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Art, Life and Capitalist Social Reproduction: Curating Social Practice

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Addressing the latest encounter between feminist politics and art, this article identifies a curatorially-driven turn towards social reproduction processes and infrastructures across the contemporary art field. It analyses the curatorial mediation of social practice through two UK-based projects which foreground social and economic justice issues, specifically through the politics and economies of food: Effy Harle and Finbar Prior's *Wandering Womb* (2018) commissioned by Manual Labours for Nottingham Contemporary and WochenKlausur's *Women-led Workers' Cooperative* (2013) hosted by Glasgow's Centre for Contemporary Arts. The central question is: what can social reproduction perspectives bring to the analysis of artistic, curatorial and institutional practices which seek to intervene in social relations and thereby contribute to feminism as a social movement?

Keywords

social practice

participatory art

social justice

feminist curating

social reproduction

care and curating

curatorial maintenance

Art, Life and Capitalist Social Reproduction: Curating Social Practice.

This article will consider the entwinement of curatorial and social practice, connecting the visible dimensions of artworks which intervene in the social fabric to their immediate contexts of production and mediation, as well as their ensuing 'lives'. While it is generally recognised that this kind of creative production (whether artistic or curatorial) pivots on a durational commitment to social and economic justice, its specific relation to feminism as an emancipatory struggle and critical perspective is yet to be properly elaborated. My starting point is the integrative perspective advanced by materialist feminist approaches which address art as a field, or circuit, brimming with contradictions (Pollock 1992: 146). The deep ambivalence towards the art institution in feminist thought and struggle also marks the terrains of social practice; in both cases, relations are often fraught and shaped by pragmatism. Yet, if feminism's critique is overt and long-standing, scholarship on the mediation of social practice is surprisingly limited, leaving the relationship with the institution and the performance of curatorial labour largely obscured from view. This results in an overriding impression that mediation structures are incidental (or even bypassed entirely) in this realm of creative production. Exceptions in the literature point to the pivotal role played by curators in raising the profile and, arguably, acceptance of socially minded approaches within the artworld (see Birchall 2015; Bishop 2012). Others place an emphasis on the challenge posed by the same approaches, framing them as an expanded form of institutional critique and noting their inherent demand to recompose not only art's social basis but its infrastructures as well (Lütticken 2015). My own analysis of the curatorial and institutional mediation of socially engaged artworks is positioned within the social reproduction

perspectives advanced in feminist thought. I argue that this theoretical lens has much to contribute to critical analyses of recent social justice and ‘care’ trends in contemporary art and curatorial practice, as well as to a feminist social history of art mediation.

The rapid adoption of socially engaged practices by art institutions over recent years has seen ideas familiar from the associated literature absorbed into art’s infrastructures. These variously include the prioritisation of face-to-face encounters, a focus on practice over objects, the creation of micro-communities of self-selecting participants and appeals for curators to ‘take care’ (Bourriaud 2002; Huberman 2011; Kester 2004). Food, its cultivation, preparation, distribution and consumption, has increasingly been centred by institutions and curators at a programming level, seen as a pragmatic mechanism through which to move at least some programme components beyond spectatorship and towards more participatory and user-driven models of engagement and community-building.¹ While many institutions establish allotment projects or designate the café as a vital programming site, Casco Art Institute in The Netherlands goes so far as to deploy ‘cooking’ as a metaphor for a curatorial approach that rejects the privileging of exhibition-making to instead ask: ‘What shall we cook together? With whom shall we share it and how?’. A similar tendency can be found in the UK where curators at la Sala have centred their annual programme around the theme ‘fermenting institutions: thinking beans’, setting out to understand what contemporary art can learn from food growers, producers and collectives. Food’s traction in the art field can be seen as another instance of curators’ and institutions’ growing interest in the terrains of social reproduction; that is, those life-making activities and structures which sustain workers on both a daily and generational basis. For more than half a century, feminists have insisted that food preparation is part of the constellation of

undervalued social reproduction processes that scaffold the formal economy. As part of a drive on the part of art institutions to adopt an expanded ‘civic role’ in the early 21st century, vision documents and programmes increasingly centred caring labour and encouraged attempts to intervene in the infrastructures that support and reproduce life, from education and the environment to healthcare. Given the public health, economic and social crises now facing humanity (though heavily inflected in terms of impact by class, race, gender and disability), this care-focused interventionist model is a trend that is likely to escalate and take on new forms over the coming years. It can be described as a curatorially-driven social reproduction turn, the hallmarks of which have frequently entailed not only a move beyond the ‘broadcast’ models of exhibition-making established in the 19th century but also evolutions in staffing structures and roles in order to better support more durational, experimental approaches orientated toward ‘radical hospitality’ and social justice issues.

