and let things happen – as it was for the audience.

Out of necessity MEANTIME created its own, continuously evolving context. Although geographically isolated the project was aligned with artist-led projects, spaces and networks of self-organised practitioners in urban and rural locations around the UK. A key intention of MEANTIME was to develop the visual arts ecology of the region, to offer a model for artists, students, returning graduates to see the possibilities and seize opportunities, so that a cluster of grassroots activity might germinate, sustain and support each other.

PATRICK LOWRY The MEANTIME residency in 2009 was my first residency anywhere and was in several ways a significant opportunity for me. Not only did it offer me the opportunity of a dedicated period of time to develop a new, site-specific piece of work, it also made me realise how beneficial the opportunity to have uninterrupted time, a good sized, dedicated, making and exhibiting space, along with critical support, was to the development of my practice. But even more significantly, the residency happened at the same time that I along with two other artists had acquired a space in Redruth, Cornwall, later named Back Lane West. Drawing on my own experience of the artist-led residency model of support and collaboration developed at MEANTIME, it became clear that we should try to develop Back Lane West along similar lines. The adoption of the model instigated by Sarah for MEANTIME has led Back Lane West to over 10 years of activity and has involved many artists and associated audiences, local, national and international, along with the development of links and exchanges between artists across the world including the US, Germany, France, Italy, Ukraine, Russia, and South Korea.

JANE LOWRY Having developed BLW initially from the experience of the MEANTIME model, it is interesting, I think, how we have each developed, based on our locally experienced dynamics, opportunities, and influences. As BLW had no funding, or only for specific projects and to pay the rent, we could offer very little apart from the space and our / other artists' support. We had to ask artists for a small fee to cover basic overheads so it made sense that the residencies were conceived of as being for the artist, with a mutual benefit from and to any interested local artists. Building and holding an interested, involved community is not easy. Being even further geographically isolated actually provided the spur, we didn't just want to be endlessly talking to ourselves in Cornwall. We recognised that beyond providing the space, time, and artist community within Cornwall, the most important other resource that artists need is connections, routes, and pathways to wider opportunities, as their work develops, and to develop their work.



Sometime after founding MEANTIME, in 2010 I met the organiser of Retreat,⁷ Michael Whitby, when he attended Tom Down's residency event. Tom and Michael had studied together at Wimbledon. Retreat is an annual week-long self-organised, self-funded residential workshop that offers 'fresh air, communal living and artistic discourse' with groups of around 20 broadly defined practising artists. The web of those attending began with the organiser and has built successively from invitations extended by previous attendees – a literal manifestation of a network in action. Retreat is structured to create a temporary community with each iteration and

facilitates a mutually committed environment focused on interests and practices (everyone attending gives a presentation) and acts of care (everyone attending cooks a meal). There is something transformational in the attention to everyday practices, the generosity of its organisation, the intensity of purpose, and in critical exchange that is both safe and rigorous. The spaces of Retreat were important loci of discovery and engagement through the seven workshops I attended, introducing the work of many practitioners who undertook residencies at MEANTIME.

⁷ <https://retreatart.org/>

In his Retreat presentation John Walter discussed the idea of hospitality as practice, attending to the space of human relations within his work by inviting people into a space of engagement with art objects through conversation, costume and jestering, food, drink and friendship. This offered a framework for thinking about MEANTIME's *modus operandi* as

JOHN WALTER This meeting at RETREAT was a fundamental moment in my development; meeting you and other key people whom I worked with around that time and continue to work with to this day. It was a confluence and enabled unlikely meetings of people, which otherwise would not have happened.

Honestly though, I can't imagine not having done *The Tarot Garden* and *The John McCririck Memorial Bar*. They are such seminal projects for me. I still show them all the time. They are very important intellectual and visual building blocks in my oeuvre.

Do you remember finding that yellow material we covered the floor in? That was amazing! And cheap I remember... The 'laws of hospitality' that you mention – if I can call them that because I think they have been proven over a long time now to hold true – are fundamental rules of engagement. They have proven useful right up to my current artist-in-residence role at Kavli Institute in Delft. Going towards people rewards them and you with a bond that is the building block for the art to happen. It's like quantum dynamics – there is an idea of entanglement in which particles are birthed or join. Something like this is going on in making art but also in engaging audiences too.

JULIET MACDONALD I felt at home during my residency at MEANTIME. I actually slept there, with a sleeping bag on the floor of the upstairs space, looking up at the rafters, surrounded by the paraphernalia of my experiments. I made myself at home in a way that is possible only in a temporary encampment: setting



John Walter, *The Tarot Garden*, 2012

a hosting relationship, supporting artists at crucial times in their careers and providing opportunities to make new work. The human scale of the operation suggested a domestic dwelling – the physical dimensions of the building equivalent to those of a two-storey terraced house, its public spaces calibrated for one person to maintain.

up around me the limited items needed for comfort and meaningful existence, getting to know the local area and establishing little routines that last only for the short period of occupation. I have happy memories of it. The relocation from my usual home/work gave me the space and time to think like an artist.

Sarah, your hospitality contributed to this feeling. You were generous with your time, invited me to your home to eat with your family, and provided critical discussion and careful consideration of my work. This created a welcoming space for the uncertainty I felt about my artistic project.

The responsibilities of host extended outwards to the neighbours. An early altercation between musicians, their van and The Brewery security, with the ensuing letter to the council alleging regular parties and drug-taking, was a reminder that it was important to make friends and allies. Although well within the town centre, the building was in a quiet residential area and despite occasional raucous sonic events, we didn't receive a word of complaint from close neighbours.

RUPERT HOWE Though I always thought MEANTIME would be a great place for a rave.

Early in 2010 I invited local MP Martin Horwood to visit MEANTIME following his declaration in the local press of Cheltenham's need for a new arts centre. He was openly underwhelmed by the modesty and scale of the operation and was keen to know where I'd *really* like to be. Horwood's idea was for the new Arts Centre to be self-financing through corporate hire, as public funding for the arts was finished. As a space for the public that is publicly funded, I wondered aloud how MEANTIME would fare in a world imperilled by corporate and private interests.



Wojciech Kosma, *Waterfall event*, 2007

The residency programme was constructed, as far as artists engaged with it, to examine the context within which it was operating. Most often the building on Oxford Passage was the stage and focus, with the town's rotation of festivals and heritage playing out at a distance. Locating MEANTIME alongside other realities, global realities and complexes, against a backdrop of conflict, economic calamity, political conservatism, austerity and cuts, with hindsight it is interesting to see how far these realities were addressed through practice. Probably in just a handful of cases.

MARTIN WOOSTER MEANTIME was and still is as memory an attempt to break free. It sought to break free from the weight of history (Cheltenham), from the weight of an absence that now dominates the political scene and is increasingly absorbed by human suffering (neoliberalism), and from a culture of destruction that can no longer tolerate the other as an obstacle of complexity, ambivalence and contradiction (global finance capitalism).

In May 2010, just as the Liberal Democrat party went into coalition with the Conservative party and set the next decade's political agenda, the artist Chie Konishi and I organised a town meeting. With Martin Horwood's calls for a new arts centre, the University's proposed relocation of Pittville arts campus, and the temporary closure of the Art Gallery & Museum for major building works in the coming months, Cheltenham was undergoing a period of change in its arts infrastructure. Through our conversations, Chie and I wondered about the ambitions for the visual arts in the town, and wanted to hear from the various institutions, groups and individuals with an interest in the field of art production. *Are We OK?* would help us gauge the impact of MEANTIME on the cultural ecology of Cheltenham and the wider the region.

Furthermore, given that we live in a world in need of a radical re-imagining, we speculated as to how artistic representation could be used as a platform to formulate and disseminate new models of thought, activity and engagement in the process of constructing the future.

The forum was attended by a cross-section of artists, arts organisers, educators, a politician and members of the public. Its intention was to invite discussion around different forms of cultural process and production, in some way to address tensions surrounding the MEANTIME project and relations with the town.

Having posed the questions, rather than directing answers or conclusions, the floor was left open to see what surfaced through discussion. Further questions were asked about the priorities of cultural provision and resources. We discussed how MEANTIME negotiates the double-edge of visibility and invisibility, of being in Cheltenham, and the challenge of creating a context for the visual arts and building audiences for the work. The reluctance of larger institutions to champion smaller initiatives was noted. The questions themselves pointed to the impossibility of MEANTIME, occupying a territory that has no institutional map, but with a sense of itself as a part of a wider domain.

MARTIN WOOSTER *Are We OK?* This I believe is as much a spiritual as a literary question. It is also one that inevitably brings us to a limit of what language itself can say about the crisis of meaning that now besets our lives. Faced with the malignant narcissism of the capitalist system in which the pressure to conform is relentless and the obligation to enjoy that has become as much a part of the mechanism of oppression as renunciation has, the question thus challenges thought to address how is it possible to collectively break with such a paralysing power.

Over time things shifted and took more intentional turns. The MEANTIME project morphed from a temporary zone into something more open-ended, something with momentum. The commitment to new work and experimental practice found a new context with the artists and networks around Retreat, and expanded the scope and scale of work being produced on residencies. Network connected to network and the sense of isolation began to diminish.

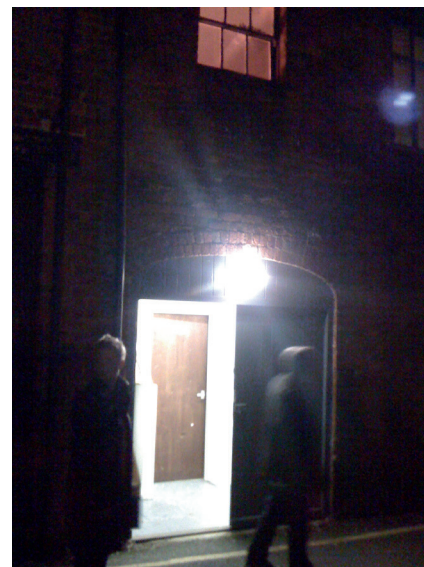
GRACE DAVIES This was a time when artist-led spaces continued to pop up across the region and beyond, and a network of artists resources, spaces and opportunities was contributing to a vibrant creative ecology. And the conviviality of the spaces was enabling exchange and discourse across broad geographical areas, building a supportive cohort of practitioners.

MEANTIME was one of a number of artist-led spaces that placed their focus on the production and experimentation – rather than the presentation – of creative practice. This dedication to the development of practice in the region was identified as a clear need by and for practitioners, at a time when sustaining a creative practice career was increasingly more challenging. Though the demand from practitioners was clear, the relative lack of public engagement opportunities made gaining funding for these spaces difficult – either through Arts Council funding, other trusts and foundations or corporate sponsorship.



Following *Are We OK?* I was keen to continue the conversation and bring other voices and expertise to address the issue of visibility by discussing the circulation and impact of MEANTIME's communications. Here I was influenced by artist-led gallery Eastside Projects, who had launched around the same time as MEANTIME. In October 2011 Eastside Projects convened a three-day *Public Evaluation Event* at the gallery that de- and re-constructed the practice of reflection and analysis around the various elements that make up the Eastside whole. Particularly interesting was the integration of design processes – from mailed posters to user manuals⁸ and crowd-sourced typographics – in both the conception of the gallery and their marketing output.

