

Making-do: a pragmatist approach
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Being an artist-cum-administrator is a process of constantly negotiating between art and its publics, engaging in the politics of mediation, and developing a sense of criticality where one implicates oneself in the object of one's critique. In her essay, "When Water is Gushing In" curator Maria Lind writes that we have reached a crisis of mediation, where the demand for the spectacular has trumped attention to artistic projects that fall outside the realm of traditional exhibition strategies, projects that take risks and can result in failure, ones that offer a chance to reconsider the politics of context and the need for questioning the comprehensive phenomena of economic structure and the working conditions of everyday institutional practice. She asks, "What do we do with art where the process is as important as the art? What new forms of mediation arise when art works are radically heterogeneous, art works that willingly relates to its surroundings and shares many common interests with those who are not specialists?"

Arguably, new forms of mediation are continually needed to respond to the shifting parameters of art and therefore the terms of "crisis" are contingent on the present conditions for making creative work. Alternative modes of organizing have always been around, but today the heightened necessity of making-do may encourage their proliferation. The current economic recession is throwing into relief a problem that has been ongoing for some time, namely the considerable lack of arts funding in the US. But it's about more than simply not having enough money; artists (and people in general, really) have never had enough money to get their creative projects done. It's better to say that the current infrastructures for supporting and cultivating emerging forms of art practice are just not cutting it these days. The popularized and polarized models of for-profit and non-profit are both struggling. Competition for private and public funding is fierce, forcing artists and organizations to base their programming on available funding streams. In an environment where governmental support for the arts is minimal at best, and private support is dictated by the values and priorities of granting foundations, innovative and potentially controversial work is compromised in order to fit within categories deemed "fundable."

So what is to be done? Today the way one goes about acquiring necessary resources is just as creative an endeavor as how those resources are then utilized. It seems necessary to develop a vocabulary of approaches around this creative way of making-do, one that takes into account the relationship between art, its organizing structures, the conditions for participation, and how the underlying politics of these systems affect its reception. What is needed is a renewed approach, not necessarily to making art, but to navigating the underlying infrastructures that exist to support it. To start with, this means asking questions and challenging the traditional role of the arts administrator to be more of an intermediary figure attuned to critical inquiry and decision-making that involves mindfulness, commitment to open exchange and artistic integrity. The organizers of artist-run spaces are the ones directly involved with reformulating strategies that go beyond the traditional tasks of collecting, preserving, presenting and distributing to engage directly with practices that shift in and around "art" proper and imagine new possibilities for a revitalized cultural public sphere. One that, as cultural theorist Jim McGuigan writes, "provides a vehicle for thoughts and feeling, for imagination and disputatious agreement, which are not necessarily of inherit merit but may be of some consequence."

On an organizational level, artist-run spaces provide the opportunity to shift the typical benchmarks for a successful art organization from measurable goals and sustainability to those more conducive to experimentation and productive failure. Artist-run spaces fit all kinds of models. They are testing grounds and springboards to the commercial art world, intimate gatherings in apartments, and places for reading groups and shared meals. They are little pockets of activity that serve particular audiences at particular times, filling gaps and holes for all that the

art-world fails to provide. Sometimes they are meant to be temporary, and other times they can grow to become professionalized institutions that a later generation of artists define themselves against. All of these options should exist; emerging and career artists alike need multiple networks and venues to make an art-world that serves their needs. Yet allowing for all these possibilities seems to beg for a greater degree of specificity, it's important to look at the ways people are already working and the challenges they are facing on a pragmatic level in making it happen. What types of economies are being participated in here in Chicago? What types of exchanges are taking place? What kinds of obstacles are being encountered?

I am part of a group called InCUBATE (The Institute for Community Understanding Between Art and the Everyday), an experimental research institute and artist residency program dedicated to exploring and documenting new approaches to arts administration and arts funding. While studying Art Administration at the School of the Art Institute we became uneasy about the professionalizing discipline of "administration" when it came to critical and experimental art practices. There seemed to be a disconnect between what we were learning about in school, namely the tools to maintain the idiosyncratic art system as it exists, and the socially engaged and critical art practices happening in Chicago which seemed in tension with that world. So a few of us decided to build a platform where we could openly question how the art-world actually works and what possible directions it could conceivably take. Together, we act as curators, researchers and co-producers of artist's projects, operate a storefront space that houses a creative research residency program, and various other projects such as Sunday Soup (a monthly meal that generates funding for a creative project grant). Our main focus has been to address the lack of resources for artists operating outside the boundaries of institutional and market support and experiment with possible solutions.

InCUBATE is a learning tool to figure out how and why institutions function the way they do, who the people involved are, and what interests they serve. It is an access point, a way of finding a seat at the table where resources are allocated and visibility is provided. We want to learn by doing. How can we participate in artist-run culture as it exists currently in Chicago without just analyzing and historicizing its practices? What does collaboration between administrators and artists look like when institutional authority is called into question? We are not experts; our process is directly dependent on a gradually accumulating group of people who want to be involved in collectively pooling resources, sharing histories on what's already been done, and imagining the conditions for an ethical and critical art world that would support its constituents. It's built upon social relationships that have to develop over time.