Beginning with an analysis of two curatorial case studies which elaborate these shifts, realized in Scotland and England respectively in the period between two global events – the financial crisis of 2007/8 and the public health emergency of 2020 – I pay close attention to what I call their ‘curatorial lives’ (incorporating commissioning, delivery and subsequent maintenance). The first draws upon my own experience as an independent curator working with the Austrian collective *WochenKlausur* on a project which set out to address the difficulties faced by a Glasgow community in accessing fresh food due to an absence of grocers and supermarkets in the local area. Undertaken in 2013 over the course of a four-week residency supported by the Centre for Contemporary Arts (CCA), *Women-led Workers’ Cooperative* sought to make a useful intervention beyond the gallery walls. The second case instead

orientated attention towards its host institution, Nottingham Contemporary, attempting to map and then reshape its social dynamics by installing a mobile kitchen for the use of employees. This commission, entitled *Wandering Womb* (2018), was organized by the independent curators Manual Labours working closely with in-house staff. Both projects centred food production, a notable, long-standing trend in social practice where the cultivation of community gardens, cooperative bakeries and the establishment of food preparation businesses are now commonplace.² Yet, what Helena Reckitt (2013) has theorized as the ‘forgotten relations’ of such interventions can be traced back throughout the intersections between contemporary art and feminist thought where the same thematic has opened up critical engagements with sexuality and representation as well as classed, gendered and racialized labour. Calling attention to the ‘memory lapse’ to which Nicolas Bourriaud fell victim in his influential account of the relational practices of the 1990s (2002), Reckitt was the first to connect art’s more recent forays into the social field to feminism, noting his elision of feminist precedents, and with them the stark challenges they pose to his theory. In the same vein, Marina Vishmidt (2017) has pointed to the centrality of feminist art practices to the evolution of community art and socially engaged practices, citing Suzanne Lacy as a prominent example. Vishmidt’s observation that social practice and gendered labour are similarly premised on the generation and maintenance of social bonds is borne out in Lacy’s *International Dinner Party* (1979), a work that saw groups of women across the globe gather over a meal and send telegrams to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art which were duly recorded on a large map pinned to the institution’s walls. Yet, unlike apparently ‘frictionless’ examples of relational art typified by Rirkrit Tiravanija’s gallery cooking experiments, in Lacy’s performance the preparation and consumption of food became a

site of both encounter and organising, establishing an intimate connection between feminist struggle, the art field and processes of social reproduction.

Women-led Workers' Cooperative and *Wandering Womb* were realized in publicly funded UK arts institutions in the decade following the socialisation of the financial crisis. Since the formation of the Scottish parliament in 1999, responsibility for culture has been devolved to the Scottish Government, while in England arts provision is overseen by Westminster's Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). State funding is distributed via their respective arms-length bodies, though the two country's respective political contexts diverged after the dominance of the Labour Party fell away both North and South of the border to be replaced in Scotland by the SNP in 2007 and in England by a Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition in 2010. Opened at the tail end of the museum boom in 2009, Nottingham Contemporary is one of Arts Council England's flagship National Portfolio Organisations, receiving additional support from Nottingham City Council and, specifically for the Public Programme, the city's two Universities. Glasgow's CCA also underwent a large lottery-funded redevelopment in the late 1990s which similarly prioritised a sequence of white cube gallery spaces, though it was in a markedly less stable financial position in 2013. Following the loss of regular core funding from Creative Scotland (the national arts funding body) seven years before, the institution adapted to survive, evolving a new 'open source' model designed to democratize programming and enhance its social relevance amongst communities across the city and beyond. As part of its reinvention, CCA prioritised food as a programme thematic, attracted by its capacity to engineer conviviality, engage with ecological and social justice concerns at a local level as well as to generate positive institutional narratives during a time of challenge and crisis.

Increasingly replicated across a number of institutions, this thematic focus must be considered in relation to the increasing number of UK households facing food insecurity under the double blow of changes to the welfare system and the violence of austerity governance over the same period. While in 2014 a Westminster All Party Parliamentary Group noted that hunger was now woven into the daily lives of communities, food banks had become normalized; a development which, once established, is known to be difficult to reverse (cited in Garthwaite 2014).³ In such a precarious landscape, food-orientated artistic and curatorial practices were therefore well-placed to respond to funder and policy-makers' demand for the social impact narratives which complement the economic case for culture, a point I will return to later.

Though the differences in the commissioning contexts underpinning *WochenKlausur*'s and *Manual Labour*'s interventions were marked, the briefs and resulting projects shared some similarities; the prioritisation of improvements to social reproduction infrastructures, a requirement to operate beyond the gallery spaces (against the architecture, as it were), and a 'start-up' format whereby the projects were able to generate their own momentum and 'lives' utilising a mix of funding secured through local universities and the respective public funding bodies. In both, the artists and curators involved identify as feminists, approaching their respective projects as an opportunity to realize feminist effects within the everyday lives of participants and collaborators as well as to contribute to feminism as a social movement. These two case studies provide an insight into how institutional commissioning and curatorial work operated in 'austerity Britain' and in relation to social and economic justice concerns, particularly those which impact on women and other marginalised groups. Their analysis also

casts fresh light on how a specifically feminist politics operates within art institutions; as is often noted, the two frequently clash (Lloyd et al 2016).