MEANTIME: Communicating took place in 2012, an invitation for people to feed back on the ways the project engaged with the public, alongside artist and designer Adam Burton. The gathering provided much insightful commentary into how the building, and the project, spoke to people: the careful anonymity of the building's exterior had to go; it was time to let people know what went on inside. We installed an outside light. We worked on the website's digital presence and a more intentional logo was produced. This process set in train a resolve to create further opportunities to work with people on the development of the project.



8 <https://eastsideprojects.org/about/users-manual/>

MEANTIME had operated through extremely cost-efficient means and relied on the commitment and generosity of many, within an economy of its own making. The main burden of financial support was placed on the Arts Council, through the Grants for the Arts project funding strand. This was augmented with modest contributions from the short-lived but crucially important Arts Development department at Cheltenham Borough Council, and from the Arts faculty at the University of Gloucestershire. Although Arts Council bids for funding could extend to a three-year programme of activity, applying for this length of project was not advisable given both the quantity of money at a time of economic contraction, uncertainty over the security of tenure on property, and the reliance on a single individual to carry the project over a lengthy timespan. This meant that MEANTIME cycled through annual rounds of bid-writing, suspense, celebration, graft and uncertainty, a struggle that underpinned and often threatened to overwhelm the enterprise.

Whatever limited cash-money/resources/public funds were accessed for the project, these were, as far as possible, redistributed back into the pockets of cultural workers in the forms of residency bursaries. A bursary would just about cover costs over a month's residency but was not a living wage. While there was never feedback on a successful application, and rarely conditions placed on funding by the Arts Council, my sense was that with successive successful bids I was pitching the ask at the right level.

In 2013, when MEANTIME had become established as more-than-temporary, I fundraised to commission a formal consultancy process. This was carried out with Ruth Claxton (Eastside Projects) and Cheryl Jones (Grand Union) and aimed to review the organisation's processes and strategic planning and development. The exercise pushed me to think through where the project was and where it was going, and exposed organisational faultlines, such as the level at which the time and labour involved in organising and curating MEANTIME was acknowledged and remunerated. It argued for improvements to the building, in terms of access and digital infrastructure. It identified a number of scenarios that would propel the organisation forward, including the need to bring in an associate producer to ease the burden of duties – it was clear that at the current pace of programming, the sheer amount of work involved in running and maintaining the project was more than one person could manage. (MEANTIME not only hosted residencies but frequent exhibitions, live music, performance events and film screenings, developed publications.) The benefits of authoring the organisation – fundraising, organising the public programme, managing the residencies, hosting the artists, their well-being, being social, discussing the work – needed to be weighed up against capacity for further development and innovation.

Subsequent applications to the Arts Council that made a case for greater investment in the project were unsuccessful. It's possible to understand these decisions in terms of the particularities of time and place: by 2013 austerity had bitten down hard on public resources and there was not yet the capacity for smaller organisations to be supported through the National Portfolio. But it can also be seen as a failure to understand the value of small-scale organisations within the arts ecosystem – organisations that are never going to attract levels of corporate or philanthropic sponsorship that national institutions were increasingly able/required to obtain.



Juliet MacDonald residency, 2012

Common Practice,⁹ an advocacy group working for the recognition and fostering of the small-scale contemporary visual arts sector in London, have produced research papers and conferences arguing for 'the ways in which small-scale arts organisations produce artistic value beyond measurability and quantification, provide spaces for public experience extra to the market, and in so doing contribute importantly to cultural wealth'. Defending the dependence of small visual arts organisations on Arts Council funding, in *Size Matters*¹⁰ Sarah Thelwall argues that 'small organisations act as an unofficial support mechanism for larger organisations, by investing in risk-taking and the development of work. [...] In this way, small-scale arts organisations provide ample evidence of the necessity to build rather than diminish state funding for the arts as a core public asset.'

⁹ <http://www.commonpractice.org.uk/>

¹⁰ <http://www.commonpractice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Common-Practice-London-Size-Matters.pdf>

JOHN WALTER I think the financial deftness, while at the time felt tight, now looking back was very important. It enabled nimbleness for you and me. It's a classic punk strategy. Better to just bash on using a limited budget that force through something over-polished and expensive.

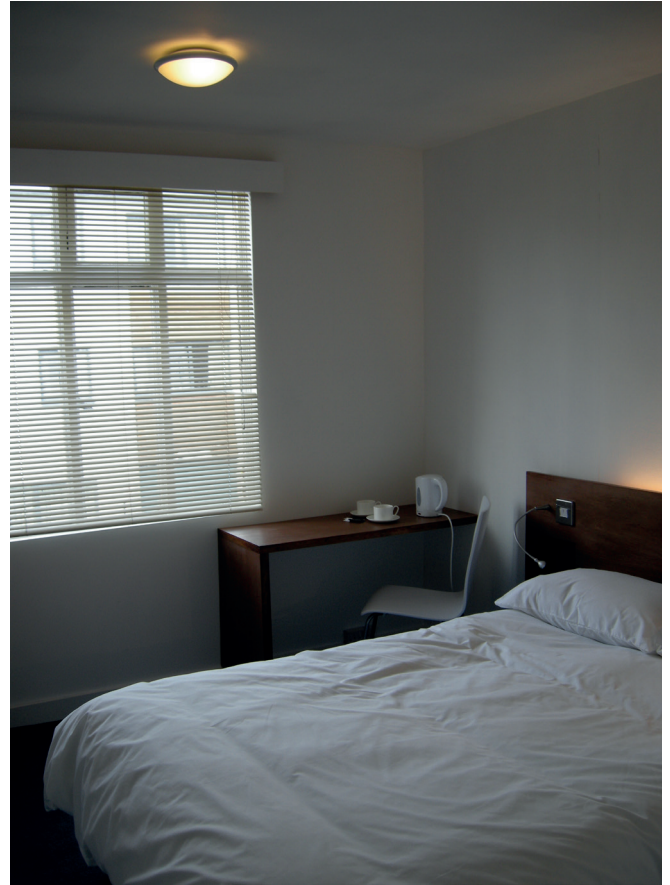
KATE LEEPER Artist residencies differ across the board in terms of the support offered to artists. One thing they all have in common is by their very nature, provision for the artist's regular life as well as the practice has to be taken into consideration. The greater the support for the daily life needs of the artist, the less risk averse the artist can be in carrying out the residency project.

The success of each project in a residency offering scant support for life's necessities will rise and fall on the resources that each artist has available to them from other sources i.e. public funding, private financial support, employment leave with pay, other passive income. Therefore, a residency without sufficient support for artist's lives as well as practice will always favour those who already have a level of privilege.

In such circumstances, whatever costs are paid to the artist for production materials are necessarily fudged to cover living costs, which in turn favours either dematerialised practice, reiteration of previous successes, a practice with access to an abundance of free or low-cost material, or a practice that is otherwise resourced to cover production costs as previously mentioned. Therefore, residencies with scant resources tend to entrench practice that is risk-averse, dematerialised and/or 'low-fi' for poorly resourced artists, rather than freeing under-resourced practice from having to negotiate economic market pressures and the conservatism that those pressures necessarily breed. As a result, an art language divide is increased along class lines rather than unpicked, as experimental equity for all art practice is lost to the advantages enjoyed only by the language of privilege.

True artistic experimentation is a luxury of the well-resourced. Under current market driven funding models, it seems that experimentation remains the preserve of academy, although this too is under threat. Risk-averse public funding breeds risk-averse artistic practice, with residencies in the middle like MEANTIME, between a rock and a hard place.

Once the complex of structures that prop up otherwise thriving entities start to fall away it produces a momentum in one direction. At the same time as the Arts Council had become apprehensive about continued investment, so the backbone of moral and financial support from the Borough Council disappeared as Leisure & Culture operations moved from council-run to a multi-venue charitable trust, with no remit or capacity for local arts development. MEANTIME, though sustaining and sustained by its growing communities, and backed by its landlord who had long since stopped talking about rent increases and waived rental payments while funding was sought, would have to close.



Patrick Lowry residency, 2011

GRACE DAVIES Looking back, it's possible to chart the confluence of factors that played into the ultimate unsustainability of MEANTIME and its counterparts operating in this realm. The rise of commercial rent rates, the development of cities and towns by commercial and private developers, the policies of funding bodies such as ACE, a growth in the enterprise model of universities leading to a focus on more commercial opportunities (and perhaps a negligence of local and community interests), and even student communities not engaging so deeply with artist-led initiatives thus failing to generate a wide enough community of interest to support the initiative. A study of MEANTIME and its contemporaries feels important at this juncture in order to understand its impact on practice, of creative communities and on the development of the sector.

It's interesting to note that now at the end of 2020 when ACE have just launched their 'Let's Create' strategy, the emphasis has once again returned to the

act of making and the intrinsic value of creativity itself (rather than its instrumental or economic value). Had MEANTIME been operating now, perhaps ACE would have invested, potentially even endowing it with National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) status. Perhaps the University would have invested in the value of having local space dedicated to the experimentation and production of art by artists with a range of lived experiences and practices. Perhaps, given the current circumstances and the fragility of the high street, there would have been a thirst for the occupation of spaces. It's impossible to say.

From my own perspective, it opened my eyes to new artists, new ways of making art and it enabled me to re-evaluate my preconceived ideas of contemporary practice. I saw it form new networks, new ways of working and new friendships, and these are things that should not be underestimated.

ELAINE FISHER The importance of MEANTIME as physical location was never more apparent to me than in the last days of its tenancy in Oxford Passage. At this time Sarah had initiated an expansive archive project to document changes (past and present) to Cheltenham's Lower High Street, particularly in light of the imminent loss of a modernist building that provided a canopy to a vibrant community market-place. I was part of the project team and used MEANTIME as a space in which to make work, collaboratively with another artist.

As my collaborator William Lindley lived between London and Brighton we decided to base our collaboration around fixed meeting points at MEANTIME, spending two days together once a month. The time lapse between each session created a kind of stop-motion frame through which we viewed the building demolition/development that was happening on MEANTIME's doorstep and which not only our work but the MEANTIME project began to mirror.

It seemed necessary to close the project with a further public debate. In June 2014, *Where Were We?* picked up the threads of conversation and expanded on the questions previously explored through the idea of *cultural renewal*. Mark Fisher, in the introductory paragraphs of *Capitalist Realism*, argues: ‘Tradition counts for nothing when it is no longer contested and modified. A culture that is merely preserved is no culture at all.’¹¹ On the same page Mark Fisher had asked ‘how long can a culture persist without the new?’ *Where Were We?* asked to consider the complex of conditions required for the new to happen. Should not MEANTIME have made itself redundant? If not, why not?

My notes from the event read: ‘The quote reminded me immediately of Cheltenham. But it also reminded me that MEANTIME isn’t owed anything, and nor should it be. It has no intrinsic right to exist. It’s a project that has always been contingent on favourable conditions. It has always been precarious, and that precarity has kept the project alive, striving. MEANTIME has existed in a state of perpetual renewal, not for the sake of renewal itself, but in the process of evolving, adapting and responding, critically and productively.’

