

What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Photography and Participation

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**What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Photography and
Participation**

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What We Don't Talk About When We Talk About Photography and Participation

Abstract

This conversation takes the work of artist Anthony Luvera as the basis for a broader analysis of participatory photography in the context of contemporary art. Where existing literature typically focuses on the ethics of participatory production—considering the amount of ‘agency’ afforded to participants in any particular project—the discussion focuses instead on relationships between funders, facilitators, artists, audiences and participants in more material terms. It aims to open up an understanding of participatory photography, reflecting on the issues of financialization and labour typically overlooked in existing analyses and reflecting on some of the reasons for that omission.

Keywords

Participation; photography; contemporary art; collaboration; labour; homelessness

FIG 1

Ben Burbridge Perhaps you could start us off by saying a bit about your project *Assembly*?

Anthony Luvera *Assembly* was made in Brighton between 2012 and 2014. It's a progression of the greater body of work I've created with people who have experienced homelessness in towns and cities across the UK for over fifteen years. As part of *Assembly* I initiated a partnership with the Brighton Housing Trust, and in the first year or so I spent time getting to know the staff and individuals associated with two of their support services, a hostel called Phase One and the First Base Day Centre. I then invited people to use single-use cameras to create photographs and digital sound recorders to capture their experiences. I met with participants regularly to discuss their images and sounds, and to record conversations about our work together, and about photography, representation and identity more broadly. Participants were also invited to learn how to use medium-format digital camera equipment, over repeated sessions, to create a self-portrait for my ongoing series *Assisted Self-Portraits*. In addition to working with participants to create photographs and record audio, I struck up a collaboration with The Cascade Chorus – a choir of people in recovery – to sing, create sound recordings, and rehearse for a performance that was part of the exhibition of the work.

I was commissioned to create *Assembly* by the Brighton Photo Fringe and when the work was exhibited for the first time in the Phoenix Gallery in Brighton, over seventy photographs were presented, including photographs created by participants, images I made, documentation of us working together, and *Assisted Self-Portraits*. A 50-minute soundscape weaving excerpts from all of the various audio recordings also played in the space. A piano donated by Phase One, and tables and chairs lent by First Base were installed, and the gallery was transformed into a community hub where visitors were invited to spend time contemplating information about support services for homeless people in the UK. This information was presented in a piece of work titled *Frequently Asked Questions* created with a participant, Gerald Mclaverty. It invites consideration of the state of support services for

people dealing with urgent housing issues provided by local authorities of cities and towns across the country.

BB So at the core of what was clearly a complex and multi-faceted piece of work sits a participatory photography project. Perhaps we should start off by talking a bit more about that. You work as an artist. But art is just one of the fields that has embraced the potential of participatory photography—what some people, generally those outside the arts, sometimes call “photo voice”—in recent years. I am thinking about the types of projects initiated or supported by NGOs, and also research projects associated with the social sciences. I wondered where you position your work in relation to this array of practices that utilise similar working methods; practices that, like your project, are invested in unsettling, subverting or reversing some of the power dynamics encountered in more traditional documentary projects.

AL I mostly work with individuals and groups of people in ways that can be described as participatory, or otherwise invested in strategies of co-production, facilitation, pedagogy, and collaboration. Ultimately, I am interested in how involving participants as contributors to the processes of representation can inscribe a different, more nuanced view, or otherwise complicate commonly held perceptions of their lives.

My critical position and the methodologies I use are informed by a wide range of perspectives, including critiques of documentary photography by the likes of Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula and A.D. Coleman; community photography work by collectives and individuals including Jo Spence and Terry Dennett, Paul Carter, and Andrew Dewdney and Martin Lister; writing by anthropologists and sociologists such as Johannes Fabian and Norbert Elias; and approaches to progressive education by Paulo Freire, Ivan Illich, and bell hooks, to name just a few. Rosler’s observations on “representational responsibility” in her essay “Post-Documentary, Post-Photography?” particularly struck a chord with me and continue to underpin the questions I bring to the creation and consumption of photographs of other people (2004, 226). Likewise, Freire’s model of education as a dialogical practice that can enable critical consciousness by uncovering the systems and processes that normalize exclusion and oppression has had a lasting influence on my

thinking about collaboration (1971). Underpinning everything, I'm keen to ask; how can a photographer address the power (im)balance between them and the people they represent?

