Artists and cultural workers in cultural policy and creative practice: From the big break narrative to mutual aid and collective care. Simone Wesner and Jane Woddis in conversation with Stephanie Taylor and Greig de Peuter

Künstler und Kulturschaffende in Kulturpolitik und Kreativer Praxis: vom Durchbruchnarrativ über gegenseitige Unterstützung zur gemeinschaftlichen Fürsorge. Simone Wesner und Jane Woddis im Gespräch mit Stephanie Taylor und Greig de Peuter

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Considering artists as decisive participants in policy and management processes that affect them illuminates the role of collective and individual agency in shaping policies as artists manage their careers and seek to influence their working conditions, their artforms and the cultural sector more widely. This is a relatively young field of cultural policy research. When we began working on it in the late 1990s there was little academic study of artists' voices and activity around policy and management. Artists' perspectives remained side-lined and under-represented in policymaking and arts management discourse. Yet the importance of expanding cultural policy studies to embrace the agency of artists and cultural workers began to be recognised, not least because artists are the progenitors of the cultural products and processes which are the subject of cultural policy and thereby of cultural policy research itself. And as has become increasingly evident from within the cultural sector, arts practitioners do engage in policy activity and act as narrators of their careers. Cultural policy studies miss an important part of the picture if these actors are omitted.

This field has now greatly expanded, encompassing distinct theoretical, methodological and topical threads which are often pursued separately from each other. These include a growing range of work

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that examines cultural labour and the working conditions and status of arts workers; myths and narratives around the idea of the creative practitioner; the education and career paths of artists; and collective organisation among artists and cultural workers, and their direct and indirect interventions in the policy process. This work, which utilises many different methodologies, ranges over a wide variety of artforms and cultural sectors, nations and continents, and levels of administration and governance.

We seek to bring at least some of these threads together here—not in any way to flatten out their differences and distinctivenesses but to see how they might help to inform and enlighten each other. To explore this subject from different perspectives we talked with Professor Stephanie Taylor from the Open University, UK and Professor Greig de Peuter from Wilfrid Laurier University in Canada, in separate conversations. Both Stephanie and Greig come with track records of researching artists and cultural workers' practices, their careers, dreams and wishes as well as struggles with and for policy against precarity and for artistic recognition. We have organised the conversations in themes, shortened and edited from the original exchange.

We should at this point explain that we will be employing several terms (artist, art[s] practitioner, arts worker, creative practitioner and cultural worker) to refer to people working professionally in the arts and cultural sectors. In some cases, these different descriptors are applied for stylistic variation; in others for greater precision, reflecting the varying terminology of the contributors to this special issue and that of different artforms and sectors, and of the roles within them. These terms also reflect the growing breadth of critical work on artists' creative labour and collective organisation as outlined above.

Common sense

Historically, careers in the cultural sector have been labelled as being less predictable, unstable, messy and fragmented. In the 21st century this applies to many other professions—there is no longer an expectation to work in the same job or stay in one profession, although the branding of professions that help you pursue your dreams or follow your interests remains. We wanted to test this idea and so began by asking Stephanie Taylor, "What is driving your curiosity and interests in your career?

ST: My research career has been about analysing the common sense which shapes people's talk, applying a critical discursive psychological approach. I'm interested in how people are constantly taking up understandings which are part of their cultural resources, and how these are used in ongoing negotiations of who the speakers are and what they want to achieve in interactions. People follow established ways of doing things. They innovate, take ideas and conventions for granted and operate from given perspectives—as well as sometimes challenging what is taken for granted and given, and confronting the contradictions. The approach thus assumes that existing ideas, including many that have come from academic psychology, provide our starting points for making sense of the world. People take up these ideas selectively in their ongoing interactions and in the more extended project of constructing a personal identity, a sense of "who I am", which has been shaped over time by the ideas that are in circulation in our social context. The personal is also social. Critical discursive psychology doesn't attempt to tidy away the multiple associations of creativity or the contradictions. Instead, these are all analysed as part of people's shared understanding or common sense.

The big break narrative

In narratives, as forms of social life, the personal merges with public conduct. At this interface, a shared understanding between artists, their perceptions and conditions in society develops. When translated into a career, these circumstances (for example support that is provided in form of grants, prizes and social security provisions), impact on how artists interpret their careers. Chances that are presented and taken up, or even rejected, matter. We are interested in the idea of artists' narratives and how these chances are narrated over time. Stephanie, you mentioned repeatedly that the background and the circumstances are important to note.