RUPERT HOWE I’d actually forgotten I ‘chaired’ this event. Though I don’t recall it needing much direction from me. As for the What Next? question, it’s just as relevant and problematic now as it was when MEANTIME opened. Though I wonder about the term ‘artist run’ and what that actually means in practice today. On a personal level, many recent discussions have tried to articulate a broader ‘conviviality’ – a term derived from the work of Ivan Illych whose ideas informed the first Camp 0 – which might encompass artistic practice alongside, say, mutual aid and the development of practical tools for living. And RIP Mark Fisher. He may be gone but his ideas are still strikingly in and of our moment.

JAMES FISHER Sarah’s notes from *Where Were We?* seem to me to go right to the heart of the mechanics of MEANTIME, and perhaps reveal something about why it flourished and flared.

Risk can reveal an artist’s frailties, but in that precarity is a liberation. MEANTIME was a collaborative initiative in various ways – it presented an arena for collaborating artists as well as offering the hand of partnership in collaboration itself. To enter into a collaborative practice with other artists elicits uncertainty – will your voice be diffused? – and this instability is often reflected in the materiality of the objects that emerge from a collaborative interaction. Such volatility was recognised in reflections on an early project at MEANTIME, Gavin McClafferty’s *Horizontal Column*, and described as the poetry of materials: ‘their mass and their interaction with gravity; their fragility and their transience.’¹²

At the same time, while the individuality of artists engaged in collaborative partnership are imperilled, they also take liberating harbour in which they can detach themselves from their usual persona and authorial responsibility to play. MEANTIME fostered many performative gestures of collaborative play and through this enabled fertile communication between participants and the things they made.



¹¹ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 2009, p.3

¹² Gavin McClafferty, *Horizontal Column*, review by James Fisher, *a-n* October 2007

To paraphrase Jane Lowry: *building and holding a community is not easy*. In many ways the complex environment (as noted by James Fisher) is epitomised by Gavin McClafferty's project, *Horizontal Column*: our fates interlocked in a fragile arc, under intense external pressures. The closure of MEANTIME in 2014 is linked to the ending of a whole swathe of artist-run spaces and projects around the same time. Subsequently, wider structural changes such as the dismantling of working tax credits that supported artists/workers/self-employed/families on low incomes and for many subsidised artistic labour has further impacted on the kinds of ad hoc and informal occupations that support an ecology. Working tax credits have, since the mid 2010s, been gradually replaced by Universal Credit which fails to recognise irregular work patterns and payments as legitimate.¹³ Add into the mix central funding structures themselves, which focus on short-term grant support for one-off projects and in social reality do not function with low income state support.

¹³ https://www.artistsunionengland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Universal_Credit_guide.pdf

¹⁴ <https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/asda/asda-to-allow-kids-to-eat-free-in-cafes-to-help-pandemic-affected-families/650855.article>

¹⁵ <http://hardwickgallery.org/>

¹⁶ <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/hakim-bey-t-a-z-the-temporary-autonomous-zone-ontological-anarchy-poetic-terrorism.a4.pdf> Pg. 23

Echoes of MEANTIME continue to resonate, and I'm reminded of the free soup that accompanied exhibition openings, as Asda declare they will feed children for free in their supermarket cafes.¹⁴ We have been writing this document during the pandemic of 2020, mostly under restrictions that mean we are not able to leave our homes except for essential reasons. Just as MEANTIME was witness to the corrosive effects of austerity following the financial crisis of 2008, we are currently witness to new forms of undoing and remaking of social and financial structures and dependencies. No one knows how this is going to play out.

MEANTIME modelled a community being formed, a community that understood its precarious temporality but had arguably just hit its stride at the point of departing. It represents an in-between space between studio and gallery, between art school and artist, a portal between past and future. This document has examined what remains of the project six years after closing its doors and suggested how the practice of spontaneous collectivity engendered by MEANTIME might continue to circulate, both hyper-locally and in other corners of the world. MEANTIME is not a model of exceptionalism, it is a 'modest proposal' demonstrating that people working together can resist structural hierarchies to shape culture and realise ideas. This understanding has been key to establishing Hardwick Gallery¹⁵ at the University of Gloucestershire. Hardwick Gallery replicates MEANTIME in that it is a one-person endeavour, however the project is stabilised by the institutional framework and entrusted with the autonomy to extend into the university (Speculative Art School, Bad Ideas Study Group, the Forest Residency) and work on long-term projects with the communities of St Peter's and St Paul's (We Create), that have already benefitted from the time-span committed to MEANTIME and are its legacy.

MEANTIME aspired to the condition of a *Pirate Utopia*, Hakim Bey's formulation for intentional communities, 'whole mini-societies living consciously outside the law and determined to keep it up, even if only for a short but merry life.'¹⁶ There is a paradox at the heart of the mission that is a history of MEANTIME: it was difficult, exhausting, and reached too far. But it offers a model of hope, even as everything is stacked against us.

CHIE
KONISHI Your text felt as if I was again being inside MEANTIME. I remember you telling me about Roy Harris, the printer, several times, but reading your story about Roy was a different experience. It somehow felt really important, and I was glad to know that this was written down so that it became a part of an important history. These moments of encounters built up to form MEANTIME, the sequences of encounters that might not be recognised as important history but are very important for those who take their initiative to create what they need. Your way of building a good relationship with neighbours was also something I admired, and very important in a history of MEANTIME.

I always thought of MEANTIME as your project, and you needed it in order to live where you live while being a mother, when you don't have choice of moving around different cities. I think this is such an important reason why MEANTIME existed in Cheltenham. And you managed to form a community of people who shared something in common, and people who also needed a place like MEANTIME for whatever reasons that might be. What I really like about MEANTIME is the project was both your very personal project and everybody's. It became both in the end.

MARTIN
WOOSTER MEANTIME had afforded from the beginning a brief messianic moment to dream, as much a desire not to be moved as a means to interrogate its moment and ask questions of what we do with our time, yet with something of a squatter's spirit at its heart, it knows its time is counting down even before it has begun. Thus, it starts with a romantic disposition to linger and welcome those wishing to mangle among the ruins of what is most vulnerable, unintelligible, and unknowable in the human condition. It knows its existence, not in a purely political or instrumentalist way but rather as a site for artistic gestures that afford opportunities to unlearn, knowing that to see requires experimenting with forms that prohibit our seeing. In this respect it enacts a series of short circuits to disrupt the smooth transition from philosophy to reality and thus lay bare the symptomatic void at the heart of the social.



The Political Economy of Artistic Experimentation: MEANTIME, Money & Me

Kate Lepper

Hito Steyerl, the influential¹ artist, has written:

The art field is a space of wild contradiction and phenomenal exploitation. It is a place of power mongering, speculation, financial engineering and massive and crooked manipulation. But it is also the site of commonality, movement, energy and desire... This mess is kept afloat by the sheer dynamism of loads and loads of hardworking women. A hive of affective labour under scrutiny and controlled by capital, woven tightly into its multiple contradictions... Art affects this reality precisely because it is entangled into all of its aspects... Art is not outside politics, but politics resides within its production, its distribution and its reception²

I recognise the art world in Steyerl's quote. The entanglement she describes is never more plain than in the situation of an artist residency. One thing all artist residencies have in common is by their very nature, some kind of provision, albeit to varying degrees, for living needs as well as the project. MEANTIME was no exception.

My 2012 residency at MEANTIME was smack in the middle of Cameron's Age of Austerity, three years after he first publicly named it in MEANTIME's very own home town.³ At MEANTIME I experienced austerity in action. It marked one more shift away from public funding toward greater reliance on individual circumstance, tacitly further exploiting the goodwill of community. In the UK, the cult of creativity has played a curious hand in making this shift more appealing to the public.⁴ Therefore, this time of reflection on the history of MEANTIME,

offers the perfect opportunity to examine the entangled political economy, as it relates to MEANTIME specifically, and an artist's contemporary condition, more broadly.

In this look back, MEANTIME's critical context plays a key role. The MEANTIME programme offered time and space for artists to experiment and realise new work⁵ exploring 'speculative or negotiated outcomes'⁶ that resist 'models of commodity and market-driven production.'⁷ MEANTIME identified the need to 'build a community around the work.'⁸ Even though Cheltenham has the fourth highest density of millionaires in the UK⁹ and no shortage of ticketed cultural events, a visual arts infrastructure was largely absent.¹⁰ MEANTIME addressed the prevailing convention by reconstituting a 'fixed position of the art-space or gallery and ... who and what it represented, with a pluralist approach.'¹¹

Like many contemporary artist-run-initiatives, MEANTIME embraced a theoretical legacy dedicated to experimental art practice.¹² At its root is the 19th century bohemian artist rising in opposition to a bourgeois mentality.¹³ This historic turn produced a move from a formal, style-bound profession to individualised practice of autonomous artistic freedom that accelerated to a new level in the 20th century. In this time, artists shifted from regulated artist memberships to the idea of 'open entry for all', managed instead by formal and informal barriers to limit numbers thereby retaining value.¹⁴

MEANTIME was positioned 'outside' a commercial market of tradeable commodities. Instead, it engaged with public and academic funding seams, which produced a series of economic trade-offs similarly weighed up by contemporary artists.¹⁵

1 Steyerl, described as "Artist – Political statement-making and formal experimentation" is no.18 on *ArtReview's Power 100* (presented by BMW Group Culture) for 2020. Accessed 21 March 2021, <https://artreview.com/artist/hito-steyerl/?year=2020>

2 Steyerl, H. 'Politics of Art: Contemporary Art & the Transition to Post-Democracy//2011' In Frederike Sigler (ed) *Documents of Contemporary Art: Work*. Whitechapel Gallery & MIT press: London, 2017. p.123.

3 'David Cameron warns of 'new age of austerity' *The Guardian*, 26 April 2009. Accessed 20th March 2021 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2009/apr/26/david-cameron-conservative-economic-policy1>

4 "Austerity and creativity go hand-in-glove in crushing any alternative to capitalist society... The narrative from governments has been... espousing the now familiar tropes of encouraging self-interest, entrepreneurialism and risk-taking by removing social welfare...this chimes with the mantra of 'creative work': labourers are forced to do 'more with less'... work far beyond their paid hours." Mould, O. *Against Creativity*. Verso: London & New York, 2018. pp.101–102.

5 'Proposals' MEANTIME website, accessed 4 April 2021 <https://www.meantime.org.uk/proposals>

6 Bowden, S. 'HISTORY(S) OF MEANTIME.'

MEANTIME project-space, accessed 22 March 2021, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5eb1739ef2de600cdc8a9335/t/60d5ee4171e96802e05c48ca/1624632927805/History%28%29+of+MEANTIME.pdf>, p.11.

7 'MEANTIME Project Evaluation Guidelines'. word doc, supplied to author by Sarah Bowden upon completion of residency project, July 2012.

8 Bowden, 'History(s) of MEANTIME', opcit. p.13.

9 'Cheltenham one of UK's most popular spots for millionaires with more than 4,000.' *Gloucestershire Live*. 30 November 2020. Accessed 20 March 2021 <https://www.gloucestershirelive.co.uk/news/cheltenham-news/cheltenham-one-uks-most-popular-4742958>

10 As is the case for much of regional UK: "the regional supply network for innovative contemporary art outside London is fragmented undeveloped and largely unrecognised" Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, as quoted in: Behnke, C., Kastelan, C. et al. (eds) *Art in the Periphery of the Center*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015. p.19.