WochenKlausur: Institutions & Afterlives

The methodological difficulties inherent in analysing art projects which are realized through social relations are well rehearsed; the absence of a discrete final product, the insufficiency of conventional art historical terminology and diffuse authorship models are compounded by the extended durations over which such works unfold. Those individuals embedded within the project appear best placed for the task. Indeed, as Claire Bishop has noted, the narratives around participatory work are frequently managed by the curator (2012: 6). She goes on to comment on the critical foreclosure that besets such curatorial reports, citing the establishment of personal ties over time to chart an inverse relationship between involvement and objectivity. Yet, attending to the pragmatics of experimentations with what Paul O'Neill and Claire Doherty (2011) call the 'co-production' model underpinning social practice reveals that the complexity of the constraints in play press well beyond issues of friendship and fidelity. O'Neill and Doherty deployed the term co-production precisely in order to effect or acknowledge distributed ownership amongst protagonists, including the curator who is so often responsible for the initiation and subsequent maintenance of the artwork. Applying an economic perspective to curatorial efforts to produce and care for social art projects reveals that the narratives advanced not only determine the work's future life or viability (its capacity, for example, to secure further funding) but the extent to which the curator's career is implicated in its perceived success, or otherwise. After all, both artistic and curatorial practices are now deeply marked by precarity, reputational economies and

a dependence on networks. In this light, bold assertions that failure is not a possibility for the ‘useful’ artwork begin to take on new dimensions (Bruguera 2012). It is not only a question of effectiveness – acknowledging the high stakes of real-life interventions – but of reputation. With an understandable reticence, then, some curators have circuitously acknowledged the drawbacks in truthfully describing a project, while others have postponed their more critical accounts until a safe distance from the host institution has been established.⁴

My account of an involvement with a social practice project is similarly caught by my own implication. Operating as a ‘co-dependent curator’ (O’Neill: 2005), a term for independent practitioners who necessarily operate through institutions but at a remove from their protective confines, I worked with my collaborator, Angela Dimitrakaki, to invite WochenKlausur to take up a four-week residency as part of our exhibition project. Titled ‘ECONOMY’ it set out to map the gradual prioritisation of economic relations in art practice and theory after the end of the Cold War and the consolidation of capitalist globalisation. Following an initial site visit, three members of the collective and one local artist began the process of initiating a worker’s cooperative with unemployed women living in the Drumchapel area of the city. Provisionally entitled *Participatory Economics*, the artists set two aims for the venture: to address high levels of unemployment by encouraging entrepreneurial approaches and to tackle nutritional issues that stemmed in part from a lack of access to fresh produce. The proposal was designed to tap into the CCA’s existing connections with local health and wellbeing charity Drumchapel L.I.F.E. and to further the art institution’s established commitment to developing projects centring the politics and economies of food. This institutional background, however, was missing from WochenKlausur’s own report on the project. Writing just after the conclusion of their residency,

the artists were careful to acknowledge the supporting role played by Drumchapel L.I.F.E. but limited their mention of CCA to the inclusion of the organisation's name in the post's title. This distancing obscured the hidden yet experimental role played by the institution and its agents in terms of commissioning the venture; hosting the artists in an office-cum-studio set up in CCA's Creative Lab space; identifying the core theme of food insecurity; and providing access to existing relationships with crucial partner organisations including Drumchapel L.I.F.E. [Fig 1. WochenKlausur, *Women-led Workers' Cooperative* (2013), artists at work in CCA's Creative Lab. Photo: courtesy of the artists] In other words, in addition to cultural capital, the institution can be said to have provided access to the primary 'materials' of artistic production; in the case of social practice this means access to human participants and the web of social relations.⁵

Renamed *Women-led Workers' Cooperative*, WochenKlausur's brief burst of creative action concluded after one month following the piloting of the group's new business venture which centred on the sale of inexpensive 'meal bags' containing a simple recipe card together with the exact quantities of required ingredients [Fig 2. WochenKlausur, *Women-led Workers' Cooperative* (2013), meal bag. Photo: courtesy of the artists]. Though a support infrastructure comprising a range of service representatives and the Director of CCA, Francis McKee, had been established, the enterprise itself had begun to falter: the already fragile cooperative of three women began to dissipate and the plans to open a shop could not be realized.⁶ Kerry Moogan, CCA's Programme Development Manager, secured additional funding to extend the part-time contract of the remaining local artist for a further 12 months and McKee took the decision to incorporate the initiative into CCA's core programme. Here we can see the institution working to mitigate at least some of the issues that accompany the project model of art production whereby

the engagement of practitioners is funded for a specific period of time. The artist Tania Bruguera makes the dynamics of this relationship more explicit in her account of ‘Arte Útil’, a term and associated criteria she devised with a team of curators to denote artistic practices operating within and beyond the art field, orientated towards useful societal transformations and social justice: ‘I see myself as an initiator (rather than a performer or even an artist) ... with social and political public work we do not own all the work and that the ways by which these works can be sustained are by the intervention, care and enthusiasm of others’ (Bruguera cited in Eccles 2015: 74). Though precisely *which* others is not specified, it appears that a more comprehensive analysis of such artworks necessitates attending to the institutional ‘life’ of the artwork, which usually denotes a far longer duration than the artist is typically able to dedicate.⁷ In the case of *Women-led Workers’ Cooperative*, while Dimitrakaki and I were indeed present as temporary curators over a marginally longer period of time than *WochenKlausur* (subsidized in part by our own institutions), CCA provided a degree of stability through the provision of resources, maintenance of networks and programme integration. Seen from this perspective, an important aspect of the curators’ and institution’s role in the delivery of this project was to paper over the ructions induced by precarious working conditions.