ST: I agree. I'm interested in using narrative as an analytic concept to refer to the ways that sequence and consequence are constructed in people's talk, and how those constructions are taken up and used. I'd assume that these constructions are shaped by context. I'll give you an example of a career narrative which my co-author Karen Littleton and I found in the talk of practitioners that we were analysing. We call it the "big break narrative" of an artist's career, the idea that—rather than

the steady upward gradient of development that is usually presented in other accounts of careers—for artists, the hope is for the big break in which recognition, success and reward all come together, although it might be a long time coming—it could even be posthumous. Now, the logic that follows from this construction is that you keep on going. You're not expecting a kind of steady, upward gradient of earnings, recognition and success. And we found, for example, that this construction appeared quite often when people were defending what they were doing, for instance, to their families, who would say "You've been doing this for a long time, you've done further qualifications, you've even had exhibitions and some recognition, but you're still not earning any money. Why not"? I've noticed the big break narrative in play in recent situations, in interviews for example; but it will be interesting to see if it persists in the post-pandemic economy, and whether the same defence is needed when so many careers outside the arts have become uncertain.

Counteracting uncertainty through the "big break narrative" has become a long-term defence mechanism in many artists' careers. For example, it helped artists from Eastern Germany believe in themselves and their abilities during and after German Unification, a major political transformation (WESNER 2018). Part of the big break narrative is built around a concept of creativity that oscillates between two ideas: that everybody is creative—as artist and art professor Joseph Beuys argued, "Everybody is an artist" (BEUYS & BODENMANN-RITTER 1975: 189)—and that creativity requires possession of a special talent, a kind of inner gift that awaits discovery and propels creative practitioners forward. When Beuys enrolled 50 previously rejected applicants into his art programme in 1972 at the Art Academy in Düsseldorf, he ran into difficulties with colleagues and the institution's leadership who wanted to select the most talented students, suggesting that not everybody can be gifted. Even though this happened 50 years ago, the debate about who is, can and should be creative continues.

Stephanie, you wrote about conflicting characterisations of creativity that have now become common sense. Artists have been seen as the exemplars of creativity, not exclusively but to a certain degree, and there is also the idea that creativity is available for a lifetime and that, as a self-characteristic, it is a source of continuity. We are interested in this tapping in and out of the creative reservoir as a defining self-characteristic. Could you elaborate here with an example?

ST: Maybe you're an actor who can't get work or you're an artist who has to work four days a week earning money to support yourself so that you can pursue your art practice for two days a week, because it doesn't make money. It's interesting that in this kind of situation the idea that you are a creative person can still become what sustains you throughout your life and defines who you are. This contrasts with the more common idea that your identity derives from whatever paid employment you engage in and when you stop working, that's no longer who you are. These are examples of what I'm always trying to understand—how people utilise ideas to make sense of themselves and their lives.

Artists and workers

One aspect of the focus on cultural labour and working conditions concerns how arts practitioners conceive themselves, and there can be a tension between their identification as artists and as workers (BRYAN-WILSON 2009; KIM 2019). Resistance among arts practitioners to categorise themselves as workers can come from the idea that what they are doing is closely tied to self-expression and self-fulfilment, and is thus different to other kinds of work. They are therefore reluctant to characterise themselves as workers because they feel it could undercut that specialness. Yet, as we have already indicated, there are commonalities between cultural workers and precarious workers more widely, particularly around issues of working conditions and employment status. We picked up this thread of the conversation with Grieg, who has also written about making links between cultural workers and precarious workers in other industries, and has described arts-based collectives such as W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) as operating within traditions of trade unionism (DE PEUTER forthcoming). We asked him: while the commonalities and benefits of such links are clear, what differences between cultural and other sectors still need to have attention paid to them—both in terms of the workers themselves and the specific terrain and conditions in which they are working?

