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Productive Refusals

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Over the past decade, stepping aside and saying 'No' to conventional requests and expectations has become a prominent tool of subjective and political resistance. Highlighting society's dependence on undervalued labour and unsustainable resources, practices of negation challenge the status quo, leading to new intimate and professional habits.

Within the cultural field, various tactics of refusal have emerged. Artists have declined invitations to speak at art fairs that pose as community gatherings, or on panels whose academic premise they disagree with. They have asked not to be nominated for prizes based on identity criteria with which they prefer not to be linked.[1] When they are shortlisted for prizes, they have rejected the demand that they treat other artists as competitors, dividing the spoils amongst themselves instead.[2] They have refused to exhibit in museums sponsored by foundations and corporations that perpetuate exploitative practices, in turn prompting some art institutions to sever long-term philanthropic relationships.[3] Cultural workers have rejected working gratis, or for inadequate pay.[4] They have questioned the contradictions that lie at the heart of many artistic projects and institutions, demanding that organisations pursue progressive practices that match their rhetoric.[5]

Within my milieu I have encountered various instances of productive. refusal. An artist refused to provide an image of her work to accompany an article I'd written, asking why she should subsidise a profitable academic publisher. A message to a cultural worker prompted an 'Away from emails' automated response: it featured their rules for 'Extraction October', 25 directives, starting with 'No doing work on commutes' and ending with 'We don't repeat the hyper-delivery-care-deficit-fatigue ever again.' [6] To my invitation to perform in Toronto, an artist explained that instead of flying from London they would take the less physically and environmentally damaging option of performing via Skype.[7] Recently, lecturers on short-term contracts at Goldsmiths, University of London, where I teach, announced a staff wildcat strike, protesting the College's decision not to renew their contracts during the COVID-19 pandemic, an act that disproportionately affects precariously employed People of Colour.

Behaving Otherwise

In contrast to these overt acts of withdrawal, refusal can operate in less visible or public ways, such as continuing to show up while participating 'otherwise'. Minimising unwanted surveillance and control, this approach can prove necessary in situations where it is impossible, or too risky, to walk away. Working to rule, fulfilling the terms of employment yet withholding the extra labour upon which the system relies, is a tried and tested tactic. In her 2015 book *Garments Against Women*, Anne Boyer enacts a form of 'not writing', detailing the very conditions – from temporary employment and lack of healthcare, to single parenthood – that contribute to her economic vulnerability, undermining her ability to write. Virginia Woolf advocated the cultivation of indifference as 'a form of quiet revolt, the disruptive power of choosing not to care about what we are enjoined to',[8] as characterised by Maria de la Puig Bellacasa. The radical feminist Shulamith Firestone in 1970 advocated a smile boycott, 'at which declaration all women would instantly abandon their "pleasing" smiles, henceforth smiling only when something pleased them'.[9]

For workers employed to provide care, attempting to separate their 'true' feelings from those expended for pay might be necessary to protect their personal affects and relationships from being exhausted.[10] Such efforts constitute a Bartleby-esque stance of 'preferring not to', where refusal does not entail quitting, but replaces ingrained habits with unorthodox forms of behaviour that unsettle expectations. Bartleby disarmed his employer by continuing to show up for work and staring out of the window at a brick wall instead of performing his expected tasks.[11]

The readymade artist collective Claire Fontaine describe such flights from convention in terms of Human Strike. A movement of 'desubjectification', Human Strike stages 'a strike against oneself, an exit from one's identity (of a good mother, diligent worker, loving wife, active citizen) and all that sustains it.'[12] Disidentifying from stereotypical roles and obligations can lead to 'a new state, less defined, more uncertain, but freed of the weights that burdened the previous identity and perpetuate the status quo.'[13] As a rallying cry from the 1970s Italian feminist movement states: 'We don't believe what they say about us.'[14]

Rather than constitute literal withdrawal, refusal changes the focus of attention, prompting a reappraisal of value. As a participant in a workshop on curating and care recently observed: '"No" is not compromise but conversation. "No" becomes "not this way". If you always say "yes" you suppress the reality of the situation and therefore justify it (it becomes

naturalized).' **15** Art workers at another gathering in Paris declared, 'Our proposition is instead of agreeing to provide to what is demanded, we turn the conversation around to work on what is really needed.' **16**