CCA continued to work with Drumchapel L.I.F.E. to maintain subsequent iterations of the meal bags initiative long after the artists’ (and the original participants’) departure. Renamed ‘Flat-Pack Meals’, a short film designed to promote interest the project premiered at CCA in 2016 as part of their ‘Cooking Pot’ programme.⁸ Yet, the venture struggled to maintain traction in Drumchapel and in the same year the idea was resuscitated in the East End of Glasgow supported by funding from the NHS health improvement team, this time with a volunteer-led

rather than enterprise structure. While the origins of the idea are acknowledged on the associated website, CCA was not involved in this iteration which went on to win a best community initiative award in 2018. The eventual migration of Flat-Pack Meals beyond the remit of CCA – and the scope of the art field more generally – is regarded by the institution as a marker of success and it has since been deployed as a model for their community engagement work.⁹ The institution’s experience with *Women-led Workers’ Cooperative* is indicative of a much broader interest in participatory approaches in the post-representation era, a trend that runs counter to increasing levels of social atomisation under neoliberal globalisation (Slater and Iles 2009: 36). Here the art institution seeks to operate not only as a machine of leisure and entertainment but of socialisation and optimisation through incorporating a commitment to social service – moreover, one that caters to the most basic of material needs. Notably, in this case the dedication to social and economic justice which underpins this service was orientated towards mitigating the immediate impacts of chronic unemployment and food poverty. A more direct engagement with the structural causes of these issues, or indeed with class and feminist struggle was, however, absent.

The Wandering Womb

In November 2017, Alba Colomo and Merce Santos Mir from the Public Programmes and Research team at Nottingham Contemporary invited Manual Labours to lead a staff workshop exploring employees’ relationship to their workplace. This expanded into a two-year residency during which Manual Labours took the notion of the institution as a ‘public body’ literally, collaborating with employees and, occasionally, outsourced agency staff to conduct a durational

investigation into the working environment which began by mapping anatomical systems onto the physical infrastructures. Summarising the project, Manual Labours wrote:

We wanted to carry out a health check of the building as body as a way of making publicly visible the type of (socially reproductive) work that goes on inside to keep the body alive. By exploring the anatomy of the building in terms of its different body systems we want to see where the building is hurting, blocked-up, suffering, sore, seeping and flourishing... This is a messy journey. (Manual Labours 2018: 7-8).

Further workshops, interviews and commissioned performances delved into the inner workings of the institution, mapping structures, diagnosing problems and prescribing remedies [Fig 3. Manual Labours, *Building as Body* (2018). Image: courtesy of Manual Labours]. As part of this process, Manual Labours performed a public ‘architectural endoscopy’. Dressing up in white lab coats and strapping a video camera to a participant designated as the ‘probe head’, visitors were encouraged to document their progress through the building, noting any observations on forms provided. Entering through the mouthpiece and moving through the upper oesophageal sphincter/reception area, they descended into the stomach/open-plan office where hidden problems with the volume of content, enzymes and inefficient communication were said to result in a range of symptoms from bloating and heartburn to a lack of concentration and irritability. The investigation concluded with an inspection of the small intestine (the large intestine/basement and loading bay were apparently blocked) before the group’s ‘expulsion’, back up through the mouth.

Rather than venture into external sites and communities, Manual Labours' project orientated attention inwards, using exercises and commissions to directly address staff welfare and working conditions. The embrace of humour and absurdity in this feminized institutional critique parodied the wellbeing initiatives that have permeated the contemporary workplace, performing a critical analysis using strategies which resonate strongly with Andrea Fraser's earlier appearance as a docent in *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk* (1989). The 'ground up' perspective offered by these initial investigations was partly attributed to the composition of the workshops which disproportionately attracted staff holding posts on the lower rungs of the institutional hierarchy, including technicians, cleaners, education workers and gallery assistants. In other words, what theorist Gregory Sholette (2010) has described as the 'dark matter' that underpins the artworld – here revealed once again to be deeply gendered. Nottingham Contemporary staff were then invited to perform a 'hysteroscopy' which began with the identification of an area they would associate with an organ from the female reproductive system. Their subsequent examination of the building's 'uterine cavity' (the space designated as a staffroom), identified ongoing issues with its social reproductive systems, observing that food preparation and communal areas were neglected or inadequate. In response to these findings, Manual Labours fundraised to commission employee and artist Effy Harle to create the *Wandering Womb*, together with Finbar Prior. This mobile staff room and kitchen was designed to house research materials on feminist social reproduction struggles in the workplace alongside cooking equipment, storage and an electricity connection [Fig 4. Effy Harle and Finbar Prior, *Wandering Womb* (2018). Photo: courtesy of Manual Labours]. Conceived as both a hysterical, peripatetic device and a 'space of care' to disrupt established hierarchies and to meet practical needs, it offered a place where workers could take time to scrutinize the institution as an

economic and social site, together. It was launched together with the *Building as Body* handbook at the close of Manual Labours' engagement with Nottingham Contemporary in November 2018.

In this case, oral history methods offered me a route into the project and its aftermath as an external researcher. Two years after the launch, I conducted a series of interviews with employees involved in the project as well as with Manual Labours (Sophie Hope and Jenny Richards). In their account of the *Wandering Womb* intervention, Hope and Richards noted that their goal was not to 'restore the right balance' within the institution by identifying and resolving issues. Rather, they were driven by an interest in feminist approaches to architectural misuse designed to resist the ways in which workplaces control bodies and determine encounters (Rendell 2009) as well as a commitment to supporting workplace struggle. This aligned with the Public Programme curatorial team's stated aim to use the *Building as Body* project as part of a broader attempt to shift the institution's working culture by cultivating staff engagement with processes of reflection and discussion as part of a bid to establish a union branch. As Janna Graham (then Head of Public Programmes and Research) noted, organising amongst cultural workers is rarely an easy task. Such resistance to unionisation here and related sectors is variously attributed to the perceived threat it poses to professionalism, to the 'myth of the calling', and to the protective sheen of 'passionate work' (Hill: n.d; Myers 2019). While the latter has been found to legitimize exploitative treatment on the part of employers, *not* to find pleasure in work is seen a marker of personal failure or unsuitability (Kim et al 2020). The high rates of burn out and staff turn-over are presumably to be expected.