GDP: This is an important political question and difficult to do justice to in a short time. One way into this might be to propose a slightly different angle, which is to point out the overlap between workers in the cultural sector and workers in other sectors. Are we sometimes talking about the same worker, rather than different workers? By this I mean

that we know that low earnings, and all the other issues of precarity we've been talking about, make multiple job-holding a *de facto* norm in many cultural sectors, particularly in the visual and performing arts. So when we talk about the tensions with respect to artists' identification as workers or reluctance to identify as workers, and if we want to argue for the importance of framing artists as workers, then part of that has to be the acknowledgement that cultural workers often perform labour within various industries. We see for instance the media artist who's also an art handler, a gig worker in the platform economy, a retail worker or a precarious contract university teacher. So the distance between workers in the arts and workers in other sectors is narrower than we may sometimes imagine it to be.

Utility

Stephanie, you argued in your inaugural lecture (TAYLOR 2022) that creativity is linked to the individual, but to understand it, we need to look at the multiple meanings that have been attached to creativity in different contexts in society, including academia. These meanings sometimes conflict, and one example of this is around practical applications. Could you explain why the utility of creativity is contested?

ST: I use the term "utility" to refer to being *useful* in an obviously practical way. We've mostly stopped distinguishing between the arts and the crafts in these terms but in the past, a common assumption was that the crafts were about doing something useful, and the arts did not have such obvious utility. For example, if you made a wooden statue, you were an artist and if you made a wooden box, you were a wood worker—possibly a talented craft person—but not an artist. We've now mostly given up that distinction between art and craft, but the elite arts still carry an association that they're driven by the pursuit of *art for art's sake*. Alison Gerber discusses this as a strong pattern she found in her interviews with American artists, which she mentioned in her 2017 book *The Work of Art*. The idea that *art for art's sake* applies only to the elite arts, whereas lower status activities, by contrast, have utility, can obviously be challenged. The elite arts have always had great utility, for instance, in the celebration and legitimation of the nation, and the demonstration of wealth and status. But the idea of *art for art's sake* rather than utility persists and remains recognisable.

In my research, which generally starts with what people say, I've found in my analysis of women's talk, a different pattern that connects to utility. This is that the women often refer to utility in order to justify engaging in their art practice and spending time on it. The implication is that it needs to have some useful practical function. They might refer to how they use the practice in order to teach their children, for example. One pattern that particularly emerged was an emphasis on the therapeutic function of the art. People would justify their practice by saying that it was good for their own mental health or for other people's, for instance, through workshops that they conduct for people to learn an art practice. I think there's an interesting analogy with Alison Bain's work on the studios of women artists (BAIN 2004). Conventionally, the studio is the place for art work, but for the women artists Bain studied, the studio was usually a space attached to the family house and the artist found it difficult to keep the studio door closed. The kids were in and out, people were walking in and out, household stuff would be stored in the studio. All this was like a physical expression of the point that the right to engage in art for art's sake is much more difficult for the woman practitioner to defend than for a man.

Stephanie's emphasis on pattern among woman practitioners high-lights how gender equality and equity issues remain entangled with aesthetic interpretations. In the conversation with Greig we note similar concerns related to support and care in the context of his work. This research also focuses on analysing arts workers' struggles but employs alternative concepts of collective action, arguing for the importance of collaborative organisation and activity amongst cultural workers, especially in contra-distinction to the drive towards individualisation within cultural work, with its frequent emphasis on entrepreneurship and on self-fulfilment. When we spoke to Greig on this topic, he prefaced his responses by emphasising the highly collaborative nature of his research. Much of this is part of a larger project, Cultural Workers Organise, which has involved a number of researchers documenting, assessing, and theorising collective responses to precarity, exploitation and inequality in creative and cultural industries. In this context, Grieg, together with Nicole S. Cohen, has written persuasively about mutual aid as a strategy and ethos for organising amongst dispersed, separated and often isolated, as well as self-exploiting, freelance cultural workers (DE PEUTER/COHEN 2015). The idea of mutual aid encompasses co-operation, support, equity and solidarity, and can be seen

in a range of strategies (from craft guilds and unions to co-working spaces, co-operatives and artist-run venues) that can give arts practitioners more control over their work and working conditions. This of course has relevance for all precarious workers, so we asked Grieg if there is something special or distinctive about the politics of mutual aid for workers in the cultural and creative sectors—both in terms of what it offers those particular workers and what these workers, themselves, can uniquely bring to the idea and practice of mutual aid.

