

NOT-EQUAL

EPSRC NetworkPlus: Social Justice through the Digital Economy

Project Review Form - Final Review Micro Project

Please submit this form before the deadline of 5pm on the 13th December to notequal@ncl.ac.uk.

| GENERAL INFORMATION | |
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| Lead Applicant (PI): Harry Weeks Email address: Harry.Weeks@Newcastle.ac.uk Job Title: Lecturer in Art History Department: Fine Art, SACS Organisation: Newcastle University | Co-Investigators (names and organisations): Lucas Ferguson-Sharp (Northumbria University) Supporting Partner(s): The Newbridge Project Project Title: Opening Doors: Art and Inequality in the Platform Economy Project Reference Number: NE65 |

1. RESEARCH CHALLENGE

Please outline the research challenge and question your project aimed to address.

Opening Doors proposed to examine the entrenched inequalities of the cultural sector and how these inequalities were related to labour within the cultural field. The project specifically sought to consider the cultural economy in light of recent attention paid to the so-called 'gig economy', most commonly associated with online platforms such as Airbnb, Deliveroo, PeoplePerHour etc. These two economies demand to be viewed in concert both because of commonalities between the two sectors (freelancing, precarity, underpay, casualisation, 'labours of love' etc.) and because of the gig economy's status as an emergent support economy to the cultural economy – that is, serving as a means for cultural producers to supplement incomes gained from cultural work. In both sectors, significant attention has been paid to the relationship between labour conditions and inequality. The *Panic!* Report (Brook, O'Brien and Taylor, 2018) highlighted endemic inequalities across the cultural sector in terms of race, gender and class, specifically highlighting labour as a key driver in the production and reproduction of inequality, whilst the Fairwork Foundation have argued that inequalities are 'built into platforms' (Graham and Woodcock, 2018).

Opening Doors considers how cultural workers can be best supported to survive and thrive in a precarious economy, whilst also investigating means through which labour norms and practices might be challenged and improved. Following the lead of theorists of platform co-operativism, for whom technology acts as both accelerator and potential salve for the inequalities of the gig economy, *Opening Doors* is particularly attentive to the role technology might play in confronting cultural inequality.



Building on previous research undertaken by the PI into cultural producers who find supplementary work through online platforms, the current phase of the project sought to gain broader insights into how precarity and inequality are experienced by those working within the cultural economy, taking the field of contemporary visual art as a case study. Subsequent research will focus on solutions and responses, and the role of technology therein.

2. ACTIVITIES

Please provide a summary of the approach and activities of your research project. This also includes events, engagement activities with non-academic partners and any other activities. Please include any images or website links that could be used for dissemination purposes (at least 500 words).

This phase of the project centred on a series of six workshops hosted by, and produced in collaboration with, Newbridge Project at their space in Gateshead. These workshops were collectively titled 'Assembly: A Forum for Artists in Precarious Labour' and were conceived of as spaces in which artists could freely and frankly discuss their working lives. The safety of the space, engendering a spirit of free and open conversation, was key to the project as previous research undertaken by the PI had found that the taboo surrounding the discussion of working conditions was a key inhibitor of solidarity and organisation amongst precarious cultural workers. The events were designed to serve as opportunities for people to share lived experiences, as well as tactics and strategies for alleviating the impacts of precarity.

The six workshops were curated by artist, curator and Co-Investigator Lucas Ferguson-Sharp, and were moderated and facilitated by artist and researcher Toby Lloyd. Each workshop was led by an invited artist(s), whose practice resonated with the themes of the project. The six workshops were:

1. Input – 26/09/19 – led by Nicola Singh
2. Unite – 10/10/19 – led by Su Jones and Loraine Monk
3. In Kind – 25/10/19 – led by Ailie Rutherford and Janie Nicoll
4. Power – 14/11/19 – led by Priya Mistry
5. Funding – 22/11/19 – led by Ellie Harrison
6. Output – 05/12/19 – led by Sophie Hope

Participants for the workshops were made up of a varied group of local artists and art workers. A core group of around 10 attended most/all workshops, while a further c40 attended one or more workshops. These were drawn from various local networks including: participants on Newbridge Project's professional development programme Collective Studio; undergraduates Fine Art and MFA students from Newcastle University; artists and workers associated with Artists Union England. Other attendees represented a wide diversity of ages and genders, although racial diversity was notably minimal.

Nicola Singh's first workshop promoted self-reflection on the project, and centred on various mapping exercises through which we could understand the institutional network that *Assembly* was imbricated within. The research team explained the funding processes for the project and their own relationships to precarious work as a means of engendering an honest and open atmosphere. Subsequent events focused on unionisation in the arts sector, the proliferation of unpaid and 'in kind' work in art, diversity and representation within the sector, and alternative funding strategies and sources. Each topic served as both a provocation for thought and reflection on people's conditions and experiences, and as a forum for action and the sharing of resources. Participants mapped their own individual economies; shared experiences of unionisation and its difficulties within a sector dominated by freelancing; produced drafts of collectively written demands for change within the sector; and reflected on their own privileges and how they might relate to their ability to maintain a poorly paid and precarious career. The final



workshop, led by Sophie Hope, afforded the opportunity to consider outputs and future directions for the project. It was important that this question was tackled dialogically with workshops participants so as to ensure continued investment and shared ownership of the project and its direction. A wall of Newbridge's Gateshead space served as a perpetually involving pinboard of documentation, resources and prompts, on which maps/demands produced during workshops, and key texts, sample invoices for freelancers, etc were pinned.