Part of our learning process is building loose-knit and as-needed coalitions with other alternative organizations. Our storefront space, the Orientation Center, houses a diverse range of projects: meeting and office space, our artist residency, a library and several regular community meals and lectures. We co-manage the space with two other local cultural organizations: AREA Chicago (a magazine and events series about culture and politics in Chicago) and the Chicago Underground Library (an eclectic library of publications and zines made by Chicagoans) as well as other co-workers who contribute rent and program events. Everyone that uses the space on a regular basis contributes towards rent. InCUBATE is not a non-profit 501c3, because we didn't want to organize ourselves that way, financially or hierarchically. There is no magic reserve of money, our personal and collective financial situation is precarious and always being re-invented. Our economy is based on the fact that all the organizations and people involved contribute to each others activities and share both personal and professional affinities. We have limited resources, but find that operating at a micro-scale and being as honest as possible about our capacity actually makes the fundraising we do manageable and immediate.

And then there are the communities we collaborate with outside our space, groups with radically different means of operating yet also with key affinities and areas of overlap. Experimental cultural centers like Mess Hall and Experimental Station inspired us to get working and start thinking through the issues of surplus, generosity, and community-building. Threewalls

exemplifies how becoming a nonprofit institution can be a thoughtful, slow-building process. he said-she said in Randall Szott and Pamela Fraser's living room is a dialogic space for cultural practices from inside and outside art contexts that parallels some of our own arguments about how to participate in the art-world. Backstory is a collectively-run café and infoshop that fuses radical politics with a functioning economic model. These spaces operate according to the needs of specific people and neighborhoods in the city. This specificity makes them do what they do well and is what makes artist-run culture truly valuable. We don't feel the need to join forces by operating out of the same space to amplify everyone's activities, but rather to see ourselves as part of a functioning ecosystem in which we are one site among many in which a set of questions are debated and contextualized. By truly partaking in each other's activities, beyond monetary investment, a healthy infrastructure evolves by virtue of our mutual support.

But even with the tangible benefits to be found within a social network, everyone's still got money issues (as AREA's latest issue was aptly titled). With the global economy in turmoil, our own relationships to the political and economic realms far larger and more complex than the art world are thrown into sharp relief. So we find ourselves concerned with keeping our own miniature economy functional, but also contemplating economies of scale. We are faced with the questions: How do we bridge scales? How do we operate locally, within our own network and simultaneously puncture its borders? When invited to participate in Artists Run Chicago at the Hyde Park Art Center through a collaboration with Alogon Gallery, we wanted to respond to the artist-run community as it was being formulated by moving beyond our individual situation and to see what we had in common with these other spaces also trying to make-do.

Our answer was to launch the Artist Run Credit League (ARCL), a rotating credit association for artist-run spaces in Chicago. The ARCL format is derived from that of the *tanda*, a monetary practice formed by a core of participants who agree to make regular contributions to a fund, which is given to each contributor in rotation. It basically acts as a collective savings account and micro-credit line, which is based on a mutual trust amongst the members and a shared faith in the value of keeping the community networked. Members can swap out the months that they will receive their credit based on their programming needs. They are also required to throw one fundraiser per credit-cycle that will raise at least \$200 dollars, the collective sum of which gets distributed equally to all members on a quarterly basis. Besides the participation of individual members, the league is also structured to accept tax-deductible contributions from outside donors wishing to support the entire community as a whole. We hope that artist-run spaces, by being mutually invested in the fund itself, will have an interest in attending each other's fundraisers and building the community of participants outwards. The fund will accrue value the more the community invests in its well-being, meaning that it will become a sustainable model based on the group's level of commitment to making it work. In essence, it is an experimental community bank in which artist-run spaces can have a platform for sharing resources and discuss creative fundraising tools.

I don't have any idea if this project is going to work, but in order for these new forms to have any real political currency, they need to be developed through a group process, creating alliances between artists and non-artists that are animated within particular contexts of power. The model is explicitly functional in the way it generates money, and implicitly critical as a way of generating dialogue about the availability and distribution of resources for the arts. Though InCUBATE is far from being an authority in creating credit associations, there are plenty of fundraising specialists from disciplines outside the art context who are willing to share their knowledge and experiences about how to combine traditional organizational models with more experimental approaches for social justice and grassroots causes. I would like to learn from them and hopefully they have something to learn from me. The language we are building can act as a microcosm to address the distribution of resources within the art-world and extend to the ways in which we are implicated and accountable within the economies of culture. It's a means of learning how to operate in the world as it exists, but also imagining radical administration that

can make it run.

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For Ben Schaafsma