Mutual aid

GDP: A focus on mutual aid has the value of challenging what's often a default perspective in studies of cultural labour. It offers an opportunity to shift our perspective on artists and other cultural workers to something other than individualised competitive actors or something more than model workers of neoliberal capitalism. A mutual aid lens nudges us to look at cultural work not only as a site of exploitation or of austerity or inequity, but also as a site of struggle. Approaching cultural work from the concept of mutual aid invites us to look at how, despite all the structural pressures toward individualization and self-exploitation, cultural work is also a site of practices of care, of resistance and collective organising. So in terms of the thematic framework of artists' narratives, an emphasis on mutual aid helps to open space for a counter narrative, centring, not how cultural workers are victims, but how they push back, how they combine forces, and how they propose and enact alternatives.

What mutual aid offers workers in creative and cultural industries is not unlike what it offers workers and communities in any other sector. It helps them to increase their power through combination and potentially helps to expand their autonomy. It's a bottom-up infrastructure to support cultural workers' livelihoods which can help these workers to cope better with structurally precarious employment that is so prevalent in the cultural sector. It allows for the pooling of resources, spreading risk and accessing greater income security where there is none or where it's insufficient. In terms of what cultural workers bring to the idea and practice of mutual aid, there are of course rich histories of cultural workers building their own organisations, creating their own institutions, from the union tradition through to the model of the artist-run centre. Whether it's a co-working space, a union, or even an insurance pool, mutual aid ultimately helps to make cultural work more sustainable.

Grieg's mention of practices of care in relation to resistance and collective organising suggests parallels to ethics and to feminist moral philosophy. Deva Woodly (2021) has argued that Black Lives Matter is a movement of care and that pushing an ethics of care into mainstream politics is long overdue. Under these circumstances, care can no longer be compartmentalised in society (childcare, care for elderly) but instead we need to see care everywhere. It is thus notable that American political scientist Joan C. Tronto's approach to analysing care as "processes of caring about, taking care of, care-giving, and care-receiving" (TRONTO 1998: 16,17) has been (re)discovered in cultural policy studies, connecting the moral and political terrains.

GDP: I would absolutely agree that an ethic of care is intrinsic to mutual aid. I don't think that practices of care in these collective organising contexts are necessarily new, but it's being newly observed in current conditions. And the pandemic has made many people more alert to this sustaining undercurrent of care and the centrality of care to social reproduction. In our context, it's necessary to shift perspective on how we narrate cultural workers as not only individualised, but also engaged in acts of care, solidarity, and reciprocity. These are key features of cultural communities that have tended to be overlooked in debates for a long time, where the emphasis, understandably enough, has been on the push to entrepreneurialism and self-exploitation and self-reliance. In terms of the issues we've been talking about, mutual aid is a pushback against the ethos of self-reliance, which is so baked into policy and labour market conditions around cultural work.

Policy from below

Another explanatory lens employed by Greig and Nicole S. Cohen (2015) is that of "policy from below" (DE PEUTER/COHEN 2015: 309-312). This notion is of course also present—even if not named as such—in the work of other scholars and among arts and cultural workers involved in policy activity (including examples in this journal issue). It is the idea that arts practitioners themselves can be initiators of policy proposals, through their own research, advocacy and organisation, and is concerned not only with coping with precarious existences but also with questioning and changing structures and systems. We asked Greig if he

could elaborate on this, including in relation to both the challenges and potentialities it presents.

GDP: With the concept of policy from below, we're trying, again, to shift perspective from top-down, state-led cultural and labour policy formation by centring the efforts of cultural workers and their organisations to develop, shape and propose policy to improve work and livelihoods in the cultural sector. We're specifically interested in policy from below in the context of collective organising. Our contention is that this is an often overlooked facet of cultural and labour policy. And the arts and cultural workers who are closest to the problems of labour in the sector are the ones who are best positioned to propose solutions to these problems.

The development of minimum fee schedules for art institutions is just one example of policy from below. But arguably, we could reconceptualise dimensions of the collective bargaining process as a kind of policy from below and think about how workers contribute to and shape policy in the context of democratically-run worker organisations. Also, policy from below has the potential to illuminate gaps in the current social protection framework. More broadly, policy from below expands our imagination of what might be possible if cultural workers and their organisations are better centred in the policy process.