FIG 2

It seems to me, the types of projects by NGOs you refer to are often underpinned by ambitions to symbolically position subjects as representative of particular political, social or economic issues within their marketing, campaigning and fundraising activities. Although my work is sometimes commissioned or funded by institutions that will have a particular agenda for supporting the work I do, one of the main ways I see a difference in my practice compared with that undertaken by an NGO is in the terms of the invitation issued to participants, the dialogue that drives the work we create together, and how my role as an artist and author of the work is negotiated. Within this I am concerned with how the process of the creation of the work and its subsequent dissemination may impact issues such as agency, representation and authorship.

BB There seem to be two things at play here, both of which we could talk about in a bit more detail. Firstly, there is the question of the art institutions you are commissioned by, which presumably possess some kind of expectation regarding the work you are going to produce, but those expectations are different to those that might accompany a project funded by an NGO. Secondly, there is the question of your process, of how you make your work. In that sense, you seem to be suggesting that you approach collaboration in a way that is both more organic and perhaps also more self-reflexive than the other types of participatory photography project we have been talking about. How did those elements play out in *Assembly*? And what was the relationship between the two?

AL Negotiating expectations of commissioners, funders, and the other organisations and individuals involved – not least the participants – each with their various investments in the work, is an important aspect of the practice.

The relationships, tensions, conversations, restrictions, and other elements that affect decisions made with and without participants, all need to be carefully navigated. Sustaining a transparent dialogue with participants is an important consideration within this. Mitigating ambitions by institutions – especially when they are driven to infer social or personal benefits onto the participants – can sometimes be a trickier undertaking, particularly in relation to how their agendas ideologically predetermine the subject position of both the participants and me as an artist.

It seems to me that at the core of your query is an apparent tension between the process and products of the practice. Ultimately the relationships formed throughout the process of undertaking the work are as much the practice as the images, sounds, and other materials that are created and then disseminated publicly. When making *Assembly*, the time spent building relationships with organisations, and the staff working for them and individuals that use their services, was just as significant, if not more so, than time spent creating images or recording sounds. Attempting to maintain reflexive self-awareness throughout this process and enabling audiences to perceive something of this is as important to me as providing imagery to look at.

BB So do you think your relationships with, and the expectations of, funders are visible in the final project, to the extent that this visibility constitutes another level, or another mode, of self-reflexivity akin to that relating to your engagement with the homeless people you worked with? Of course, you are right – my interest in this topic is very much a product of the questions that we both seem to be suggesting are implicit within this kind of process-orientated work. I think there is something very interesting about which elements of that process, along with which of the parties it involves, are experienced by viewers as a legitimate part of the work—as part of what that work actually *means*—and which are deemed to be somehow extraneous to the production of meaning. I am interested in where the work ends and something else begins, and vice versa, because there seems to be an interesting and rather complex politics at play here.

AL To varying degrees, the conditions of being commissioned are sewn into

the work I make. This can take effect through the requirements of funding, the extent of the budget, and specific cultural or creative remits of the institution. This might determine I work with, over what time frame, and is sometimes expected to demonstrate what can be referred to as “corporate social responsibility”. Or, to explain this term in another way: the efforts by an organisation to accrue funding, cultural capital, and audiences, and to be seen to do so in ways that demonstrate “diversity” and “participation”. Navigating the effect of this and representing the ways in which these conversations, tensions, opportunities or compromises unfold – and how participants may or may not be able to assert their agency within this – is one of the challenges faced by the artist, not only in relation to how meaning is produced and participants are represented, but in how the artist fairs within the power differential between the artist and the commissioning agency. Through experience I have learnt that key to this is being selective about which organisations to work with and, perhaps more importantly, ensuring that the individuals within the institution are engaged in thinking through the critical dimensions of the work in ways that chime with or productively challenge my own points of view. This isn’t to say that all this always goes smoothly.