The Land of NOPE

The development of subterfuge and withdrawal as survival strategies has a long lineage within Black theory and practice. The political scientist and historian Francoise Verges describes 'the loopholes of retreat' forged by enslaved Black women, which entailed 'creating one's own forms of freedom, endurance, perseverance, fortitude, as well as cunning', including 'learning to play stupid, deaf, and blind to gather information in order to distract those in power'.**17** Not opposing one to another, Verges asks how we can develop "a politics of visibility and invisibility both for fighting in the open and for building spaces of retreat away from the constant racial-sexist gaze of State surveillance and control?' **18**

Essentialist assumptions about identity and representation imposed on members of marginalised groups constitute damaging forms of tokenism. People of Colour question the supposed benefits of being included as representatives of ethnic groups and as evidence of institutional inclusivity. They indicate that they routinely carry out labour that exceeds their paid roles, from providing extra mentorship to Black and Brown students who seek them out as role models,**19** to using their personal networks to encourage members of culturally diverse communities to attend white-dominated art institutions. **20** Yet People of Colour in the art and academic sector are disproportionately employed at lower ends of the pay scale or on short-term and part-time contracts. Expected to share their stories of vulnerability and pain, their presence in white-centred organisations bolsters institutional optics around representation and diversity, as a UK collective of artists and arts workers recently objected.**21** Sought out to develop community engagement and education programmes in museums and galleries, too often this involvement does not translate into broader institutional support for their professional development or artistic practices, thus marginalising them and their work. **22**

Nowhere is the exploitation of People of Colour's labour more visible than when their criticism of institutions is used by those very organisations as evidence of their progressive culture. This is the paradoxical situation that Sara Ahmed faced when she exposed the systemic racism and sexism that she encountered at Goldsmiths, where she was a professor

and a diversity officer. 'The work you do to expose what is not being done is used as evidence of what has been done', she pointedly explains.**23** Likening her experience to that of facing brick walls, Ahmed resigned her post. Ahmed practises another form of productive refusal in her writing. Reversing academic habits of 'citational privilege', where the same intellectual precursors are referenced time and again, in *Living a Feminist Life* Ahmed does not cite a single white man; instead she highlights those feminist and critical race practitioners whose work has sustained her.

In another form of strategic withdrawal, artist E. Jane's NOPE (a manifesto) rejects demands that their identity and subjectivity be deemed visible, stable and knowable. 'We are beyond asking should we be in the room. We are in the room. We are also dying at a rapid pace and need a sustainable future.' Resisting the colonial occlusion of 'identity and representation', E. Jane affirms their place 'outside of it in the land of NOPE'.**24**

Passionate Work

At the 2019 Freelands Artist Programme Symposium at Sheffield's Site Gallery, I led a workshop on 'Productive Refusals'.**25** I started by highlighting some of the problematic work conditions common to the cultural sector, symbolised by the many invitations that we receive (and perhaps give) to participate in projects gratis – for the opportunity, exposure, or contacts. I asked those present to recall a time when they agreed to something that, in retrospect, they should have refused, as well as an incident when someone saying 'No' to them proved generative.

This exercise was adapted from a proposition that I developed with artist Alex Martinis Roe as part of a feminist workshop that formed the basis of her 2016 film *Our Future Network*.**26** Following my account of being expected to pay to register and travel to an academic conference at which I was speaking, Martinis Roe described having invited the philosopher Luisa Muraro to participate in an artwork inspired by her research into the Milan Women's Bookshop collective, co-founded by Muraro. When Muraro declined, on the basis that Martinis Roe was her teacher in this situation, what might have felt like rejection ended up empowering Martinis Roe, who found the source of authority within herself, rather than externally.

In subsequent role-play sessions in Sheffield, one group examined the need for clarity on project budgets and artist payments, while another explored how to turn down an exhibition invitation from a friend. Some participants objected to what they understood to be the exercise's underlying premise, which pitted artists and representatives of arts organisations against one another. Their work in artist-led culture would never happen if they waited for funding to be in place, and for everyone to receive fair pay, they argued.

While I agree that financial reward is often the last reason why we choose to participate in the arts, unfortunately the assumption that we work for love, rather than pay, perpetuates the field's poor labour conditions. Cultural workers, like others who occupy feminised roles, risk being treated as sources of infinite support. Such expectations reflect extractivist attitudes that treat nature, like maternal love, as a free, boundless resource. Consequently, the subjectivity demanded of cultural workers, which emphasises flexibility and mobility, communication and overwork, can be even more emotionally draining than that required of conventional 9–5 employees. The Freelands Foundation workshop explored how to stimulate more reciprocal relationships, based in solidarity and mutual recognition, between artists and those holding institutional roles.