As well as contributing to a consciousness-raising effort, Manual Labours also attempted to engage the institution's management and Board through the production of a report. Their efforts in this respect, however, were seen as rather naïve by at least one member of the senior management team who noted that they had required assistance to find the right language and that the Board had questioned whether everyday staff working conditions lay within their remit. That said, my interviews with those involved made clear that encouraging the Board to engage outwith their comfort zone had in fact been a key objective and that the act of publishing the Manual was intended to politicise the issues. It appears that the staff team were indeed galvanized through the process of feminist critique and collective reflection; many of the employees credited the *Building as Body* project with contributing to the realisation of some workplace reforms, including the fairer distribution of shift work. For some, the experience was personally transformative: the *Wandering Womb* commission gave one employee the spur to leave an institution she regarded as typical of the sector in terms of its 'vampiric' and overly hierarchical structure. In her words, it had become clear that 'the solutions weren't going to come from the inside'.¹⁰ Refusal is of course an established feminist tactic, and, in contrast to the WochenKlausur example, the structural perspective afforded through Manual Labours' interventions led some to the conclusion that mere reform is indeed inadequate.

Manual Labours expended considerable effort negotiating for the *Wandering Womb* to remain on site after their departure and it has since been absorbed into the institution through regular use. Despite this, however, the unit now resides in the Director's office and is only brought out for public events and community workshops. Managed via a booking system, it is no longer accessible to the Gallery Assistants for use during their lunch breaks and its function as a

hub of information on social reproduction struggles has been lost. This literal and metaphorical tethering of the unit to the established functions and hierarchies of institution – what might be called its political sterilization in the parlance of the project – speaks directly to the difficulties in enacting structural change within institutions well-used to assimilating critique. Manual Labours curators Hope and Richards reflected during our conversation that ‘if [the *Wandering Womb*] has become too useful [then] it has failed as a project and as a performative device... it is meant to be playful and provocative’. Compliance with the institution, they went on, uncritically reinscribes the essentialized relationship between the womb and the kitchen rather than cutting open the dynamics of gendered labour. A parallel can be drawn here between the difficulties faced when negotiating feminist politics and socially-engaged creative approaches within the orthodox institution. As Zarina Muhammad (2020) notes: ‘There isn’t the infrastructure or expectation to prioritise longer-term relationships, mutual care, or transference of power’. The extent to which art institutions can engage with and contribute to feminism as a socially transformative and emancipatory project while being locked into the reproduction of the status quo is therefore put into question.

Infrastructures of Social Reproduction

The conspicuous prominence of food in the art field’s turn towards social reproduction can, at least in part, be accounted for by its capacity to engage with each ‘layer’ of processes associated with the term. These include what Marx called those ‘natural needs’ essential for the biological continuation of the species; the maintenance of working subjects; and those activities, practices or services connected to the fulfilment of human needs and the production of social values. Both

Women-led Workers' Cooperative and *Wandering Womb* addressed a lack of access to specific material conditions of reproduction, including access to nutritious comestibles and space for rest. I have written elsewhere (Lloyd 2015) on the prioritisation of caring relations in social practice, but here I will focus on how these two projects address the *infrastructures* of reproduction and care. The tendency for contemporary art to step in where the state has withdrawn was signalled at the turn of the century by Miwon Kwon who viewed artists' heavier social responsibility in the US as symptomatic of welfare funding's constant diminishment (2002: 113). In her important article on the politics of 'useful art', Larne Abse Gogarty discussed Director/curator Alastair Hudson's desire to reorientate the activities of his institution, the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (mima), to support and contribute to other areas of state provision beyond culture such as healthcare, housing and education. She observes that his vision effectively parcelled out the 'good' side of the state as a viable context for artistic support, while other scaffolds of capitalist production such as prisons, police and border systems were spurned (2017: 122). The divide she identifies holds water across the field of social practice more broadly and can be articulated as one demarcating care from violence, a problematic opposition as feminist analyses have consistently demonstrated.¹¹

An enduring challenge to discussions on social reproduction and the art field is that different lines of Marxist and post-Marxist theoretical enquiry have been argued to leave the term 'social reproduction' itself vulnerable to indeterminacy (Giménez 2018: 291). A more nuanced approach distinguishes between *descriptions* of such processes and recent attempts to elaborate Social Reproduction Theory (SRT) as a framework apposite to the future of feminist politics and struggle. With a legacy that can be tracked back to the perspectives developed within

the international Wages for Housework movement of the 1970s and beyond, SRT works to re-script what actually counts as labour and to position gendered labour as foundational to capitalism as a mode of production (Bhattacharya 2017: 2). More recently, the COVID-19 crisis has cast an unforgiving light on this dependency, exposing skewed, racialised and violently unequal systems to scrutiny. In her critique of SRTs, Martha Gimenez (2018) notes that such wide definitions of social reproduction begin to map onto what Marx referred to as capitalist social formations; historical terrains shaped by the capitalist mode of production which encompass oppressive social relations and a multiplicity of institutions that create and recreate economic and ideological divisions. Gimenez argues that social reproduction is not foundational to capitalist production as part of an integrated process, as many hold it to be; rather it is *subordinate* to the reproduction of the capitalist class. This important distinction allows her to contrast her sketched alternative framework of ‘capitalist social reproduction’ to its opposite, *socialist social reproduction*, where in her words, ‘the satisfaction of the material needs and self-development of the direct producers would determine the objectives of production; under socialism, reproduction would become foundational in practice, rather than theory’ (2018: 206, fn118). By contrast, the relationship between production and reproduction under capitalism is fundamentally contradictory.