BB Listening to your description of the project—and reading over what has been said and written by others about some of the earlier projects you have worked on—those types of institutional relationship and the ways in which they potentially impact on the work remain largely unaddressed, beyond the usual courtesies most funders require. Given that the meaning of the work derives from the process of making photographs and the relationships this involves, that absence is potentially very telling, particularly if we open ourselves to the likelihood that those aspects of the process that are not made visible probably indicate something about how institutions—and, indeed, whole systems—function. By thinking about those absent processes, systems and relationships and, particularly, the potential reasons for their absence, we begin to appreciate that there are other sets of power relationships at play here. Of course, that would also mean that the fact they are not disclosed is important. I’m not suggesting that funders explicitly forbid the kind of self-reflexivity via which some of these other relationships would become visible;

more that there are normalized conventions about what are and are not regarded as legitimate subjects when we think or talk about this kind of work. And the naturalized status of those assumptions is a sure sign that there is a powerful and complex politics at play, one that probably has something to do with the precarious position of the artist freelancer; of arts organizations' obligation to meet certain, often largely market-based, criteria; and so on.

Parts of what I am saying draw from recent discussions about the history and the future of institutional critique. Hito Steyerl, for instance, has suggested that the politics of art remain a major blindspot for artists and their audiences – when contemporary artists “do politics”, they usually deal with a “political elsewhere” (2010). Andrea Fraser goes further, suggesting that the economic and political circumstances of art's production and consumption should be central to what art means, “not just socially, but artistically” (2011). I find the idea that this kind of analysis—*this kind of meaning*—is implicit or latent within any work of art quite compelling. In a project such as yours that notion seems to have particular purchase.

AL I think you're right. To not address the economics and politics of any practice is to disavow an important aspect of the function of the work, not only in terms of its aesthetic or its meaning, but how it is embedded in unequal conditions of labour and production, and may even contribute to their reproduction. I am also reminded of Steyerl here, particularly when she stated, “Art is not outside politics, but politics resides within its production, its distribution, and its reception” (2010). This seems to me to be particularly acute in relation to socially engaged practices, especially when funding bodies and commissioning organizations overstate their role as social agents or even make authorial claims for work made by an artist and the individuals they collaborate with. In my experience, part of the balancing act in addressing or representing this aspect of the process is negotiating how, when and where to open up conversation and assert critique. You don't want to snap so hard at the hands of commissioners that they won't continue to support your practice. Part of this challenge is in enabling a discussion to take place in ways that will be productive rather than antagonistic for the position of the freelance career artist within the power dynamic inscribed by the institution. Particularly when

confronting the limits of existing institutional policies and practices. I have found public talks and other discursive or poly-vocal formats a useful way of doing this.

BB Your last point seems to relate to a very interesting shift in contemporary art practice. A number of artists have started to embrace the performative possibility of the artists' talk. Traditionally, this has been something regarded as 'other' to the work of art proper. But that neat separation becomes harder to maintain when a work of art deals explicitly with questions of labour, or even with social relations. When artists such as Walid Raad or Andrew Norman-Wilson perform the role of the artist discussing the production and reception of their work, and that work is very much concerned with questions of labour in and outside the art world, they knowingly embrace the potential of the talk as an extension of the work, or even as a new piece of work altogether.¹ That approach means the audience and the institutional setting in which the talk is taking place also become activated as part of the work. Indeed, the very term 'art *work*' takes on new importance in such a context.

There is an interesting article by Catherine Grant about the use of reenactment in contemporary art, which I think may be relevant here. She argues for an expanded definition of reenactment, informed by Brecht's notion of the learning play. The projects on which she focuses often involve artists revisiting and/or rehearsing earlier cultural texts, thereby "putting the past in the presence of now" (2016). To some extent, that is the logic at play during any artists' talk, but—rather than focus on the work of someone else—it is a matter of reinterpreting their own practice. There are real creative and critical opportunities when this is approached with self-awareness.

In the work of artists like Raad and Wilson, the process can make for an uncomfortable, but nevertheless productive experience for audiences, who are denied the reassuring distance from the politics that artists often critically frame. When the 'political elsewhere' becomes inseparable from the political

¹ See, for example, Andrew Norman-Wilson's performative lecture, *Movement, Materials and What We Can Do* and the various performances associated with Walead Raad's ongoing project, *Scratching at Things I Could Disavow*.

here, then our own relationships to patterns of exploitation and uneven power relations come into clearer view. I'm not sure that kind of self-reflexivity constitutes an adequate goal in itself (*no shit, the art world is intimately linked to a global capitalist system!?!*) In fact, I think art really needs to do something else as well (engage with the causes and experience of homelessness, for instance). But neither do I think the two are mutually exclusive.