11 Bowden, opcit. pp.13–14.

12 "...the rhetoric of experimentation and risk... form central tenets within artist-run literature... such narratives expect artist-run culture "to claim space for alternative critical practices" (Morley 2016,77). Bugden, Emma. *Testing Grounds and Launching Pads: Situating the Artist-Run*

Space Today. Unpublished PhD thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2020. p.107.

13 "...a paradoxical aspect of the bourgeois rebel... is that the modest wealth of the family background is a pre-condition—sometimes even a permanent condition—of the rebellion against it. It is quite extraordinary to what extent the French anti-bourgeois remain bourgeois." Weightman, J.G.. 'Bohemian versus Bourgeois, by Cesar Grana.' *Commentary*, September, 1964. Accessed 19 March 2021 <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/j-weightman/bohemian-versus-bourgeois-by-cesar-grana/>

14 Abbing, H. *Why Are Artists Poor?: the Exceptional Economy of the Arts*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2002. pp.121–128; Behnke, et al. opcit. pp.9–17.

15 "As part of a more complex culture, artist-run spaces need to be permitted to be able to constantly change in correspondence with their own changing environments, as this is one of their key strengths, and indeed could even be considered to be one of the primary reasons why these platforms were initiated." Pryde-Jarman, D. *Curating the Artist-run Space: Exploring strategies for a critical curatorial practice*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. Coventry: Coventry University, 2013. p.43.

That is, whether to seek resourcing that ensures sustainable longevity and in so doing formalise the structure of the organisation, or to rely on shorter-term funding so as to retain the flexibility of its provisional critical context¹⁶ and to avoid over-committing beyond the precarious bricks & mortar tenancy.

As with all examinations of political economy, following the money is pivotal, although in MEANTIME's case there was very little currency in evidence. To develop a critical and experimental reputation, MEANTIME made up for spartan, insufficient funding by relying on the barely waged, passionate labour¹⁷ of Sarah, and her ability to shore up of a network of artists with enough social and financial capital to self-fund and keep the programme turning over.

For my residency, MEANTIME offered a modest fee for materials at the end of the project upon presentation of receipts. In addition, a camp bed made the project workspace double-up as (unofficially) free accommodation, but no funding for living costs was available. The appeal to be part of the MEANTIME programme was Sarah herself, the interesting critical context, and a space to try things out. But it was ultimately my personal and familial privilege that enabled my participation, and that privilege is enmeshed in the politics of access to the art world and broader market economy.¹⁸

At the time of my residency I was one year out of the MFA programme at the Slade School of Fine Art. I was 38, a British born, 6th generation New Zealand pākehā¹⁹ by descent, a single white woman without dependents.

After graduating from the Slade in 2011, from the end of my summer job until March the following year I was job hunting and signing on, applying for residencies and shows, without a place to make work. Early in 2012 I found a tiny studio to myself that I was paying for by working as a cleaner for the studio complex. Through a Slade contact I had also started to pick up work as a freelance gallery technician. In June 2012, at the time of my residency, I was between contracts.

For my MEANTIME residency project I had submitted two unsuccessful public funding applications both in Aotearoa/NZ and the UK to help pay for the residency, and was again signing on to unemployment benefit.

I had met Sarah a couple of years earlier through Retreat. I became connected to Retreat through a Slade colleague. Gaining and taking up a place at the Slade was possible for me as an international student because my step-mother was well-resourced and generous; she is an art lover and supportive of my artistic ambitions. It was also possible because my dad and step-mother offered me a room rent-free in Zone 1 and a fridge full of food.

I moved to London from Whanganui, Aotearoa/NZ in 2009. My Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at Whanganui's polytechnic no longer exists (as of 2015), replaced with shorter degrees in the creative industries. Whanganui is a town off the

beaten track, with a population of around 40,000. Its greatest assets are a deep river rising on the slopes of the dormant volcano, Mt Tongariro; a distinct, vibrant and robust indigenous population; and a covey of serious and remarkable tangata whenua,²⁰ pākehā and tauwiwi²¹ art practice. But like a lot of small-town Aotearoa/NZ, Whanganui bottomed out on all the socio-economic measures associated with the devastating impact of 19th century colonisation and, since the mid 1980s, a government programme of nationwide privatisation and systematic dismantling of social welfare provision (informally referred to in local vernacular as 'Rogernomics' and 'Ruthenasia').

In the final year of my UG degree I lived in an ex-state house across a fence from the Mongrel Mob gang HQ. In the early months of the year, a toddler, the daughter of a rival Black Power gang member, was shot through the front window of her home in a drive-by shooting. For months following the incident until arrests were made, police helicopters hovered over the Mob's pad (and therefore my flat) as they followed every vehicle coming and going. The mob used to pile into all sorts of ramshackle vehicles, way too many occupants for the amount of seats. They'd often pass me walking to and from class and wave, full arms out the windows.

In the years prior to heading to the Slade, my parents had been living in various parts of the world, as educated, mobile, baby-boomers. They eventually settled in the UK, their birth country, in London, where my dad got a job as a public service economist with the DCMS. In Whanganui I funded my way through my BFA on a couple of scholarships, student loans and allowances, a gift of money from my brother who was also living overseas, and part-time work at the local provincial gallery. After graduating I worked a number of freelance, casual and part-time jobs, renting a studio, exhibiting and applying for opportunities, living as a classic cultural precariat.²² Once I moved to London, my practice, and my personal existence, became far more precarious.

In Whanganui I was personally and independently well-resourced relative to the cost of living and materials. By contrast, in London I was constantly on the back foot, even with the level of privilege I had. If my Whanganui experience was a metaphorical car, it would be a little, low maintenance, automatic that went on the smell of the proverbial. Living in London was like being loaned a Rolls Royce with no money for petrol.

As an example of the financial exposure of my position, in the middle of the MEANTIME residency I was due to sign on at Westminster Job Centre to keep my unemployment benefit coming. I called in sick thinking it meant I wouldn't have to travel back to London, but instead I was given until 5pm the next day to turn up or I would lose my benefit. I immediately went out and bought a same day return bus ticket to London for the following day and in so doing, left myself with less than £10 to live on until the following week's UB payment.

¹⁶ "Such tensions demonstrate the ongoing pull between two core organisational desires for artist-run spaces; that is, as Clive Robertson describes, "to be both fluid movement and a lasting apparatus" (Robertson 2004, 4). Bugden, opcit. p.176.

¹⁷ "Passionate labour...is where creative work and a sense of one's self collide (McRobbie 2016), and plays a vital role in maintaining and perpetuating cultural precarity for artists and arts workers. Such labour positions the emerging arts worker, through their unstable, multi-faceted work portfolio and a strong personal identification blurring life and work, as an ideal neoliberal worker." Bugden, opcit. p.140.

¹⁸ Abbing, opcit. p.268.

¹⁹ Definition of 'pākehā': "New Zealander of European descent" From 'MaoriDictionary.co.nz' the online version of, Moorfield, J.C. *Te*

Aka Māori-English, English-Māori Dictionary and Index. Longman/Pearson Education New Zealand, 2011. Accessed 18 April 2021. <https://maoridictionary.co.nz/>

²⁰ Definition of 'tangata whenua': "local people, hosts, indigenous people." From 'MaoriDictionary.co.nz' ibid.

²¹ Definition of 'tauwiwi': "foreigner, European, non-Māori, colonist" or "person coming from afar". From 'MaoriDictionary.co.nz' ibid.

²² The cultural precariat is generally a freelancer who juggles multiple contracts without stability or permanence, but who does so because of the belief in their chosen creative pursuit (Gill 2010; McRobbie 2002, 2016; Ross 2000). Bugden, opcit. p.9.

²³ Settersten Jr., Richard A., Furstenberg, Frank F., and Rumbaut, Rubén G., eds. *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy*.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. p.282.

²⁴ US sociologist, Dr Richard Settersten quoted in: 'Generation Boomerang: Why Won't Young Adults Leave Home?' Real Stories, 29 Nov 2020, content licensed from Beyond Distribution. Accessed 26 January 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tUjO-va2_o&t=443s

²⁵ Pryde-Jarman, opcit. p.21.

²⁶ Telese, E. Trade off: Markets for art in the UK. a-n The Artists Information Company: Newcastle upon Tyne, 2007. p.4.

²⁷ Morgan, G., & Nelligan, P. "CONCLUSION: DON'T CALL US, WE'LL CALL YOU." In *The Creativity Hoax: Precarious Work in the Gig Economy*, 145-50. London, UK; New York, NY, USA: Anthem Press, 2018. p.148.

²⁸ "Anybody who takes part in the discourse on the recognition of art and artists and who is able to

Over the month of the residency my confidence was low, largely hampered by fatigue due to poor sleep, interrupted by stress about the progress of my project, exacerbated by anxiety from constant hustle with no long-term security accumulated over many years, homesickness for Aotearoa, and what I now recognise as the first signs of burnout. But I at least had the confidence that I could exhaust what funds and energy I did have on the project, because I was always going to return to London and a household taken care of by a public service income.

I mention my parental generation market segmentation here because it matters. In the centuries-old struggle from dependent young adulthood to financial independence and security, baby-boomers are the generational aberration.²³ Due to full employment and state assistance, baby-boomers' progress to independence did not entirely rise or fall on their parent's financial and social capital alone. I benefit from their good-fortune, because for every other generation before or since, gaining financial independence "is not about the investment [young people] put in, but about the investment their parents make."²⁴

These individual circumstances ripple out into the art world especially. Project-spaces like MEANTIME function, in part, as spaces for emerging practitioners to gain experience and exposure²⁵ after graduation. But if you don't have personal resources what are the options available for artists who choose to work in spaces 'outside' the market? Research undertaken by a-n The Artists Information Company, indicates that existing as an artist in a non-commercial practice is more possible where there is public funding. Where this is not available, engaging with the market at some level is necessary to not only make a living, but also to develop a reputation, and even enter academia in some cases.²⁶

Two Australian sociologists, George Morgan and Pariece Nelligan, have noted: "creative aspirants from poorer backgrounds regularly confront a series of transactions – points of thorny reckoning – where they are forced to barter their skills in response to financial and social pressures and diminishing vocational options for meaningful symbolic expression."²⁷ This is the sliding scale, a reality for all but a few artists: at one end is non-commercial experimental artistic autonomy and at the other commercial conservatism. The position you take up on this scale is relative to what extent your personal circumstances enable an independent living.

It is not just familial financial resourcing that defers these 'points of thorny reckoning.' In the controversial 2002 study 'Why are Artists poor?', Dutch artist and social scientist Hans Abbing doesn't get everything right, but his description of the art world as an 'exceptional economy' is compelling. Abbing describes a world structured by informal barriers and 'gate keepers'²⁸ whose own position is precarious and dependent on being in control of the dominant discourse.²⁹ Abbing argues that social and cultural capital are crucial currency within this world, which

is why the majority of artists come from wealthier backgrounds.³⁰ (As with the bohemian artist of the 19th century)³¹

This despite the fact that financial precarity is perceived in the popular imagination as a necessary condition of creativity. The sociologist Emile Durkheim's idea of 'collective effervescence', where periods of uncertainty and unrest give rise to the greatest art, creativity and innovation, is often quoted in support of this idea.³² But there is a contradiction inherent to this. When interviewed on BBC World HARDtalk in 2010, the then-Chairman of Christies, Edward Dolman, claimed: "Moments of stress and strain are key to the creative process, for example, war, oppression, political process." Yet moments earlier in the same interview he stated that "great art tends to have great patrons. Money is crucial to art."³³

It is this unresolved dissonance within the projected image of the artist persona that enables two politically and economically suspect ideas to perpetuate, namely the 'starving artist' and the 'artist as entrepreneur'.