Importantly, Gimenez attends to the *shaping* capacities of capitalist social reproduction. Her revised framework not only captures workers’ access to necessities (such as food and housing) but also enters into correspondence with Louis Althusser’s work (also from the 1970s) on those infrastructures and structural practices which underpin the *ideological* reproduction of workers and the relations of production. In Althusser’s account (1971), Institutional State

Apparatuses (ISAs) including the education system, religion and, of course, the family and cultural institutions, operate in constant (though subtle) connection with those aspects of the Repressive State Apparatus that Abse Gogarty noted the contemporary art institution distances itself from; namely, the police, military and prisons. Notably, both feminist and Athusserian theoretical vectors offer a perspective that repositions aspects often separated from the continuum of capitalist productive relations as central to it. It is clear that any analysis of the institutional and curatorial social reproduction turn in the art field must negotiate both trajectories. Vishmidt has already begun this work on ‘the two reproductions’, warning against the tendency in some feminist approaches to detach reproductive labour from its role in the reproduction of capital which, she observes, can lead to the moralisation of care work and the affirmation of traditional gender roles. Tracking a politics of subjectivity through specific performance works, Vishmidt demonstrates that ‘art does not behave simply as a mediating institution but as an *iterative* one’ (2017: 50-51). That is, notwithstanding differences such as those set out above, art institutions operate under capitalist social reproduction, configured within the hegemony of capital while playing a role in the formation and shaping of subjectivities. It is with these comments in mind that I contend that a more rigorous and nuanced approach to social reproduction perspectives must inform the analysis and critique of feminist curatorial work within the art institution.

While much discussion has been afforded to the ways in which the exhibition model interpellates subjects as ‘good citizens’, positioning viewers as recipients of instruction and entertainment (Bennett 1995), social practice offers a markedly different set of conditions. Here, the subject tends not to be addressed as an individual but as a group or community, and is not

presumed to be white, male and middle class but rather female, precarious and marginalized. Yet, despite the critique that is embedded in the perspectives advanced, much social practice is similarly engaged in the production of the good subject, perhaps in part due to its attachment to usefulness, pragmatism and problem solving (O'Neill and Doherty 2011). Both *Women-led Workers' Cooperative* and *Wandering Womb* dealt with workers, whether as employees or as potential labour. More specifically, both sought to engage with the economic oppression of women workers and struggles over social reproduction: though Manual Labours did address the stagnation and diminishment of wages, their primary concern was with the organisation of the work, together with the facilities and resources available to staff.¹² Aiming to address the highly gendered impacts of austerity and disrupt what sociologists Laslett and Brenner (1989) have called *societal* reproduction (the perpetuation of class inequalities through generations), the Austrian collective's Drumchapel initiative attempted to integrate women deemed 'disposable' by rehabilitating them into a flexibilized, entrepreneurial workforce. Though neither of the case studies examined here addressed gentrification as a process of class-based spatial displacements, recent work on the topic by the sociologist Kirsteen Paton (2014) is useful in that she prioritises the internal impact of the physical changes which have indelibly marked urban landscapes and communities throughout the UK. Focusing her attention on Glasgow, Paton notes that subjects *adapt* to turbulent times by rejecting class-based collective identities and constructing entrepreneurial, neoliberal identities in their stead. Just as art's 'site' has been internalized in the case of *Women-led Workers' Cooperative*, so has gentrification's frontier. Meanwhile, Manual Labours' curatorial intervention and commissions were somewhat unusual in seeking to build solidarity between primarily middle class, though often precarious, art workers and the institution's broader workforce. While their analysis interrogated the production of specific

inhabitants and behaviors through the architecture and internal social hierarchies, the *Wandering Womb* formed part of a counter strategy to cultivate an alternative form of the ‘good arts worker’: ‘one that cares about the holistic health of the whole organisation and their relationship to colleagues, not just the public performative façade’ (Manual Labours 2018: 8; 77). In other words, the intended outcomes were to actively demonstrate different working dynamics and engage participants’ commitment to feminist politics with the aim of moving from competitive to political subjectivities.