What we are discussing here borders onto other efforts to develop an extended political context for photography, and for art. A view as sensitive to questions of production, circulation and consumption as it is to the visual information contained in any particular image. Such a view could, again, be seen as taking its lead from Steyerl, this time from her discussion of images as things rather than as representations, of images as changing sets of social relations (2012). Azoulay's *The Civil Contract of Photography* would be another useful reference, particularly her argument that no one—particularly not the photographer—can claim exclusive ownership of a photograph (2008). But, where Azoulay is primarily concerned with the person, or people, who appear in photographs, in their motives for being photographed, what it is they hoped to achieve, the agency available to them, and the political or human rights they may be granted or denied outside photography, we can also challenge certain assumptions around the agency and autonomy of the photographer by considering the institutions they are working for.

That broader field of enquiry raises some further possibilities when we think about *Assembly*. I was wondering, for example, what the homeless people involved with the project made of the exhibition and, particularly, of the people who were looking at their images. In the essay you referred to earlier, Martha Rosler suggests that, however much participatory photography projects disturb certain hierarchies at the level of production, these are often reintroduced at the level of dissemination and consumption (1999). But perhaps we can also work against that tendency, by approaching the exhibition as a point of contact between various groups of people. In which case, it would be interesting to hear more about what the people most closely involved with the project made of its dissemination as part of an arts festival, and the types of audience who were viewing their lives. Even free exhibitions such as yours will generally attract an educated middle-class audience; even

art student audiences loaded with huge debt occupy a very different social position to many of the people you were working with. And, for all its self-styled radical chic, Brighton remains one of the most expensive places to live in the country. Are those disparities between makers and audiences something you discussed with your collaborators?

AL The commission by Brighton Photo Fringe to make work for an exhibition at Phoenix Gallery was central to my invitation to participants and our ongoing discussions. When preparing the show, and while it was open to the public, I was keen to find ways to dismantle perceptions of the exhibition as rarified and exclusionary. To these ends, when the participants and I undertook the editing and selection process we spent a lot of time in the gallery developing plans for the exhibition together. We discussed questions around ‘who the exhibition is for’ and ‘who might attend it’ extensively, particularly when we made decisions about which images to include and in relation to the other elements presented in the gallery, including the work *Frequently Asked Question*, and a collaboration with a community choir, the Cascade Chorus. The creation of *Frequently Asked Questions* was a response to the intention to provide research and information about support for homeless people, and the collaboration with Cascade Chorus was focused on the production of performances to take as part of the show. The installation of a piano lent by Phase One – which visitors played a lot – and tables and chairs provided by First Base enabled people to spend time in the gallery in informal ways. Additionally, the gallery was designated as the Participation and Events Hub for the festival, with a number of public events taking place in the exhibition. These included a panel discussion about homelessness in Brighton and issues involved in working collaboratively with community groups; an artist peer feedback event; a book fair; as well as talks for school and college groups. By consciously positioning the exhibition as a social space, its function was much more than a display of objects in a gallery. But to go back to your question about what the participants made of the types of people looking at their images, this is an interesting question and one I don’t have a ready answer to – we’d have to ask the participants.

FIG 3

BB I have been struggling with precisely that possibility of late. Those participant perspectives could do really interesting things to open up the discourse around this kind of work, by helping to reverse, or at least to expose, another set of naturalized hierarchies. But while I can absolutely see how we would benefit from those perspectives, I wonder about your collaborators and how they would gain. Some additional sense of recognition, perhaps, or a further indication that their views and experiences are valued. But then, unlike you or I, or even the staff at Brighton Photo Fringe or *Photography & Culture*, they have no easy access to the mechanisms through which a particular form of cultural capital is accrued or, more importantly, exchanged down the line for financial capital, via future commissions, teaching opportunities, attracting students to particular universities, research audits and so on. In that sense, an effort to draw them into an extended critical conversation about the work would reproduce all that is potentially progressive, but also all that is problematic, about participatory photography more broadly.