First, the idea of the starving artist forsaking material comfort as a necessary condition for the production of great art, supports a power asymmetry between an artist's economic agency and the economic system that needs to profit from the sale of art works.³⁴ Put plainly it serves a 'buy low, sell high' dynamic that advantages art agents and dealers, as well as art market speculators.

Further, the Durkheimian idea that periods of revolt and upheaval provide the perfect conditions for artists to do their greatest work,³⁵ glosses over the fact that, most of these advances were made by the middle classes adjacent to, and largely buffered from, these unstable circumstances.³⁶ In reality, for art to be made during these times, a very particular set of circumstances is required. That is, the time, space and resources to keep making work, cushioned from the volatility, as well as some kind of platform or accessibility to an audience, enabling the work to come to the attention of those who confer its relevance.

The other persona of the artist is that of the entrepreneur. Much is made of the similarities between artist and the entrepreneur, as risk-taker³⁷ and the atomised, frontier individualist.³⁸ This image is loaded with romance and prestige, from Joseph Schumpeter's entrepreneurs as agents in 'creative response',³⁹ Richard Florida's new bohemian creative class;⁴⁰ to 1990s Silicon Valley-funded public television where a white male rock climber teaches creative risk-taking to business students, linking it to heroic personal development and material success.⁴¹ It resonates with the 'idol' star-system trajectory in the music industry and the winner-takes-all art equivalent.⁴² The art hustler always perfecting the 'elevator pitch', operating only on their wits, just one bold move from ascension to white cube fame, the 'peacock' personality who proves their worth as an investible subject by the hours put in without pay, just for the love of it,

influence the discourse is a gatekeeper. Artists and other experts like critics, gallery owners, dealers, impresarios, civil servants etc., can all be gatekeepers." Abbing, *opcit.* p.268.

29 Abbing, *opcit.* pp.267–276; "...the current climate is one of elitism and misunderstanding, in which it is in art dealers' interest to keep the market small and opaque [Morris Hargreaves McIntyre. 'Taste buds: How to cultivate the art market. Executive summary.' Arts Council England, October 2004. p.7]: "Managing the subscription process necessitates restricting the amount of work for sale, and the number of people who are able to possess work by the artist." Telese, *opcit.* p.5.

30 Abbing, *opcit.* p.121.

31 Moss, Geoffrey. "Bohemia: Introduction and Classic Prototypes." In *Artistic Enclaves in the Post-Industrial City*, 31–47. Cham: Springer

International Publishing, 2017. pp.32–33.

32 Dempster, A.M. 'Perspectives on Risk & Uncertainty.' In Dempster, A.M. (ed). *Risk and Uncertainty in the Art World*. 25–45. London: Bloomsbury, 2014. p.38.

33 Montague, S. 'Edward Dolman, Chairman, Christie's International'. BBC World News, HARDtalk interview 4th October, 2010.

34 "[Independent curator] Ken Pratt describes a tendency for UK galleries, small and established alike, to prefer the artist in a more passive role. Telese, *opcit.* p.7; My father, Dr John Lepper, an economic researcher and author, retired academic and public service economist, pointed out that artist passivity in the market despite the fact that an artist has a monopoly over their own 'product', is an anomaly because normally in a market the converse is true, that having a monopoly gives the monopoliser economic and

political power. In conversation with the author, 11 April 2021.

35 Dempster, *opcit.* p.38.

36 Gupta, A. K. *Crises and Creativities: Middle-Class Bhadrakol in Bengal, c. 1939–52* New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2009.

37 Dempster, *opcit.* p.35.

38 Mould, *opcit.* p.62.

39 Schumpeter, J. A. "The Creative Response in Economic History." *The Journal of economic history* 7, no. 2 (1947): 149–159.

40 Roberts, David. "From the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism to the Creative Economy: Reflections on the New Spirit of Art and Capitalism." Thesis eleven 110, no. 1 (2012): 83–97.

41 Goleman, D., Kaufman, P., & Ray, M. L. 'The Creative Spirit.' production of Alvin H. Perlmutter, Inc., presented by WETA,

with unwavering belief in the innovative potential of their idea and that it is only a matter of time until they crack the big time.

In reality, the optimum creative risk-inducing conditions are opposite to this popularised idea of heroic precarity. Analyses of creative behaviour in corporate workplaces tells us so. For example, job insecurity has been shown to hinder idea generation and implementation,⁴³ as well as preventing the creativity and flexibility that much corporate restructuring aims to encourage.⁴⁴

If in fact financial struggle was necessary to the creative process, you'd think it might be easy to prove a natural propensity for creatives to equally take financial risks as well as creative risks. However, the opposite is true. While there is a direct correlation between creative risk-taking and the domain of social risk-taking, there is no such proven link with the domain of financial risk-taking.⁴⁵ Even entrepreneurial myth-busting itself accepts we all need enough money to avoid being distracted by our financial situation and free us to focus on being creative.⁴⁶ Easily google-able advice to entrepreneurs echoes this.

As well as needing adequate funding to take risks, despite what the rock-climbing, competitive individual of corporate creativity is selling, creatives also can't do it alone.⁴⁷ Artists and their risk-taking thrive in connected trusted networks.⁴⁸ Art world power is contingent on this fact. Risk-taking is actively encouraged as essential to high quality contemporary art,⁴⁹ and more than that, careers can be made by it, but only by gaining favour with a collective of experts.⁵⁰

Yet according to Abbing, this reputation giving is not dished out equitably for all artists. Since these experts monopolise the discourse, they are able to protect the innovation and risk-taking of some artists, whilst leaving others outside of this protection. (Just as the stylistic advances in the newly autonomised 19th century art world were often attained by the colonial exploitation of indigenous populations in the rest of the non-European world.) It serves gate-keepers to be the identifier of the next innovation as validating their position as expert, as long as that experimentation confirms the gate-keeper's position and does not offend or threaten to topple it.⁵¹

It is the non-monetary rewards, including improved status and reputation alongside a genuine belief in the value of their ideas,⁵² that explains why so many artists engage in the risk and experimentation required for innovation even though it is relatively "unprofitable"⁵³ (and increasingly unsupported institutionally),⁵⁴ leaving the artist's condition especially vulnerable to both manipulation and exploitation, consensual and otherwise.

Spaces like MEANTIME, whose programmes rise or fall on the financial and social capital of individual artists, benefit

from these mythological trajectories because emerging artists rationalise working for little or no financial reward as just part of the process of 'getting your foot in the door', where more stable critical and financial support appears to exist. But the clincher is that the ability to forsake monetary rewards in the first place depends directly on the amount of monetary and non-monetary rewards the artist is already receiving.⁵⁵

The political economy of artistic experimentation is further complicated by the fact that while risk-taking needs financial stability to thrive, it cannot be motivated by financial gain.⁵⁶ And further, if you are dependent on your artistic output for money, you are less likely to take artistic risks.⁵⁷ Poof! goes the artist-as-entrepreneur myth. At the same time, Abbing's research shows that "when artists earn not enough money to make a living their willingness to exchange money for private satisfaction is almost zero."⁵⁸ Poof! goes the starving artist myth.

This disconnect between production and profit motivation places demands on mainstream economic theory.⁵⁹ In particular, the criticality of risk to the creative process exceeds current economic and sociological scholarship on risk and uncertainty.⁶⁰ It is a disconnect that favours secondary market exponents who will continue to shrug off⁶¹ rather than resolve the dichotomy between stylistic consistency as an artist's best tool to buffer market instability and the fact that most great art takes a lot of risk, all the while it serves the interests of private fortunes. Artist run initiatives, independent researchers and public funders are best placed to explore this expanded field of economic theory. In fact they have a duty to, in order to find ways to share the burden of risk with art practitioners of greater diversity.

The evidence is clear, the equation for greatest creative experimentation and risk-taking = stable financial resourcing + artistic autonomy + social connection.⁶² Instead visual arts in particular takes neo-liberalism to a whole other level, pitting financial stability against artistic autonomy, and perpetuating social elites. Privilege begets privilege. Artists who are unable to fund through private means are quicker to seek a return for their work in a market of tradeable commodities most accessible to them. If these artists do not have access to the social capital that can transubstantiate experimentation into a monetary value, they are increasingly under pressure toward conservative art production, and away from risk taking. Therefore even the word experimentation becomes entangled in the system of signals and codes⁶³ that act as informal barriers for the uninitiated.

In many ways MEANTIME was an attempt to work around these art-world monopolisations. Aiming instead to open practice to a new form of cooperation with a community,

Washington D.C., broadcast on PBS, funded by IBM, New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Dutton, 1992. Accessed 26 March 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qwsUo8yyp0>

- 42 Frey, B. S. *Economics of Art and Culture*. Switzerland: Springer International, 2019. p.35.
- 43 Van Hootegem, A., Niesen, W., & De Witte, H. 'Does Job Insecurity Hinder Innovative Work Behaviour? A Threat Rigidity Perspective.' *Creativity and innovation management* 28, no. 1 (2019): 19–29.
- 44 Probst, T.M., Stewart, S.M., Gruys, M.L., & Tierney, B.W. "Productivity, Counterproductivity and Creativity: The Ups and Downs of Job Insecurity." *Journal of occupational and organizational psychology* 80, no. 3 (2007): 479–497.
- 45 Vaibhav, T., Hanoch Y., Hall, S.D., Runco, M., & Denham, S.L. 'The Risky Side of Creativity: Domain Specific Risk Taking in Creative Individuals'. *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol.8, 2017 p.145.
- 46 Burkus, D. *The Myths of Creativity: The Truth about How Innovative Companies and People Generate Great Ideas*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2013. p.95.
- 47 Chan J. 'Creativity and Culture: A Sociological Perspective.' In: Glăveanu V. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Creativity and Culture Research*. Palgrave Studies in Creativity and Culture. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2016. p.654.
- 48 "...heightened competition with fellow artists... not only eroded trust and solidarity but also led to less exchange of knowledge and information among professionals." Gielen, P. "Safeguarding Creativity: An Artistic Biotope and Its Institutional Insecurities in a Global Market Orientated Europe." In *Handbook of Cultural Security*, 398–416. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2018. p.410.
- 49 McMaster, B. *Supporting Excellence in the Arts From Measurement to Judgement*. London: Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 2008. p.6.
- 50 "In fields like science and art," Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes, "a consensus of experts decides whether an artifact is really new." As quoted in: Behnke, C., Kastelan, C. et.al. (eds). *Art in the Periphery of the Centre*. Sternberg Press. p.12.
- 51 Abbing, opcit. pp.272–279.
- 52 Bugden, opcit. pp.140–41.
- 53 Abbing, opcit. p.272.
- 54 Gielen, opcit. pp.408–410.
- 55 Abbing, opcit. p.116.
- 56 Burkus, opcit. p.95 & Bugden, opcit. p.141.
- 57 "If the focus of your artistic practice is to join this market then you may well have to take a cut in your independence and creativity." Fox, C. 'Market gardening: Artists' responses to the art market' a-n Collections September, 2007. Accessed 20 February 2021 <https://www.a-n.co.uk/>
- 58 Abbing, 2002, p.116.
- 59 Gielen, opcit. pp.407–408.
- 60 Dempster, opcit. p.39.
- 61 Gerlis, M. & Schwartzman, A. 'Allan Schwartzman "The Art Market: How it is Shaped and Challenged"' Barcelona Symposium 2020' *Talking Galleries*, 19 February 2020. Accessed 22 January 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CJEt3ZeWSI>
- 62 Burkus, opcit. pp.98–103: describes numerous examples in corporate businesses where creative employees are allocated breaks from normal work to explore projects or problems of natural

much like a 'socially relevant experimental laboratory for a new perceptual paradigm'⁶⁴ that was popular in Germany and other European nations at the time of MEANTIME's emergence. MEANTIME achieved many remarkable projects made possible by the risks that Sarah⁶⁵ and other artists took. Yet without independent funding or a community that could financially sustain it, just like the brick location of the space itself, MEANTIME existed between a rock and a hard place.