This practice of policy from below has flourished during the pandemic. This is something that I've written about recently with my collaborators, Kate Oakley and Madison Trusolino, based on a review of documents that were produced by worker organisations and activists in the cultural sector during the pandemic (DE PEUTER et al. 2022). One of the findings is how common it was for cultural workers and their organisations to respond to these crisis conditions with proposals for policy changes. These proposals were not necessarily new. The fact that they were equipped to advance policy proposals as swiftly as they were, reflects how many of these cultural worker organisations had been developing policy in this area for many years, identifying the gaps in social protection frameworks and proposing new income security measures. Worker organisations in the cultural sector were some of the very first to highlight the problems with government income security measures, which often excluded the self-employed, or failed to recognise how artists can often have erratic incomes, which impacted their eligibility for emergency benefits. Many of these proposals were really for cultural workers to be treated fairly, to be put on a level playing field with their counterparts in standard employment. Another potential that we saw

around policy from below, particularly during the first waves of the pandemic, was how the generation of policy proposals brought cultural worker organisations in different sectors together and helped to create new kinds of coalition. It also helped to raise the profile of policy proposals that had been marginal. One of the most striking impacts of the pandemic on public policy discourse has been the rising profile of the idea of a basic income. And again, cultural worker organisations have been among the protagonists in advancing this demand and demonstrating not only that cultural workers have been left out of many income security measures, but also that compensation practices in the cultural sector have not been working for a very long time; that these problems haven't been created by the pandemic, they've, of course, only been exacerbated by them. Those are some of the promises of policy from below. The challenges are nonetheless immense: it's one thing to have a policy proposal, it's another entirely to have the mobilising capacity to advance these demands. To realise leverage and exert pressure on government officials and politicians to actually implement it, requires power; and it requires favourable social conditions.

Specificity

Grieg's work has examined several different cultural and creative fields, including visual arts, digital journalism, and creative industries more generally. We asked him what commonalities and distinctions he has found among these different fields in relation to the labour politics explored in his research.

GDP: This question and some of the other questions you've posed, have me thinking about specificity. I have a somewhat ambivalent stance on the notion of specificity when it comes to the study of cultural work and especially the study of resistance in the cultural sector, because on the one hand, the possibilities and the limitations of collective action, and the forms that it can take, are going to be shaped by the employment conditions, the professional norms and the institutional make-up of each individual sector. On the other hand, an over-emphasis on specificity can come at the cost of concealing common material conditions, mutual concerns or shared grievances, all of which are potentially openings for expanded solidarity. So that's in the background for me: the analytical necessity of specificity, but also the potential political limitations of an

overemphasis on specificity in this field. Nonetheless, there are significant differences in the labour politics of cultural work across some of the fields that we've looked at. One of the important differences is between sectors with and without a union tradition. Nicole Cohen and I have researched the ongoing movement to unionise digital journalism (COHEN/DE PEUTER 2020). By any measure, it's been hugely successful. Workers have organised well over 100 media organisations in the US and Canada since 2015. But the conditions of possibility are unique. In the US and Canada, unions have had a long, if admittedly strained, presence on the print side; these cultural workers have access to well-established parent unions in their sector. At an even more basic level, these workers have the legal right to join a union and to engage in collective bargaining on account of their status as employees rather than as freelancers. The composition is very different in other fields that we've looked at, like the visual arts, which generally do not have the same union tradition. And artists typically don't have a consistent boss or traditional employer to whom to address their demands, but instead engage in one-off project-based interactions with multiple institutions. That shapes the kind of collective organisations that they build and the strategies that they adopt in their efforts to raise labour standards. So I think that you're absolutely right, that there are important and apparent differences across these fields that we've looked at. But there are also several commonalities that come up in this research: material concerns about working conditions, pay, benefits, social protections, making cultural work more sustainable. But at the same time, bread and butter issues are not the only motivators. Desires for equity and voice, or democratising workplaces, are also vital organising catalysts.

One of the other things we've seen in our research is how it can sometimes be employment status, rather than a profession or a field that serves as the basis of solidarity—so common status as freelancers or common status as interns, for instance. Another commonality is the institutional contexts of cultural labour. For example, artists who are pushing for standard fees may confront non-profit cultural institutions, and journalists may confront outwardly progressive media organisations. Both of these groups can have a shared frustration, but also shared leverage in the gap between the institution's social mission or mandate, and how the same cultural institution or the same media organisation treats its own workers. So there can be a unique institutionality to the labour politics across the different fields that we've researched.