AL Questions about what motivates a participant, how they experience taking part, what they might expect to gain, whether they are able to achieve this, and how their views are mediated or represented are all very interesting to me. I think that as much as a participant may choose to be involved in an artist's practice for the purposes of their own particular motivations, I suspect how the artist sets out their agenda and the terms of their invitation, will also play a significant role in why and how an individual participates. I think a lot about this when I'm working with participants, especially when I begin a project. At this invitation stage, I try to be as clear as possible in sharing the information I have about the commissioning frameworks I'm responding to, what I hope to get out of the work, and how I frame and ask questions to open up decision making and shift the process of working together forward. While I seek to be as clear, responsive, and as open as possible, I am aware that my presence influences the conversation and the dialogue that ensues. I'm also

aware that mediating the course of this dialogue is often unavoidably reductive to a degree – even within the context of an exchange such as this.

Dave Beech makes an incisive point about the terms of an invitation in a participatory practice in his essay “Include Me Out”, when he observes, “participation always involves a specific invitation and a specific formation of the participant’s subjectivity, even when the artist asks them simply to be themselves” (2008). He argues that instead of seeing participation within a binary pitched opposite exclusion and passivity, a more nuanced “constellation of overlapping economies of agency, control, self-determination and power” should inform how we view participatory practices (2008). Registering the work in this way poses all kinds of questions about intentions, motivations, agency, and power. And as you suggest, attempting to gauge answers to queries about the participant’s experience within this, is often reliant upon forms of testimony and documentation, which are not without framing by the artist. Not least, the invitation phase of the dialogue between an artist and participant, which can often be hidden, obscured or represented in ways that are over-determined by the artist, and in turn by the commissioning body..

In considering the complexity of the network of dialogue that underpins a participatory practice, I am reminded of what Paul O’Neill and Claire Doherty refer to as “charismatic agency” (2011, 7-8). In their writing about the creation, curation and critical analysis of site-specific, durational public artworks, they use this phrase to characterize the conduct of the multiple agents involved in the means of engaging participants and visitors, as well as the efforts to procure funding and resources. I think this is a useful notion to reflect on in relation to the kinds of work we’re discussing here, and to question if and how artists acknowledge or represent the tactics of persuasion they explicitly and implicitly employ when articulating their intentions and the process of their practice. It appears to me that part of the challenge is to try to get beneath the skin of narratives put forth by the artist or commissioning organisations. And in doing so, to understand if the contribution and accounts by participants are registered as something more than symbolic affirmation. As Pablo Helguera notes, “in their own descriptions, artists commonly blur the line between what actually happened and what he or she wished had

happened” (2011, 74). In being mindful of this kind of pitfall, I’ve been keen to find ways to co-create representations of process with or led by participants. This was part of the reason for the use of audio in *Assembly*, as well as the blogs in *Not Going Shopping* (2014) and *Let Us Eat Cake* (2017).² What’s in it for them? Why should they want to participate? How do they experience taking part in the work?

BB I can absolutely see how the question of ‘what would be in it for them’ could point in all sorts of complex directions. We could think in terms of symbolic visibility, for example, or the forms of agency linked to the different modes of participation involved at various stages in the social life of the project – from its production to its public presentation and interpretation. We could also approach the issue in altogether more material terms, talking about participatory projects and the various activities that grow up around them in relation to labour. If we were to develop the second point, which I think is much less frequently discussed in relation to this kind of work, then we would need to talk a bit more about how you approach the question of payment. Do you pay the people that you work with for the time that they contribute to making a project?

AL I have thought carefully about this over the years and more questions come to me than answers or solutions. While I completely recognize that all forms of labour have worth, I’m uncertain about paying participants carte blanche, mostly for considerations of how it might affect our relationship as well as the work we create together. I think part of my reservations about offering payment for participation is an anxiety that it may skew the participants’ intentions for taking part and influence their contributions.

BB So what are your specific concerns regarding payment and the ways it could risk skewing participants’ intentions and contributions?