For when a residency offers financial support that does not cover living costs, it replicates a neo-liberal crucible, rather than providing an alternative to it. Further, it could be argued that residencies in such a position (albeit unwittingly) assist in the exploitation of those artists most likely to challenge the status quo.⁶⁶ The fact that artistic risk-taking requires financial and collective support which is dependent on privilege, and yet is also intrinsic to contemporary art practice itself, is the perfect self-perpetuating feedback loop, an echo chamber for privileged practice, where it is easy to conclude like Audre Lorde, that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.⁶⁷

If we have any interest at all in resisting and imagining a true alternative to the neo-liberal model, perhaps the first step is to question whether we are comfortable continuing to boost the idea of artistic autonomy irrespective of available capital, while in fact remaining reliant on hidden economic and social privilege.

Steyerl's entanglement is real. Aside from a few artists who are resourced via passive income, public funding or other private support, most artists aren't making a living through their work, but depend on the broader job market for their livelihood. Therefore, regardless of where artists are receiving funding, they, like everyone else, are participating in a broader market economy. It is reductive for an artist or artist run initiative to argue a case for resisting making money through art on political grounds only to make it in the open job market. No aspect of the economy is left untouched by the ethical dilemmas exacerbated by a situation of selling art, that is, between personal integrity, autonomy and commercial exploitation.

The answer isn't necessarily capitulating to the insubstantial and flawed economic theories of our time, but to ask more of them. This means refocusing away from the illusion of outside the 'market' to which 'market' we are engaging with,⁶⁸ on what terms, who has clout, who is excluded, how is risk managed, whether collective wealth can be accumulated for collective benefit or not, and, how conscious and open we are about that engagement with ourselves and others.

interest to them whilst still on the payroll,
to enable the companies to keep step with
innovation in their core business sector.

63 Abbing, *opcit.* p.268.

64 Pasero, U. 'Why Artists Go Unpaid' in Van den Berg, K. & Pasero, U. (eds) *Art Production Beyond the Art Market?* Berlin: Stenberg Press, 2013. p.164.

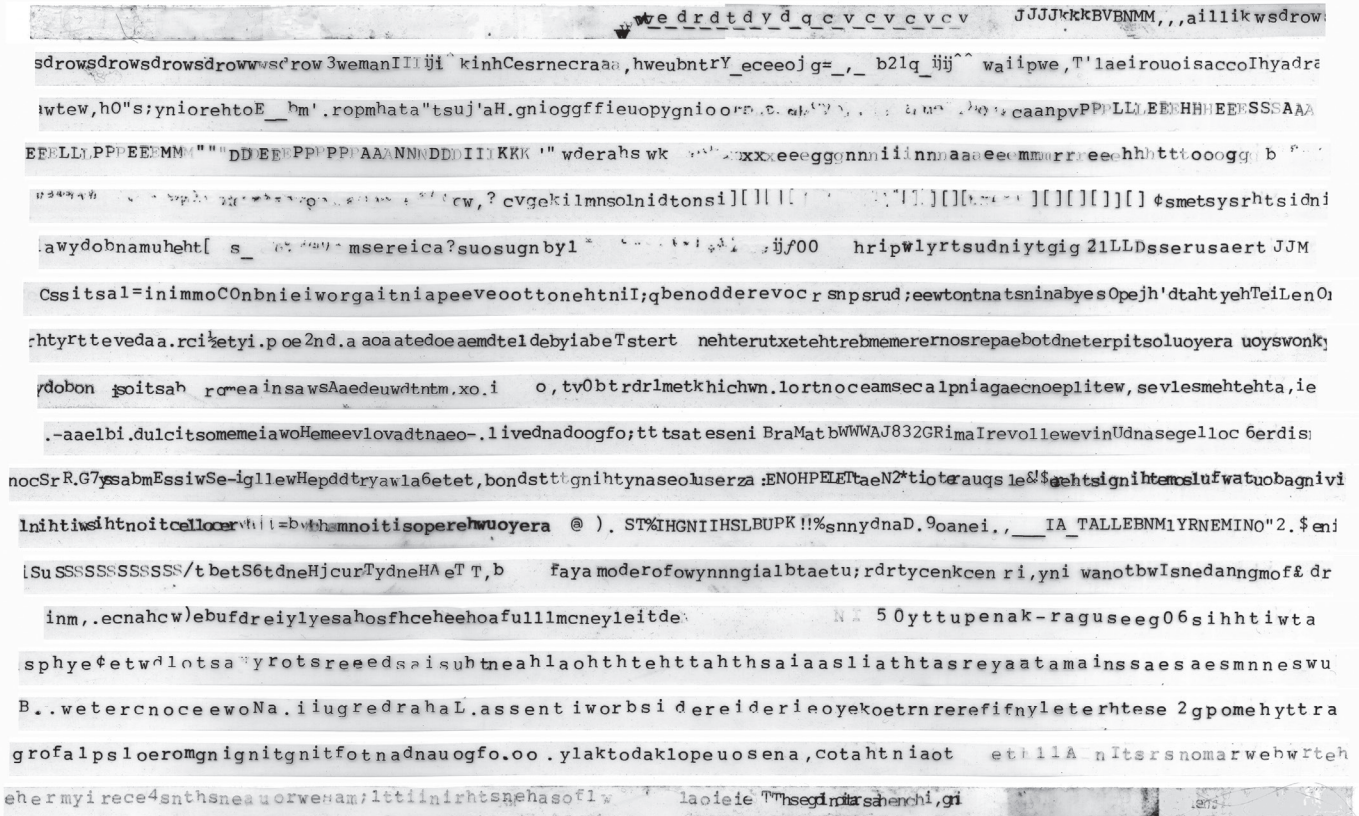
65 I am echoing Chie Konishi's insight that MEANTIME was: "both [Sarah's] very personal project and everybody's." Bowden, *opcit.* p.34.

66 This point was raised by my father Dr John Lepper, responding to an early draft of this essay, to which I had invited his feedback as an economist.

67 Lorde, A. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." 1984. In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007. pp.110-114.

68 "When artists and critics today choose a particular aesthetic option, they are also choosing the market in which that option might have a chance at economic success." Boris Groys as quoted by: Pasero, *opcit.* p.158.

WRITING AS OCCUPATION



thickening
of thought
and narrative
loops, even

Neil Chapman
and David Stent

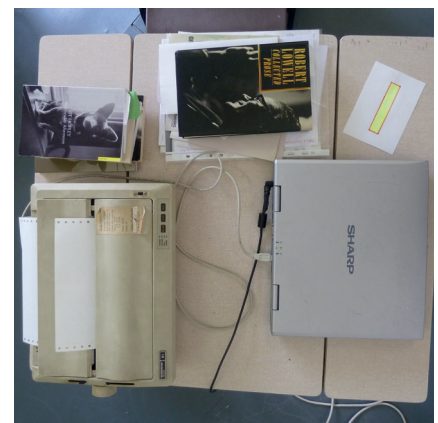
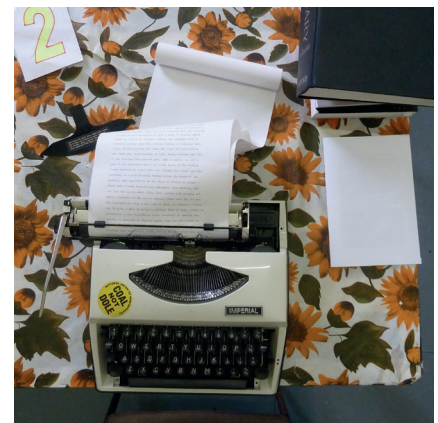
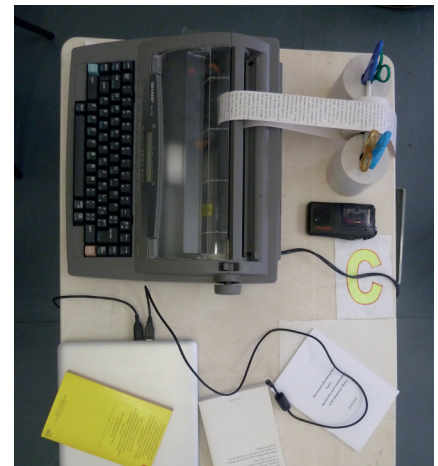


At first glance it appears that there are three sections but, if, in accordance with the severity of the situation, you in a moment, things will unfold to reveal further resort to writing, make sure to figure in the numbers using complexity, sections within sections and so on. the same system. The semblance of sense is beginning to More importantly, there are transitions. The initial one peel and crack, leaving only the slimmest chance of tactical takes place as you, reader, find yourself in the company of advancement and a degraded sense of whatever narrative someone who appears to be an insurgent sheltering in a structure had been committed to. In whatever case, the building that, you now realise, is a writing will hold forth at the point where its fuel is printworks with dark stained benches, cabinets containing exhausted and its collapse will come in line with gravity. tins of ink, stacks of paper, printing Within a certain horizon, light itself becomes trapped, presses and other equipment associated with such places. invisible. All this is due to go critical. Your position is The technology is old and so it can be reinforced, against hope, mainly through the maintenance assumed that the scene is set in prior times, the 19th of air space, securing coelomic retention – pressing insides Century, the protagonist a Communard standing onto the walls – in order to vacate all but the essentials. To beneath a window in the interior where no view is sustain the shell. A bricolage practice, then, rearranging to be had onto the street. The window is high, but objects under a dry-point vault, turning each into a singular the view is obscured further by grime on the glass. brick. With its armour plating, the building has become a A battle is taking place outside. Before going any blind sleeper, lids locked by mucous, the soft globes further let it be noted that this character in profile rotating wildly beneath. In as much as the dreamer's eyes is imagined to some extent on the basis of a painting flit, watchful in the shuttered darkness, so the writers from roughly the same era, a postcard representation remain active in the blockaded building. Sealed off as they showing a young man in profile, in an outfit cobbled are, there's still the possibility of sound leaking in and out; together from articles of civilian clothes intended to