Grieg's point about the impact of a history of organising (as with the journalists he spoke about) is something we have found also in our work (WESNER 2018; WODDIS 2014 & 2022). It is therefore important to think about how people in other fields or artforms might also learn from another group's history, even if they do not have such a tradition themselves. It is also incumbent on us as scholars to feed back among workers in the cultural sector the work we are doing and what we are finding, so they can learn from it if they wish. Greig returned to this last idea later in our discussion; but at this point in the conversation he made the observation that cultural workers' and artists' organisations also learn from each other across different national contexts. He gave the example of the group W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy) in New York City which learned, in part, from the artist fee schedule of the Canadian artists' organisation, CARFAC (Canadian Artists' Representation/Front des Artists Canadiens). Our own research has also revealed instances of learning across borders: for example, playwrights establishing their own organisations in the UK in the 1970s drew from the approach of the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in the USA, and in later years were in contact with playwrights' groups in many other countries to learn from their experience of issues such as the financing of new playwriting (WODDIS 2022). In similar fashion, visual artists in Saxony/Eastern Germany took advice from colleagues in larger cities abroad and thus secured affordable, long-term studio rentals before property prices escalated in their local environments (WESNER 2018).

Methodologies

As cultural workers learn from each other, we were curious to know more about the processes and contextual frameworks that both of our conversationists apply in their work, particularly because cultural policy research utilises and amplifies a myriad of research methodologies and methods, ranging from discourse analysis and critical theory to ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology and action research. While the background and initial training of researchers in adjacent fields (sociology, psychology, philosophy, business studies, geography, humanities and the arts) play a formative role, cultural policy studies, as a research field, does not have definitive methodologies. This enables a freedom of choice, which leaves room for experimentation,

for trying out and developing new methodologies and questioning established ones. We asked Stephanie about her use of discourse analysis throughout her career. In general terms, it seems that discourse analysis has moved out of fashion. We invited Stephanie to comment on this.

ST: There are always trends in academia and at the moment discourse has become something of a dirty word. The usual criticism is that discourse analysis is just about words—as if discursive research leaves out bodies and the material world, and emotion and feelings. As a response, I would refer to the recent work of Margaret Wetherell, starting with her 2012 book, and her concept of *affective practice*. She suggests that the feelings and emotions studied by affect researchers are inseparable from life practices, including language practices. Wetherell's work is still being explored and taken up in different ways in very recent research in social psychology, sociology and cultural studies. So, I'd say that it's in fashion now—though I also think we should be a little suspicious of academic fashion.

In social psychology, like other areas of academia, many researchers have tried to introduce methodologies that are informed by creative practices, such as asking participants to take photographs, sculpt with plasticine, and draw pictures. These activities and what they produce can be useful prompts for starting an interview and conversation with participants, although the outputs themselves are difficult to interpret. But I would argue that we need to distinguish between research practice and creative practice because, in general, creative practitioners work with different intentions to academics. Carrying out research is not usually a priority for creative practitioners.

This is not to say that there aren't overlapping interests. For example, I'm thinking of the artist Marlene Dumas, who focuses on cultural representations and their implications. She questions and attempts to subvert representations of whiteness and sexual bodies—issues that many academics research—but the difference is that Dumas's works are an end in themselves. In contrast, for the researcher, the participant's drawing or photograph wouldn't end the research process. It would be evidence that the researcher can use. To finish the academic work, there would need to be analysis and interpretation of the evidence.

Also, for the academic researcher, the interpretation of the creative outputs of practitioners is likely to begin with assumptions about the connection between the outputs and the makers. But most art practitioners would probably be disappointed if their work was viewed in that

way, and when it does happen, it tends to marginalise the practitioner as someone less than an artist. For example, Karen Patel's work (2020) with women makers highlights that women of colour avoid putting their photos on their websites. If they do, their work is often assumed to exemplify a traditional cultural craft practice that the maker is reproducing without any contribution of creativity or originality. The maker is reduced from an artist to a gendered ethnic stereotype and a sort of conduit of a (reified) other culture. This is in complete contrast to how white male artists are viewed. People don't look at Anthony Gormley's work and comment on Antony Gormley himself as a representative of ethnic and gender categories. They interpret his work as his own creative output.

To finish this rather wide ranging discussion, methodologies like discourse analysis have always developed and been reversioned. Discussing the distinctive features of the different versions remains an important form of engagement for researchers, but I don't think fashion should be a consideration.

Returning to Greig's mentioning of the collective and collaborative approach of his work, we asked him how this translates into methodologies that he utilises in his research.