Cultural workers often find themselves in a double bind. Faced with reduced programme and institutional budgets in the wake of austerity measures, they carry out the socially reproductive labour of maintaining an institution's smooth operations and positive public image. Internalising the pressure to operate in an opportunistic and entrepreneurial fashion, they feel unable to demand better conditions. A passionate commitment to artists and projects can ultimately jeopardise their own, and their collaborators', flourishing, as well as their ability to nurture non-professional relationships and care responsibilities.

Sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild discusses the emotional splitting amongst flight attendants and other employees whose jobs entail managing other people's feelings while suppressing their own.[27] Citing Hochschild, curator Jenny Richards explores the tendency of arts workers to downplay problems and emotions. Richards aptly describes the phenomenon of the 'coping curator', an inherently feminised figure, with perfect haircut and lipstick, denying her fragility and reliance on others to present the perfect show in the perfect white cube. Contesting this tendency for self-exploitation, while at Konsthall C in Sweden, Richards and her co-director attempted to make their working conditions visible, emphasising

how their roles encompass multiple tasks including those of 'janitor / chef / cleaner / therapist / friend / organiser / builder / teacher / administrator / artist'.**28**

Empty Gestures?

Many cultural workers share Richards's concern about the impact of neoliberal pressures to be endlessly busy, productive and in demand. The toll of staying au fait with the latest art world developments puts an unsustainable burden on human as well as environmental resources. Having diagnosed these norms, we must move beyond analysis. This is not to underestimate the challenges arts workers face when they attempt to change rigid, top-down institutional dynamics. Instead it recognises the need to nurture collective acts of refusal that can stimulate subjective and structural change: urgent in an art culture that often courts the performance of radicalism and criticality, without attempting to transform exploitative and unsustainable working conditions.

While I have emphasised refusal's productive potential, I also want to note that withdrawal can encompass 'unproductive' gestures of inefficiency and uselessness. 'Generative' rather than 'Productive' might be a more accurate description for the processes of refusal I have described here. Stepping aside can be a valuable act of self- and collective-care in the face of widespread burn out, exhaustion and other forms of ill health. Challenging networked culture's emphasis on spectacle, speed and shareable content, it can engender 'pointless' acts of pause and détournement, pleasure and play. For it is in moments when we choose not to perform as expected that '"I am not what you see here" gives rise to "Let's be another possible now."' **29**

Helena Reckitt thanks Sharon Kivland for her editorial work on this essay.

NOTES

1 See artist Jesse Darling's 'Thank you for thinking of me: Correspondences 2014– 2017', in which redacted details of specific invitations that Darling has turned down are presented. In one letter, Darling explains, 'I wish to practice [sic] this politics of protest and refusal in the sense of "putting my money where my mouth is" and in this sense it would be disingenuous for me to continue.', Unbag, End, winter 2018, https://unbag.net/end/thank-you-forthinking-of-me, all links accessed 22 October 2020.

2 Examples of the prize-winning artist dividing the award include Theaster Gates at Artes Mundi 6, 2014, and Helen Marten at the Turner Prize and Hepworth Prize for Sculpture, both in 2016. In 2019 the four artists nominated for the Turner Prize asked the judges not to select a winner, but

to treat them as one collective and divide the funds between them.

3 One prominent example is Nan Goldin's threat to withdraw from an exhibition of her work at the National Portrait Gallery, London in 2019, if the museum accepted a $1 million gift from the Sackler Family, owners of the pharmaceutical company that makes the prescription opioid painkiller OxyContin.

4 See Precarious Workers Brigade, *Training for Exploitation? Politicising Employability and Reclaiming Education*, The Journal of Aesthetics & Protest Press, 2017. The California-based curator Astria Suparak publicises times when she refuses to work for inadequate pay on her Facebook account. In September 2019, Suparak posted that she had said no to jurying an artist residency programme, because the fee constituted less-than-minimum wage. She subsequently updated her post, explaining that the fee had been increased, the employee explaining how Suparak's refusal enabled them to pressurise the institution to increase its budget allocation.

5 I learned of a great example from artist Hayley Newman during the '(Un)Learning Habits of Care' workshop that I organised with Grace Ndiritu at Studio Voltaire, September 2019. Newman, who has a long history of environmental activism, explained how she has grappled with the contradictions of being included in events with environmental concerns, to which she is expected to travel by air. Having flown only once since 2007, Newman often subsidises her travel by train. In an email to me she aptly described the pattern by which 'Artists who work for cultural change do so in our own time and at our own cost (financial and personal/emotional) and without credit.'