approximate battledress. There is a sense of peace in the interior that contrasts oddly with the pressures of all sound twisting around this hard cell, like unfolding in such close proximity. He is catching his breath. And more is implied, a pensive evaluation. Here I am, he says to himself in a tone betraying his surprise that he should have survived thus far. Shadowy figures run in the street, their shouts are difficult to decipher, further invoking this place as an unexpected but welcome sanctuary. In fact, what we are describing is already the second section. An early sentence or two, while not providing a description of the insurgent's entry into this space, hints at that event. If in a manner of speaking the second scene has come first it is because of a better legibility of those sentences. And the tendency to glance back to see what must surely have been missed when reading the passage at the start. You skipped over it too quickly. Note that these first sentences imply a different kind of atmosphere, and that there were two characters to begin with. The later scenario (Communard standing listening to the noise of a battle taking place outside, which he was a part of and will re-join in due course) has settled into a literary form, not least on account of the pre-modern painting with its implied narrative. The earlier scenario, on the other hand, can be seen now as more filmic, an action movie with two fighters tumbling through a door, which gives itself to them the inner sanctum that may not be the most securely as an escape route, miraculously, just when it looked like their luck was out. Such scenarios make good drama on the screen. The two Communards fire off some final shots then but before they can even take a breath, they have occupation - not necessarily the centre spot, cross-

referenced and measured, but the self-selecting heart of the turn their attention to the dangers that might reside act of retreat. And where would that be here, you ask, other inside, because it is not yet clear if they are safe in the than within an element of the writing? Distributed old print workshop. For all they know, it could be a somewhere amongst the reams of text emerging following barracks for Republican forces. Luckily, it seems not its seclusion. The occupation becomes ratified – signified to be so. They can relax. They are safe. They laugh at even – by its production. And this relates to the way it is their good fortune. Calm silence pervades the room. organised. Task rotas, writing drills, handbooks of guided Now they are able to reflect for a moment... or he practice. This is the best way for 'writing in retreat' to do its is able to reflect, because at this point the second work. It should follow the rigours of prison life, the of the two soldiers melts away. Or perhaps still strictures of schoolrooms, asylums, and scrivener's offices, better to say that the one standing close to the only lest its energies have no outlet, or fall back on uncontrolled, light source, the high, barred window, establishes chaotic leakages that exhaust themselves without concrete himself more surely as an image, to the detriment effect in the world. Lest you forget that the gable space is a of the other as image. There is no regret. He is on white-washed blank, already in accordance with countless the right side of a just war. The next transition takes patterns of quotation. But then, if it is as simple as that, the place in a more brutal way. Much of what has been question gets bounced down to the living quarters set in place so far is bracketed, shunted back into underneath—a shelter sprung up on the ground floor, forgetting while something more urgent rises. The centred on a rug found leaning like a corpse under the adversaries out on the street are not Republican stairwell. A second pop-up screen has sprouted in the forces opposing a socialist rebellion anymore. They corner of the workroom. It is an anomaly in itself, stuffed are zombies. This is a contemporary scene, if not of in dead space behind the upper bannister; lurid green, film, then of television. The trouble on the street contaminating working and sleeping patterns, a node flips from noisy infraction to menacing quiet. Many coordinating all the diagrams by which labour is dividing figures can be seen — or they would be seen if a clear up the space. You might say that this upper floor is filled view could be had from inside the building. They only with prospective content, or perhaps only the means are not running, nor are they fighting, but standing by which that could be delivered. But is this redoubt in loosely arranged groups, feeling their way, with a offensive or defensive? Can the occupation be usefully mission as persistent as their movements are slow. considered a retreat, or is it rather a form of neutrality, The point of view shifts. While you are still the sought in order to ensconce a given activity according to reader, now you're also the one they're after. They specific terms and conditions? Possessions deposited may be close by, lurking around the door, scraping throughout the space are minor, practical. They are utilities, at the window frames, but they won't get in. You are tactical tools for *elevating surfaces...* for dirtying writing safe for the moment. Stay quiet, they may even forget paper, blocking out light, screening off zones, subdividing your presence and wander off in search of easier pray,





then you will be able to leave the barricaded place to thought. The enclosing vessel is positioned in a residential collect supplies. Steel yourself for the forthcoming passage. A route home for drunks; redevelopment for retail, exit. The violence to be meted out on these bodies bulwarked by loading depots, curling macadam ramps is another righteous justice, but now it is the emerging like mung sprouts; a car park on every side; violence of a video game. Though you have a gun trolleys of commercial waste; terraced backyards. The space it's better not to use it. Any loud report will bring is confused in many respects, equidistant to the precinct more of these reanimated corpses lumbering out of and the ring road. In any case, the task is not to break away the nearby woods. Large numbers are where their advantage resides. Better to use a machete, better trading station (...Elmina, Melaka, Macau...), a mollusc on still a crossbow. Increasingly, the narrative is more the underside. The only way to establish purchase (let alone fully yours as you stoke the aggression necessary to a monopoly) is to begin papering all interior surfaces, even get you past these adversaries. Consider with disgust the nested internal barricades. Writing is pinned up the condition of the zombie brain, rotted by virus, everywhere you look, establishing the scope of a panorama the way it remains able only to direct basic functions of viable possibilities, reinforcing not only the barriers of of the body while rendering monomania all that's left the enclosure but increasing its warmth. As a setting for of thought. Other writings come to mind where the trade, the sea-grey floor gets curtailed by geometric white-characters' psyches are described approaching that of foam walls. This sea is dead calm, pushing out to the the zombie, passages on Jonah for instance in the furthest corners. Its containment suggests that all this is biblical story, where the Prophet appears in sullen ingrowing, a nail settling into the flesh. Amidst all this, mood, the interior of his head having become like texts hang on the walls like so many captured specimens, the desert where he is to be found sitting, waiting, wing patterns being slowly drained in variable light. A in the shade of a large plant, his mind emptied, all range of photographic prints also fade selectively, laden except for a smooth pebble that rolls in the cranial with stubborn coherence, suggesting they can be rescued. It cavity of his skull as he lingers with his resentful is growing cold. Could all this circumambience produce thoughts. Without warning the scene changes again. heat? Might we succeed in keeping out the elements, or It reverts. Events are organised once more around a maintain the viability of circulating airs whilst remaining window providing light for an interior but through reliant on the outer casing (of the world) for sustenance? which no view can be had — this time due to frosted As you write you think of a pearl being compressed in the glass. You are a writer, holed up here, waiting, alone, tray of an oyster. Its occupation takes shape under a like Jonah. But your mood is not resentment. It is mucoid tongue, a hard grain slowly extrapolating, writing boredom. There is work to complete. You cannot out, increasing in mass, to become the smoky white muster the energy. If you were to move out of the manifestation of a sphere... yet you're unsure if the direct sunlight it would be easier (take a tip from formation is not some kind of waste product, an accretion

of matter that begins as an itch, an irritation, only to
Jonah, he had that much sense at least). Memories
become an obstacle, a voided (indeed occupied) volume
of childhood return, interminable days when you
could not find incentive, when, in your frustration,
you climbed on the furniture as if it were an assault
course, from the banister in the stairwell onto the
high windowsill. Remember what it felt like to be in
your stocking soles, how you had to grip the window
latch to maintain your balance. Imagine friends and
family making their way back to the house. Past
crowds of zombies. Write about your childhood
acrobatics, give close consideration to the moves
required to get you from your place on the stairs up
onto the windowsill. Linger on the details. Describe
what it feels like, how it's possible to edge along a
bit further, perhaps getting a glimpse outside where
the window is open at the top. It's a game. You're
on a cliff, on a narrow ledge. If you were to lose
your grip now it would be the end. It is hardly a
strategy, but boredom is instrumental. Embrace it. In
the fallow moment in front of the typewriter Jonah's
pebble will be heard rolling. Just as the windowsill
can be described for the way it feels under the foot,
the brain in boredom has a feeling. It is a crumbly
mass, like yeast, like material that might sublimate
without warning, like matter rotted by virus. The
content of your head is added on both sides
by rocks. When their gravity can be felt, blessed
dullness, then writing begins. Thus, the earlier terms
come round. Stealthily, the thickening of thought and potential activity. And it is a
while it maintains its simple arc, picking up what
it needs from the earlier scenario and curving now
into weightlessness.

The Impossible Other

Martin Wooster

I

MEANTIME was an investigation and a conceptual experiment into the problematic question of freedom in a time of historical closure. It took place at a precise historical juncture when all the old avenues holding out the hope of a different future were being closed down. Thus it sought to break free from the weight of history, from an oppressive absence of meaning that had begun to pervade people's lives, now increasingly absorbed by human suffering, and from a globalized culture of consumption that seems ever less able to tolerate the other as an obstacle of complexity, ambivalence, and contradiction. In many ways MEANTIME drew its inspiration from a romantic sensibility as it sought an entirely new function for the writer – a writer who is still to come and who will take his or her place in a different society. For MEANTIME, its language and sense of community would be inspired by the artwork, but since its meaning could not be relinquished lightly, the work of its remembrance could do worse than find inspiration from the figure of Don Quixote, at once fantastic, agile, ironic, possessing a radiant mobility, and who gives us to discover in literature its most dangerous meaning – that everything in the world belongs to it even if it can only affirm itself in default.

2

Yet it was also the case that MEANTIME from the very beginning offered a darker, more troubled view of life. If it had sought its dreams everywhere it only ever found fragments, finite signs pointing to definite lines of enquiry, but never quite in reach to determine their objects, always retreating back into the background the closer they came. MEANTIME sought an idea of community as both sustainable and able to make artistic and intellectual contributions to various practices, always with the intention to resist the deflationary attitude towards works of the mind that marked a contemporary moment. But many of these dreams floundered on atomized lives no longer sufficiently protected by the collective structures of the welfare state, and austerity had eroded the public sphere more generally. Artists

working under their own steam needed more time and energy to feel they were getting somewhere, but all the while the belief in meaningful change was beginning to feel ever less likely. If still too painful to acknowledge, the signs were there that as artists we were already turning into a fragmented class of people largely determined in advance, and if things felt like they were coming to a halt, there was no potentiality to this halt, only the brute force of its actuality. Like the towering figure of Babel, once touching the heavens of understanding, its dreams and expectations had come to nothing, now a collapsed figure issuing a strange clamour of confused tongues amid a heap of stones. This is not to say MEANTIME didn't have its moments, the best of which displayed buoyancy and zest, but it leaves questions of freedom echoing in the air, where doubtless they will remain long after the questioners themselves, and their answers, have left the scene.

3

To return to the early German romantics, who were writing in the immediate aftermath of the French revolution, is to discover a writing project seeking a new relationship with language. To deal with a changing world, to find a subject capable of acting without orders, commandments and laws, they offered translations of poetic-erotic licence into the domain of practical reason as a means to compound the subject, and make a presentation of its withdrawal of presence. It was their intention that the splendour of unintelligibility needed to shine if they were to truly practice a democratic politics of writing. If the French revolution had given them hope for another world, it was still necessary to find the true source of its desire, that for them must lie beyond the subject and its wilful need to exercise power over life. Thus it was equally necessary that language find its revolution, which they found in developing a fragmentary form of writing. Though they sought some form of completion, it was an impossible task. For the romantics, the human subject was only discernable in its absence, knowable only in its perpetual lack, thus their project was marked by chaos, its metaphysics constantly having

to grapple with doubt, hesitation, and a fair amount of vagueness. But, despite its incompleteness, it testified to a fracture in language and a breach in the flow of communication, and in doing so awakened an insistent craving for novelty and adventure.