The tacit ambition of socially engaged approaches, such as those associated with Arte Útil or contemporary art institutions which prioritize care or struggles for social justice, to mitigate capitalist social reproduction’s worst omissions and impacts, or even to opt out entirely, is clearly discernible. Such attempts at mitigation and withdrawal can easily transmute into a drive to somehow realise socialist social reproduction in the (capitalist) present through strategies of what might be called radical care. Registering that such efforts can be susceptible to neoliberal co-optation, it is useful to connect curatorial and institutional interest in durational, care- and social justice-driven approaches to a broader cultural policy context.¹³ At the outset of the twenty-first century, the UK followed international trends in prioritizing an economic rationale in public and cultural policy, attempting to fuse this with a residual progressivism which emphasized the social benefits of engagement with the arts (Hesmondhalgh et al 2015: 185).¹⁴ This led to an environment of target-setting by governments, aimed at monitoring cultural institutions together with a focus on accountability, access and the positioning of social impact as part of the ‘core business’ of arts organisations (Bishop 2012: 13; Brook, O’Brien, and Taylor 2020). While reports and papers consistently underlined the value of engagement with

cultural activities in combating a variety of social and individual ills – with Westminster’s DCMS (2019) going so far as to recommend prescribing exhibition visits and artistic pursuits – the rhetoric of participation and community dovetailed with the discourses associated with social practice where interventions into the fabric of social relations often lack the conventional markers of ‘creativity’. The rise of socially engaged approaches paralleled the promotion of economic and social inclusion agendas across the UK, a trend that continued through to the period bracketed by the financial and pandemic crises, during which the ‘changing lives’ narrative united many policy makers, funders and institutions, centring attention on art’s capacity to contribute to health and wellbeing agendas (Bishop 2012:13; Brook, O’Brien and Taylor 2020). Given that the majority of state funding for culture has been funneled into supporting an infrastructure of institutions, it is through this route that this ‘mainstreaming’ of social practice has been managed. Here, the reproductive drive of the institution produces a politics which Oliver Marchart has noted tends to be ‘dominated by consensus, mutual agreement, administrative bargaining’ rather than a more disruptive and transformative commitment to emancipatory social movements. At the same time, far from circumventing existing cultural infrastructures, the reliance of social practice on the institution (and the curator therein) to be received *as art* ultimately fortifies it (Vishmidt 2013). Given this dependency on providers that operate under the hegemony of capital, what are the political prospects for those projects that centre socially reproductive processes and the attendant social and economic justice issues?

Which Feminisms?

The contradictions produced through efforts to transform social relations from within the ‘battleground’ of the institution are, arguably, most keenly felt by – or embodied within – the figure of the curator, particularly as she adapts to her new role as an agent, rather than target, of institutional critique (Richter and Drabble 2007: 8). While artists are still able to maintain at least the impression that their labour is un-instrumentalized, the curator’s role remains a job, even if one based on temporary or otherwise insecure contracts secured in a field where the competition for visibility, networks and funds is so clearly raced and classed (Brook, O’Brien, and Taylor 2018). That is, she remains a worker, a representative of the institution who derives both cultural and social capital from this association. The requirement to develop a capacity to hold conflicting professional identities and political commitments while negotiating competing pragmatic demands is especially marked in feminist and social practice curating (Dimitrakaki 2019). Occupying a brokering role, this figure mediates the relationships and points of intersection between state and private funders, institutions, artists, communities and participants. (Vishmidt’s [2013] elaboration on the entrepreneur as a contemporary art strategy – community and business facing at the same time – maps particularly well onto this position). The tensions produced frequently result in an ambivalence towards the profession and the label itself. Just as Hope and Richards sought to occupy hybrid positions as curators, facilitators and embedded ‘researcher-practitioners’, social practice mediators often do not identify strongly with the title of ‘curator’, highlighting its problematic connection to hierarchical and exclusionary structures with legacies in racism and colonialism. Yet if the frustrations that accompany the disconnect between the declared politics of a display premise and the material structures underpinning it are by now familiar, the mediation of social practice presses such contradictions still further: the exhibition

is, in the words of the Precarious Workers Brigade (2011) ‘confined within a space of critique without consequence’, but interventions into the social fabric place much more at stake.

The political commitment that curators who commission, mediate and maintain socially engaged artworks most commonly espouse is feminism, often accompanied by at least a mild critique of the current, neoliberal devastation. Back in 2006, Bishop went further, remarking that the critical discourses associated with social practice were predicated on ‘a tacit analogy between anticapitalism and the Christian “good soul”’, though she went on to centre the ethical imperative at the expense of an analysis of the former (Bishop 2006; Dimitrakaki and Lloyd 2017). While we can see that those institutions across Europe which specialise in social practice tend to be led by individuals who identify as feminists, the same politics appear to guide the curatorial vision behind more modest ventures, such as those under discussion here, wherein durational and ‘engaged’ projects remain secondary to the core exhibitions programme.¹⁵ What I want to argue here, then, is that the mediation of social practice forms a crucial ‘front’ in feminist curatorial approaches. Its analysis necessitates venturing beyond the two issues which have dominated discussions of late, namely visibility and precarity. Deploying social reproduction perspectives to develop a more critical and nuanced analysis of this latest (and frequently vexed) encounter between feminist politics and the art field is crucial in grasping how curators and institutions seek to engage with demands for social and economic justice beyond the exhibitionary frame.

