

COMMUNITY VOICES

Managing Non-Profit and Artist-Run Centres: Some Thoughts and Suggestions Regarding Interns, Volunteers and Other Temporary Workers

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Introduction

Initially a letter written by a disgruntled employee, the following is an adaptation of that letter on the subject of the power differential that exists between paid permanent staff and non-paid interns, volunteers, and other temporary workers hired on job creation programs, particularly in non-profit, artist-run centres. Artist-run centres form a network of non-profit art galleries that showcase a diversity of forward-looking art practices. Funded mainly through Canada Council and the equivalent provincial and city arts funding agencies, management in these centres is expected to respect existing labour laws.

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The following text is based upon my first-hand observations about some of the problems of labour and power differentials that arise systemically in such organizations, and is written in the hope of bringing these problems to the attention of the wider audience of managers in the non-profit sector, as well as to faculty members of fine arts and other social science departments.

The economic reality of artist-run centres - dependence on external funding, chronic underfunding, a predominantly female work force, precarious employee status, and squandering of experience and expertise due

to high turnover and burnout - results in situations where people easily engage in power struggles over limited resources. On the other hand, such centres serve as the training ground for artists, art historians, and theoreticians who wish to advance their careers in the art world. Can artist-run centres continue to uphold the community-minded and egalitarian ideals of "feminism and other social movements of the seventies" upon which they were founded, and still serve the career ambitions of all workers? Or, have the years of working with limited resources created a situation where the ambitions of those who have the power to preserve their jobs take precedence over the needs of the organisation and its voiceless workforce?

The combination of struggling artists willing to do just about anything for free and managers willing to do just about anything to save money is undermining our future by perpetuating practices that undercut an already fragile labour force. The difficulty begins when interns, temporary workers hired on soft funds, and volunteers, for whatever reasons, accept to work in substandard or illegal conditions in the hope that this initial sacrifice will lead to stable employment down the road. For example, when an employee is away or sick, rather than hire one of our artist-members to staff the gallery for the day and support an alternate economy more adapted to the needs of artists, we often opt for the free labour of interns.

Maybe these situations simply reflect a lack of management experience, including a basic ignorance of existing labour laws. Such a lack of experience and knowledge could lead to misguided decisions made in good faith to save the organisation a few dollars. As member-driven and government-funded non-profit organisations, artist-run centres often have little choice but to rely on interns and volunteers to drive their activities and programming. Management, therefore, has the obligation to recognize this workforce by qualifying

and quantifying its value to the organisation for the benefit of each volunteer, as well as for the benefit of funders in their constant re-examination of funding programs. Although centres already compile statistics on workers, including volunteers, their contribution needs to be qualified in a more explicit and significant way in the hopes that this recognition will have an economic impact over the long term, beyond statistics. This could also serve to shift the dynamics of interpersonal relations in the workplace away from money and power and towards more engaging, respectful discussions and actions.

Internships (150 hours), as well as employment programs (presently 26 weeks), need to be negotiated in a way that results in a meaningful, three-tiered partnership experience for workers and learners, the organisation, and funders (government or academia). Is it not in all of our best interests that the experiences of all parties lead to positive, lasting outcomes? What are we really trying to foster in these relationships, and how are they negotiated and co-defined for the benefit of everyone involved? Volunteers, temporary workers, and interns need to be present at the bargaining table. Even the shortest periods spent in an organisation should be significant, defining, and dignified. What is particular about the situation of artist-run centres, however, is that discussions around sociological, political, and economic issues remain unpopular, as many artists continue to disdain business talk. One would imagine that such issues get sidelined by more interesting discussions on art. Instead, precious time is used to discuss petty procedures around nickels and dimes, like idle chit-chat between distant relatives to avoid uncovering the skeletons in the closet.

As part of a culture that is grounded in deeply rooted altruistic and Christian beliefs, that places a high value on morality and sacrifice and that is perpetuated by a patriarchal education system, the

people who make up the majority of the work force (mainly female, white, upper-middle class, and liberal) rarely question the power differentials, lack of autonomy, and other economic inequalities that are characteristic of many artist-run centres. How are artists and artist-run centres served by a hierarchical power structure? This type of structure (the machine and military metaphors apply here) has enabled the success of just enough people - those at the top - to make it a legitimate, "professional" structure. Only a small minority experience the structure as rewarding and, in some cases, even glamorous, while many others are left feeling alienated and uninspired by endless days of repetitive clerical work. Is it possible to create a more evenly shared power structure that truly serves the needs and desires of a larger number of art practitioners, especially those engaged in other activities, such as working to support a family; caregiving of young, elderly and disabled family members, and volunteering in the community?

As a 40-something artist, mother, worker, and feminist, I am looking for ways to build on the hard-won gains of historical and present day feminisms and other social movements of the seventies. This includes looking for ways to foster active participation and engagement (without depleting energy) in an artist-run culture as dedicated as ever to raising the visibility of artists and supporting diverse, innovative art practice and critical inquiry. I suggest that, rather than asking temporary workers, volunteers, and interns to wash dishes, run errands, and replace staff away on paid sick days, we should benefit from the positive learning that feminism and the non-profit community have gathered over the years and create egalitarian work practices across the board. Interns, volunteers, and temporary workers should benefit from the same advantages as those offered in the context of a residence or university co-op program. This would serve to level the economic-

based power differential that presently exists between paid and non-paid workers and between permanent and temporary workers. And since some of these workers are only there for a wink and a blink, let's help them find a project that can be done in that short period of time and that they can call their own, all the while enriching the organisation. The dishes and other menial tasks will still get done with everyone pitching in.

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