² See the blog for *Not Going Shopping* (2014) at <http://notgoingshopping.blogspot.com>; and the blog for *Let Us Eat Cake* (2017) at <http://letuseatcake.blog>

AL Paying participants might seem relatively straightforward, but in some ways I'm not sure it is. Would the dynamic of payment further underscore the power imbalance between us, or create a new one altogether? Would remuneration have the effect of incentivizing a particular kind of participation, and would this be any less (or more) valid? Would the effect of paying people set up a kind of quasi employer – employee relationship between us, and what kind of practical and ethical responsibilities would be incumbent upon us both if so? Would thinking about money in this way skew my own intentions and motivations for the work? And more importantly, in a very practical sense, would payment adversely affect the benefits or other financial support participants are in receipt of?

Invitations to participants to work with me are usually to take part in a project limited to a pre-defined budget, conducted more or less within a time frame set by the commissioning organization, funder or negotiated between me and the participants. In considering possibilities for remuneration within this, it seems to me perhaps questions could be asked along several lines. The first might be in relation to the ability to offer something akin to the fee received by the artist paid by the commissioning organization. The second might involve the prospect of the participant's stake in the commercial value of products created. Thirdly, questions related to how participants may be offered subsequent or additional paid opportunities through the practice might also be asked.

Within a project such as *Assembly*, made with over 50 people, one of the qualities of the work I am keen to cultivate when creating the work is the potential for contributions of as many people as possible. In part, this is to enable a diversity of contributions to reflect the multitude of ways homelessness is precipitated, exists and experienced, and not least as a gesture towards representing the scale of the problem in society. It is also for individuals to be able to commit to as little or as much of the project at times and in ways they are comfortable with. I'm unclear about how a payment structure could be established to mirror all of this in an equitable way.

While I haven't actively sought a commercial market for my practice, when work has been curated into commercial contexts I've sought to divert proceeds from any sales to charities with aims that resonate with the basis of

the work. For example, in 2017 when *Not Going Shopping* was selected by Christiane Monarchi for Photo50 – London Art Fair’s annual exhibition of contemporary photography – sales were listed for donation to Mermaids UK, a charity that supports gender diverse and transgender youth in the United Kingdom. When opportunities for the purchase of work to go into public collections have come up, money offered for this has largely covered production costs and, in some cases, a nominal fee. But to be realistic, and of course this is all relative, we’re not talking about sizeable amounts.

Where possible, I have sought to enable participants to access paid opportunities within my practice through activities such as public talks and events. One example of this is when a participant from my earlier work with people with experience of homelessness in London was paid to contribute to a panel discussion for the public programme of *Assembly* in the Brighton Photo Fringe. Another was when a participant of *Not Going Shopping* was employed to work with me on an event for The Photographer’s Gallery in 2018. And recently, with *Frequently Asked Questions*, opportunities have come up at events at the Tate and the South London Gallery.

BB I can totally see how paying contributors would be anything but straightforward. The point you make about the potential impact on the existing financial support participants may receive is really interesting, and something I hadn’t thought about before. So there are very real ways that the absurd regulations that surround people’s entitlement to state benefits in the UK, which actively discourage claimants from taking on the small bits of casual work that could potentially, over time, help them to develop precisely the sorts of financial independence demanded of them by neoliberalism, may also shape thinking and practice in the field of participatory art? I’m also really interested to hear that you have created opportunities to open up art world mechanisms for retrospective payment, so that the speculative investment of time in the creation of projects may lead to remuneration later on through the invitations to give paid talks. I think this is by no means typical of the broader field of participatory photography, where it is generally artist facilitators who become the representatives for projects and thus also the people who receive those payments. I would be really interested to know a bit more about how

you decide about to whom you open those opportunities, and to whom they remain closed, particularly when you are working with lots of different people? That seems like a big responsibility to take on.

AL I've never thought of inviting particular individuals to take part in these events as a way of opening up opportunities to some and excluding others. Generally speaking, I've asked participants who have experience of public speaking that I'm aware of and who may be interested in the context of the occasion.

BB The really complex questions that you are wrestling with raise some further, complex questions about your relationships to the homeless people you work with, and the larger social, institutional and economic structures in relation to which they are forged. You seem concerned about the ways in which payment could complicate those relationships and skew the intentions of participants and, intuitively, I think I would feel the same way. So how should we make sense of that reaction? Does it follow that you feel that the economic parts of your relationships with commissioners skew your own intentions, or that the fact you are remunerated for your time may risk incentivizing particular forms of practice? Do you feel compelled to shield the homeless people you work with from some of the economic and institutional pressures that you know that you face? Or should we believe that one group (homeless participants) would be more susceptible to the corrupting influence of money than another (career artists)? Then again, is it simply too simplistic to place your labour on the same footing as that of your participants? In which case, how can we start to unpack the various forces that underpin or inform the assumed differences that separate your work, which is generally paid (even it is not very well paid!), and theirs, which is not?