GDP: At a broad level methodologically, an important guide for this research is political recomposition, a concept that's attuned to emerging forms and capacities of collective organisation. The project that we're involved in is also about exploring concepts that help us to research cultural labour, beginning from resistance and alternatives, like mutual aid and policy from below. In terms of methods, we've used a range of approaches from participant observation to document analysis, archival research and surveys, but interviews have been the constant: centring the voices and the perspectives of the cultural workers who are the protagonists of the organisations that we're studying.

Our project has also become increasingly interested in worker co-operatives. We undertook an online survey of co-operatives in the cultural and tech sectors, which has helped us begin to map the landscape of co-operativism in the cultural and tech sectors—and out of that we published a community-facing co-op primer (DE PEUTER et al. 2020). That was a stepping stone toward another project, which is a scoping review of research on co-operatives in the digital economy, including the digital creative industries. This co-ops research goes back to earlier parts of our conversation on mutual aid: going beyond coping, to artists who build

their own institutions, alter the relations of production, and challenge the division between worker and owner.

Could we come back to the idea of political recomposition? How do you deal with advocacy and activism while carrying out research? The reason we are asking is rooted in our passion for methodology and our interest in the different approaches research can take. In methodology, the position of the researcher can and will influence research findings. For example, in grounded theory, as the name suggests, theories are embedded (grounded) in data and researchers are asked to approach fieldwork as openly as possible. This extends to minimising the impact from our personal convictions and opinions including taking sides. For example, if you interview people and they know that you are on their side, doesn't it influence what they say?

GDP: This is research that takes a side. Although it's difficult for academic work to have this kind of impact, one of our hopes is to produce research that could be useful to these struggles and to organisers. I don't want to overstate the political impact of this kind of work, but one facet of the Cultural Workers Organize project is occasionally organizing public forums around our research, gathering cultural workers and their organisations to contribute to a conversation around collective organising in the cultural and tech sectors. In the process, we've partnered with some of the organisations that we've researched with. It's difficult to gauge the effectiveness of these kinds of events, but I do think that it's a modest contribution that academics can make, and to practise some kind of reciprocity with the communities who inform our research.

Conclusion

As we stated at the beginning of this essay, Taylor and de Peuter's work illustrate two distinct threads of research and focus in the field of arts practitioners' engagement in shaping their careers, their working conditions and the policies that affect them. As we said at the outset, we do not wish to flatten the distinctivenesses of these and other approaches (some of which are employed and explored in the articles in this special issue)—they bring important different understandings and findings to this developing field. At the same time, the two conversations represented here also demonstrate overlaps and commonalities, such as

an attention to the conception of artistic career as one that depends on special attributes, which both defines the person and can result in self-exploitation. Thus the narrative of the big break, that Taylor posits, is applied by artists as a way of explaining the difficulties of their circumstances and status, while at the same time, self-reflexiveness about these conditions is leading arts workers in many countries to take collective action around such issues. There is thus a perpetuation of the narrative but also a resistance and challenge to it.

This is a rich field of research, encompassing a range of theoretical framings and terminology drawn from many disciplines; in this special issue alone: psychology, politics, economics, anthropology, philosophy, sociology, geography, urban and cultural studies, history, and art. It also embraces a wide variety of methodologies, ranging from historical accounts to arts practice-based investigation, through grounded theory, and methods stretching from document analysis, indepth interviews and focus groups, participant observation, and social media analysis, as can be seen in the articles that follow. Importantly, these researches are often collaborative endeavours and bring together practising artists, other cultural workers and academics (some of them embodying more than one of these identities and professions themselves), and thus draw in a range of perspectives.

The material reality of the cultural sector, but also of other sectors, and in particular the impact of neo-liberal policies that create precarious working conditions and status is, in turn, producing the active response of artists and cultural workers. They are reflecting on and analysing their education and training, their career paths and the circumstances in which they work; and are organising collectively, both to cope with and to challenge these conditions and the policies and structures that affect them. We can also see both similarities and variations in different countries, both in the circumstances artists and cultural workers experience and in the ways that they come together to deal with these experiences. Our particular research field can play a part in bringing to light these contemporary activities as well as the histories that inform them; and help to raise the profile of artists and cultural workers as decisive participants in the policy and management processes that affect them, placing their narratives more centrally into the broad scope of cultural policy research studies.

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