6 Devised by artists Sophie Chapman and Kerri Jefferis as part of 'Extraction October' in 2017.

7 Raju Rage, 'yeah but can we listen tho?' as part of 'Care Crisis, Care Connective: An Open Forum on Cultural Work', organised as part of the series Take Care, Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto at Mississauga, September 2017, for which I curated the exhibition Habits of Care.

8 Maria de la Puig Bellacasa, 'Introduction', in *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds,* University of Minnesota Press, 2017, p.5.

9 Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, Bantam, 1970, p.90.

10 This argument is made by De La Puig Bellacasa, op.cit.

11 Herman Melville, 'Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street' (1853) in *The Piazza Tales*, Dix & Edwards, 1856.

12 Claire Fontaine, 'Existential Metonymy and Imperceptible Abstractions' *in Human Strike Has Already Begun and Other Writings*, Mute Books and Post-Media Lab, Leuphana University, 2013, p.56.

13 Ibid., p.56.

14 From a lecture by Fulvia Carnevale, 'And they ask for her help more than they are ready to help her', Goldsmiths, University of London, 16 March 2015.

15 Participant notes from 'Curating and Caring,' a workshop which I devised and which I jointly led with Christine Shaw, Blackwood Gallery, University of Toronto at Mississauga, September 2017.

16 From propositions written during 'Take (Back) Care,' Cit. de Culture, Paris, which I developed with Christine Shaw to accompany the exhibition Take Care, La Ferme du Boisson, May 2019.

17 Francoise Verges, 'Politics of Marooning and Radical Disobedience', *e-flux Journal*, #105, December 2019, https://www.e-flux. com/journal/105/305244/politics-ofmarooning-and-radical-disobedience/.

18 Ibid.

19 See Akanksha Mehta, 'Teaching Gender, Race, Sexuality: Reflections on Feminist Pedagogy,' *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research*, vol.5, no.1, 2019, pp.23–30, on the affective labour she carried out as a teacher of colour, and her students of colour, on a UK university module about the intersections of race, gender and sexuality.

20 See Teanne Andrews, 'Hypocrisy, fake solidarity and glass ceilings: My perspective working at the William Morris Gallery', weareparable.com, 2020,

http://www.weareparable.com/hypocrisy-fakesolidarity-and-glass-ceilings-myperspective-working-at-the-williammorrisgallery/?preview=true&fbclid=IwAR 0ivcAAd5EoCpOSwrR-Cd0F5gZxVzTaSzhSiMRdxnJ2DfadKwISTTqB34.

21 Arts collective including Jade Montserrat, Cecilia Wee, Michelle Williams Gamaker and Tae Ateh, 'We need collectivity against structural and institutional racism in the cultural sector', Arts Professional, 24 June 2020, https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/ magazine/article/we-need-collectivityagainst- structural-and-institutionalracism-cultural-sector?fbclid=IwAR0lwrTL 1mRmG2F83673mENmA7AiNhRzCeGHBRFfEme-MUyrtHuui187QJ4.

22 'While we do not dispute the essential impact we may bring to this specific agenda, this is an active restriction on our creative capacities which prevents us from becoming more deeply involved within these organisations', Montserrat et al, ibid.

23 Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, Duke University Press, 2017, p.110.

24 E. Jane, NOPE (a manifesto), 2017, http://www.e-jane.net/#_=_.

25 Available to listen to at https://soundcloud.com/user-682181597/helena-reckittfreelands-artist-programme-symposiumday-1?in=user-682181597/sets/freelandsartist-programme.

26 Our proposition, together with those of the other participants, appears in Alex Martinis Roe, *To Become Two: Propositions for Feminist Collective Practice*, Archive Books, 2018.

27 Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feeling*, University of California Press, 1983.

28 Jenny Richards in Victoria Horne, Kirsten Lloyd, Jenny Richards, Catherine Spencer, 'Taking Care: Feminist Curatorial Pasts, Presents and Futures', *OnCurating*, issue 29, May 2016, https://www.on-curating.org/issue-29-reader/taking-care-feministcuratorial-pasts-presents-and-futures.html.

29 'Sonogram of a Potentiality', first published in French as Échographie d'une puissance in Tiqqun #2, 2001. The English translation was published by P.troleuse Press, 2011.