4

If the romantics had given a renewed sense of possibility to live, think, and act differently, it was in language, beneath the surface of its articulated meanings. Here they had imagined that new rhythms, pulsations, touch, difference and, perhaps, even desire itself could find a new sense of freedom for language in a disenchanting world. This inspired a belief that humanity could still become something more than itself, make new promises, and as Karl Marx believed, allow this something more to 'stand security for one's own future'. The sense that language also embodied an unrepentant recognition of difference, separateness, and non-understanding meant it could tease from the things of the world new forms of articulations and sociality, of which it might be possible for all to potentially gather around. This too was reason for a political cause, and something that could become all the more political as its differences fed into moveable parts and shifting categories, rather than fixed positions. But for the romantics none of this can take shape without a prior recognition of a certain necessary stupidity, something that comes closer to Maurice Blanchot's sense of nullity, in which the crushingly useless, everything that fatigues knowledge and wears down history is necessary to create openings, and where the freedom of new beginnings must originate. For Friedrich Nietzsche the 'value of art' is meaningless unless one starts from the devaluation of all values, of which the poet Joseph Brodsky asks, 'how can there be any passion, any intensity to human sentiments without us first anticipating this inanimate infinity?'

5

For Martin Heidegger, a person's essential being, their *Da-sein*, is a happening in strangeness, and to be worthy of it is to be open to it, allowing the unthinkable to enter into a normal frame of reference. For Heidegger it was necessary to feel the tension between exposure and control, whilst knowing that left to their own devices the structures of the self are prey to darker forces that play on fear, insecurity and anger. Yet with late Heidegger, it was clear that 'homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the world'. For Marx, it was already discernible that dead labour would come to be the core logic animating the contemporary technological epoch. For

too long enlightenment thought had stripped everything down, removing everything that could not be known, so that it could then submit practical reason to the dominance of an instrumental rationality. The bio-political paradigm took hold to repair tears in the social fabric, and had become a totalizing process in which the whole governs the parts. This subsumed the power of labour within social relations, in which commodities rule like mythical divinities, and economics progressively becomes the law of all human interactions, colonising all other life-worlds. In the end Kant's thing-in-itself is not so much the transcendent kernel of the world, but had become its discarded husk.

6

In this place, both the individual and the collective remain incomplete, as any connection between the two remains menacingly unattainable, reduced to abstractions where neither is able to fill-in the inconsistencies of the other. Here labour is easily fixed in the eternal present of historicism of which Marx was to write, 'time is everything, man is nothing, he is at most time's carcass'. Doubtless this causes a greater hunger for connection, but how difficult the possibility of genuine exchange is when everything is submitted to the harsh light of a crisis that springs from a permanent and ruthless actualization of potentiality. From here the individual atomizes, and a modernity based on rushing forward in the pursuit of knowledge increasingly produces a universalism that homogenizes relations among people. As a result society has become even more divided, leading to segregations and producing intersections that only multiply barriers. The modern predicament had been laid bare: an idea to abolish negativity in order to conceive life in a radically immanent fashion, something like a play acted upon the foundation of pleasure and pain. But all the while dark forces had become more powerful, releasing nationalistic passions and culture-war skirmishes at a tragically inflated cost, pushing further along a timeline towards authoritarianism.

7

Modernity had imagined it could break the constitutive link with the non-historical origin, but the idea that life could move definitively away from its dangers is also to move it away from its resources. Existence is revealed only through the procedures of struggle, which are bound to our bodies and their inherent frailty and vulnerability. For the romantics the future was promised as other, but it resided in maintaining and protecting the unknown mystery, the unnameable part of a common existence. They believed that

a capacity to gesture, both in its communicative and transformative facility, could give back to the body the possibility of its emancipated life. For Heidegger, whose lifelong preoccupation was with the problem of Being, comes the idea that it is essential to shift human concerns from its addiction to knowledge, and withdraw back to the field of a 'fundamental ontology'. From here we may find places to dwell in order to comport time, and thus give ourselves the basis of an existential orientation able to cut into simplistic linear models of progress. Dwelling is also a chance to discover the body anew, to accept that human labour is not merely the means of life but first of all the need of life, both in and against nature. Finally, in connecting with what is both necessary and contingent, what Nietzsche called 'the iron hand of necessity throwing the dice of chance', we may learn again what a unique gift reason is when we deploy it as both mind and sensibility at the same time, a mind that feels itself in its own productions. This gives reason a collective, sustainable agency, in which there are no reasons that reason cannot extend itself beyond any possible human experience, something Eugene Thacker imagined could even make its presence felt through the periodic upheavals of weather, land, and matter, as expressed in the dust of the planet.

8

The logic of capital had cemented the norms of society, existence, and forms of subjectivity – it produced a veritable world system of power governed by the imperative of self-preservation. The market turned out to be a performance of maintaining the political-libidinal desire of the subject, and in minimizing its excesses the future is progressively wiped clean of the other, designed as a more efficient, updated version of the present. It has created a disaffected world in which everything is too difficult to comprehend and too specific to unravel, whilst a sense of depression is left to bear witness to the collapsed space of an impotent imagination. For Heidegger, this is a forgetting of Being and the mark of a withdrawn life – a world that has singularly failed to recognize the larger forces out of which egoistic struggles originate. Yet emboldened by technological development, life is imagined in its immediacy. The dream of autonomous, non-relational agents exercising their free-will in order that a conflictual humanity might retreat to the benefit of a fusional humanity becomes a reality. Here the market is imagined as the final arbiter of truth, and it is money that now provides the royal road to the other's desire. This dream however can only produce a false happiness. Not only

does it deprive language of its own desire by restricting it to forms of knowledge, it also covers over the traumatic disturbance inscribed into the very notion of the subject that finds its expression in the structure of poetry, even though there is no secure, coherent or constant ground to this structure. In the end this dream is merely an exercise in which the future embodies a type of satisfaction foreclosed in a present – one that never ends. Today this has given rise to 'the new chronic', a sense of dull soreness, of a meantime with no end, of which Andrew Solomon writes, 'we are depressed not because we are so removed from what we want, but because we have merged with it'.

9

In every truly democratic regime a materiality of speech needs to exist, and must stem from the fact that at base all we have is speech and language for giving utterances to ourselves and to the world, and for acting upon the world. For Jacques Ranciere, the principle point of distress is that speech has lost its guarantees. Having lost its sense of gravity it acts like money: immediate, fluid, weightless, infinitely circulating and immortal, severed from its concern for the ineffable, for human imagination and the mystery of other lives. When speech responds to what is not there, admits the incalculable and the unpredictable, it has no need to lie about its legitimacy and its effectiveness because it is free to assume its status as speech. This gives a sense that language itself might become its own subject and form of praxis, and although in any sign system there must exist a radical arbitrariness containing its share of 'error, madness and stupidity', it nonetheless might be the case that words often understand each other better than those who make use of them. But when speech and language fail to safeguard and maintain their depressive origins, what Samuel Beckett called the 'ill-seen, ill said', or how Jean-Luc Nancy described communism, 'the archaic name of a thinking which is entirely to come', a situation that arises from a profound boredom and the unbearable order of the existing order of things, then speech becomes compulsive and unceasing, precisely what William Shakespeare saw as very close to evil, in its incapacity to be open to the sensuous needs of others.

10

For Georg W. F. Hegel, the force of negativity is a physically experienced reality that precedes all conceptualisation and colonisation, and if we are to embrace it, tarry with its restlessness and in the end possess it more deeply, then here lies the substance for forgetting one's own self

and answering to the call of the other. The other is not to be understood as nature, or one from another culture, but an experience of reality that can only be lived, not captured by rational conceptualisation. The other is our connection to the real and its power of disruption, often necessarily violent because the changes it promises cannot be a matter of smooth evolution or simple continuity. For Heidegger it gives rise to an 'exaggerated subjectivity', which he defines as, 'not more self, but more of the world, not more activity, but more lingering'. And although the real is unliveable in itself, it nevertheless 'releases an uncanny power to inaugurate a new human order'. For Sigmund Freud, the uncanny power that he called the unconscious is essential to a capacity to dream, or wish-fulfilment, and although these wishes are not simply without an object, they do not aim at an empirical, immediate, or concrete object either. Rather they introduce a third category, that abolishes the dichotomy of presence and absence thus disturbing the regime of knowledge, to open upon the frail potentialities hidden in the folds of existence ultimately charged with the responsibilities of all life on earth. For Freud, when nature is reduced to mere knowledge and facts it loses its importance for life, and when aging and death are ignored in a failure to take account of what it really means to live as mortal, finite beings, lives lose their focus and turn hierarchical and violent.

11

The need to dream, to be open to the world and welcome an ecological reality, requires a letting go of the impoverished notion of the real as laid down by the economic doxa that entirely dictates the obligations of political productivity. The failure to imagine other worlds has turned politics into a matter of image, icon and empty spectacle, creating a sense of freedom premised on too narrow an idea of individual responsibility and accountability that presently forms the basis of morality, and its culture of guilt. For Michel Foucault, liberal institutions immediately cease to be liberal as soon as they attain a fixed state; he concluded there is nothing more harmful to freedom than liberal institutions. The liberal world promised freedom, and its forms of governmentality acted to continuously reinforce and affirm it, but it has ended up limiting and controlling freedom to the point of destroying all possibility of emancipation. In contrast, art explores the conditions of freedom in a performative manner, it thinks the spiritual and the material on the same plane, thus activating the sensitive within the intelligible and giving

primacy to its object, in order to decipher the singularities and non-identities that are lodged within it. If it makes no difference whether the object is an idea, a thought, a concept, a text, a form, an experience, or a problem of political or sociological theory, it requires drawing closer to points of insufficiency, precariousness, immaturity, stupidity, and the problems they present, that are neither dismissed nor solved. If the liberal world idealises growth and development and allows in the subject who is 'supposed to know', whilst continually concealing the fact that we are going nowhere, then art is a form of resistance in its capacity to exercise a form of powerlessness within the sublime: if it undoes the self it can be endured by reason to begin a series of cumulative transformations and thus testify to a new promise and adventure in freedom.

12

MEANTIME imagined a new subject to break through the categorical forms of subjectivity that had come to dominate every experience of the other, and to distort every other into a replica of the self. It used art to confront language at the point where it undoes itself, and at its best it was never afraid of nonsense, because it was precisely from here that one might come across the deepest experience of sense. MEANTIME knew its fate on the margins of society meant there was no essential relation connecting it to the social, to a sense of community, or by implication the political, but nevertheless it sought to order its space and find its sense in and around the artwork, reaching beyond the personal, to unlock the uneven temporalities in a heterogeneous and open past. Here it was influenced by the artist Bas Jan Ader, compelled to explore the tragic truth of the modern condition, to find ways to live with loss whilst giving testimony to the impassable alienation at the core of being human, and the greater catastrophe of misrecognising that alienation. MEANTIME was always looking for a new and different kind of desire, one that cannot succeed because a final object cannot be its aim, nor harmony its achievement, only the ability to tarry with what is most absent. (Though ultimately there is more in an ethical demand, and this more is less, a nothing at all.) Here it was hardly surprising that MEANTIME would turn to thinker Mark Fisher to ask, *Are We OK?* What is it that we have missed? In the end, like all the best passion plays, its desire had come to understand that when you can't get what you want, you have to conquer by giving yourself.

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