3. INSIGHTS & IMPACT

Please describe the findings of your project and their significance in relation to potential or actual social impact.

A diversity of issues emerged over the course of the first five workshops, with the final 'outputs' workshop serving to crystallise these into a selection of key insights that might be derived from this phase of the project.

- **Knowledge:** It became apparent that a key concern amongst the participants, particularly younger artists and those new to the sector, was their sense of a lack of knowledge concerning key and practical information, especially relating to employment law, rights, contracts, invoicing and other administrative activities associated with working as a freelancer in the cultural sector. There was considerable inter-generational conversation, guidance and sharing of resources between participants, and a broad agreement that this sharing of resources, knowledges and strategies would be beneficial to the sector as a whole if somehow scaled up.
- **Transparency:** The taboo nature of conversations regarding one's own finances and working conditions was considered to be a major barrier to progression on issues of precarity within the sector, serving to individualise what are in fact systemic issues. A need for openness and transparency amongst workers was called for.
- **Solidarity:** Relatedly, participants highlighted the many barriers to forms of solidarity amongst workers in a sector dominated by freelancing, low pay and undercutting. This may also be a cultural phenomenon linked to longstanding assumptions regarding creativity and individualism. Conversations particularly revolved around unionisation as a necessary but difficult process. The Artists Union England was highlighted as a key player in this respect.
- **Psychological and physical impact:** The impacts of precarity go far beyond the economic, and many conversations were had regarding the more bodily permutations of precarity.
- **Insulated Community:** While the workshops were focused on art workers, the lack of knowledge of the rights and standards of other labour sectors was apparent. Creating inroads and forming partnerships with other sectors was discussed as a means of knowledge sharing and creating solidarity.

As a result of these conversations, the project team (Harry Weeks, Lucas Ferguson-Sharp, Toby Lloyd) and Sophie Hope (in her capacity as facilitator of the final workshop) discussed extensively how the project and its insights might sediment into practicable, beneficial and tangible impacts for the sector. It was agreed that the pooling of resources – both resources shared between art workers (sample contracts and invoices etc.) and the many resources produced by activist groups and organisations (Carrot Workers, Precarious Workers' Brigade etc.) – had emerged as an urgency that the project might be positioned to respond to. Accordingly, the team are in the process of establishing a resource hub for art workers. This will take both physical (in order to provide a space fostering solidarity and de-individualisation) and digital (in order to maximise access and reach) form. This is being conducted in collaboration with Newbridge Projects.

4. REFLECTIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS



Please summarize any lessons learned from this work and outline any future directions or plans to continue activities beyond this project.

Plans for the physical resource hub are currently being negotiated, with conversations with Newbridge and the Star and Shadow Cinema ongoing regarding hosting the hub. Both of these spaces are ingrained within the North-East's arts infrastructure and are founded on an artist-led, activist ethos that echoes the intentions of the project and the resource hub. Newbridge Project have handled initial production of seed resources for the hub. The establishment of the digital resource hub will follow its physical counterpart. The digital hub will gather materials available in the physical hub, and further research will be directed towards how we might be able to make most of the different opportunities afforded by digital space. The research team have isolated Artists Union England (members of whom have been active and regular participants in the workshops) as being a productive potential collaborator/host for the digital hub, thanks to their shared commitment to fostering solidarity amongst art workers, their anti-precarisation work, and their broader reach beyond the North East. Conversations with AUE are forthcoming.

Work on the production of the online/offline resource hub will be supported by further research into organisation and solidarity amongst gigworkers, with particular focus paid to recent unionisation efforts amongst Deliveroo riders. This is seen as a key comparator for attempts to unionise workers in the art field, with lessons to be learned both from their successes and failures. Research by Kurt Vandaele and Karen Gregory has been identified as being formative to this next phase of research.

There is good reason to reflect on how diversity manifested within the events themselves, a topic of repeated conversation amongst organisers, participants and facilitators. Whilst diversity in terms of class, age and gender (anecdotally at least) seemed representative, at the very least, of the diversity of the sector, according to other measures, the project raised questions. Firstly, the three organisers are all white men, whilst the 8 invited facilitators all identify female. Secondly, there was a degree of racial diversity amongst invited facilitators, but this was not the case with participants. Thirdly, although a grant was secured from Newcastle University Fine Art's Research Environment Fund to cover childcare, this was only claimed once across the six events. Reflection on what might be seen as a failure to engage with communities for whom childcare is essential is ongoing and will inform future plans related to the project.

Dissemination

We plan to share this report on the Not-Equal website. Please indicate if you have any objections to this.

~~YES~~ NO

Further Information

If you have any further questions regarding this form, please contact notequal@ncl.ac.uk or 0191 2088268.