AL I don't hold that any one of the individuals I have worked with would be more or less susceptible to the corrupting forces of money than I would be. The concerns I have expressed about paying participants, and how this might further complicate the power balance between participants and me, may be completely unfounded. I guess the best way to be able to begin to answer

these questions would be to go ahead and try it out. But it seems to me the questions you're asking stretch beyond the relationship between an artist and their participants, and strike at the dominant commissioning and funding models of neoliberal policies of social inclusion and the arts, and how the economics of socially-engaged art perpetuate certain conditions of labour under the guise of cultural democracy. The infrastructure of socially-engaged practice, for the most part, is propped up government-funded bodies and independent grant-giving foundations established to perpetuate philanthropic initiatives. Both are ideologically possessed of ambitions which, on the one hand can be seen as benevolent, may also be viewed as paternalistic with their agenda to develop skills, improve self-confidence, broker social cohesion, to enhance well-being, and to generally 'empower' people. This can be seen in the rhetoric of marketing material used to blueprint the kinds of projects and practices they seek to award, with statements such as: "making art accessible"; "to create experiences for as many people as possible"; and "to help people overcome disadvantage and lack of opportunity, so that they can realise their potential and enjoy fulfilling and creative lives". The premise underpinning these sorts of intentions appears to be founded on a deficit model that focuses on fulfilling a lack. The so-called "benefits" for participants are generally perceived by individuals who occupy a more privileged role in society without comparable lived experience. This is in itself a thorny pretense to begin with. It sews grounds for assuming that by simply taking part the participating individuals are getting something out of it and that this is their "payment in kind".

It seems to me that if alternative models of production could be founded upon the systemic critique you're pointing towards – whereby the contribution of participants is recognized or valued as labour and as such economic worth in addition to a social value is ascribed – these would ricochet further than complicating the relationship between artist and participant. This may also have a broader effect of destabilizing the 'inclusion and access' agenda that one might view as a camouflage for the ideological division of labour engendered by arts commissioning and funding. As François Matarasso has observed, within the four stages typical of socially-engaged art – conception, contracting, co-creation and completion – 'the people intended

to benefit are often present only in co-creation'. He goes on to note, 'the exclusion from planning and evaluation of the people who are the reason for a project's existence is inconsistent with the expressed values of participatory artists and public bodies' (2019, 111).

Considering Matarasso's remarks in relation to the ideas we're exploring here, further questions arise in my mind: Could a definition of "access" be expanded to include participants throughout the whole process from conception to completion? How would economic worth be ascribed to the participant for their role before, during and after co-creation? Would all parties be able to negotiate from the same position of power throughout this process? In whose interests would the terms of such an engagement serve, and to what ends?

As much as I believe there are many kinds of powerful and positive experiences one can have of art, and that all forms of cultural production should be available to everyone, I've always been uneasy with the way proposals, reporting, and evaluations can be subject to over-stating claims of the efficacy of the practice in achievement of social benefits. It seems to me that these mechanisms are often hijacked to advocate and valorize relationships with funders to perpetuate ongoing revenue streams. I do my best to inject conversations about impact and benefits with a measured way of making claims about the participant's experience and, where possible, to invite participants to speak for themselves about any benefit (or otherwise) they experienced by taking part. Above all, when having these conversations, I'm keen to ask: where does failure fit within all of this?

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Figure Captions

Figure 1. Documentation of the making of *Assisted Self-Portrait of Ben Evans*, Assembly, 2013 – 2014. (original in colour)

Figure 2. Screenshot from the making of *Assisted Self-Portrait of Ben Evans*, Assembly, 2013 – 2014. (original in colour)

Figure 3. Installation of *Assembly* at Phoenix Gallery, Brighton Photo Fringe, 2014. Photograph by Heidi Kuisma. (original in colour)