Shifts in curatorial labour are perhaps the most readily apparent difference and Helena Reckitt has already offered a feminist perspective on this topic in the pages of this journal,

observing a move away from the arrangement of objects and towards the creation of socialities (2016). This is perhaps most clearly discernible in social practice curating which can now be understood as an exemplary case in the socio-economic order of feminized labour widely encountered in globalisation. Notably, this feminisation of the capitalist art field extends beyond the ways in which work is structured and compensated to ensure that the *values* associated with a gendered sphere during the rise of modern art and nineteenth-century industrialisation have transferred to curatorial (as well as artistic) production within the early twenty-first-century finance- and service-led economy. During their negotiation of the hidden infrastructures and processes of the production and mediation cycle, Manual Labours' role fluctuated between that of observers, hostesses, therapists and fixers. Their experience resonates with Leopoldina Fortunati's discussion of the broader trend whereby the dynamics of the reproductive sphere have been exported into the world of goods and services; she cites both the material labour of domestic work (cleaning, cooking, pregnancy and childcare) and its immaterial dimensions defined in her words as 'affect, care, love, education, socialization, communication, information, entertainment, organization, planning, coordination, logistics' (2007: 144). As reproduction is reframed in relation to production, the relevance of the curatorial thematisation of food takes on new dimensions and points to other possible histories. The alternative genealogy of modern curating sketched by Elke Krasny (2017) offers a useful framework for the analysis of social practice mediation which – unlike the now commonplace centring of 'care' in institutional rhetoric – is not shorn of any reference to the rich feminist debates on its politics and ethics. In parallel with Tony Bennett's (1995) conception of the 'exhibitionary complex' so strongly affiliated with the museum's ocular regime, she identifies the emergence of a conversational trajectory which finds its roots in the eighteenth century *salonière*, a domestic space engineered

by women based on hospitality, exchange and relationality which nevertheless remained predicated on exclusion. An analogy appears to be invited here – and, importantly, one that also holds in terms of race and class – between the contemporary ‘she-curator’ and the housewife.¹⁶ In identifying this connection, it is critical to negotiate the insights of early Black feminism on the implied universal relevance of the housewife, given the prevalence of paid domestic labour and the notable absence of a link between wages and liberation.¹⁷ Yet, while both ‘women’s work’ and the perennially underpaid, co-dependent curator of social practice ostensibly remain marginal to – or even challenge – capitalist circuits of accumulation, each continues to be indispensable to institutions placed in the service of capital (whether the family or the cultural organisation).¹⁸ Susan Ferguson’s sketched taxonomy of social forms of labour brings further nuance, distinguishing between experiences of unwaged work and public sector social reproduction workers; neither, she argues, fits into the category of capitalistically productive labour yet both produce *useful* things, whether it be meals, community gardens, mended bones, caring relations or knowledge. The type of curator I engage here is involved in the co-production of similar outputs under the rubric of culture, typically occupying a space between such categories as precariously employed and associated with state-run institutions. As Ferguson notes, socially reproductive workers often hold more autonomy than those directly implicated in capitalist markets and are able to prioritise life-making practices. In her words: ‘they can establish connections with others that cut against the alienating tendencies of capitalism, emotionally and intellectually investing in their work and the “product” of their labour – despite being immersed in capitalist relations and against the disciplining pressures of management and/or technology’ (2020: 129). Here the decisive relevance of state support for social practice projects emerges into view.

My intention is not to argue that curatorial engagement with socially reproductive activities, infrastructures or labour constitutes a marker of an explicitly feminist practice. When Katy Deepwell (2006) similarly insisted that such approaches cannot be biologically determined, she also noted the divergence in value afforded to ‘femininity’ as opposed to ‘feminism’ in exhibitions from the 1990s, an observation which should be kept in mind vis-à-vis social practice. While the thematization of food in socially minded practice from the 2010s can certainly be related back to its salient place in the history of art (variously signifying wealth and colonial spoils, the passage of time, conviviality, leisure and consumption), its enduring relevance to current feminist struggle is more urgent.¹⁹ Lola Olufemi has called for a wholesale rethinking of its production and preparation through to its relationship to the climate catastrophe: ‘When we begin to think about food outside the realm of what we individuals ‘choose’ to put in our bodies and instead consider the political factors that shape which foods we can access, it becomes clear that food is a feminist issue’ (2020: 128). With these comments in mind, I want to argue that the question of what identifies a curatorial practice as feminist must be supplemented with another: which feminisms? The framing of this query is taken from Susan Watkins’ stunning history of the feminist movement, tracking its institutionalisation – or ‘NGO-isation’ – since the 1970s which saw early militants in the US transformed into salaried officials competing for funding and the establishment of micro-credit schemes as the preferred ‘empowerment’ policy in informal economies across the developing world. The limitations inherent in mainstream feminism’s promotion of only those perspectives compatible with the neoliberal order signal a warning to social practice interventions in the art field which reflect such efforts to bring women and marginalized communities into the economic mainstream, as in

WochenKlausur's *Women-led Workers' Cooperative*. As Watkins notes, those 'advances that have been achieved in gender equality over the last five decades have gone hand-in-hand with soaring socio-economic *inequality* across the world' (2018: 7). More recent elaborations have identified two opposing trajectories for feminism: the liberal, 'lean in' visions of self-driven 'equal opportunity domination' versus the re-emergence of explicitly anti-capitalist feminism which builds upon the social reproduction perspectives advanced at least since the 1970s, remaining dedicated to forging a new society that puts the life-making imperative above that of profit. How the art field's social reproduction turn can consistently move beyond thematics and the superficial valorisation of care to seriously engage these divergences is therefore an urgent matter. Within the purview of its agenda of critique, different vectors of social practice adopt what might be reformist strategies or are inclined to build a space apart; a temporary model of socialist social reproduction. Exceeding the dynamic of critique, others seek to engage anti-capitalist and feminist struggles outwith art that confront capital's territories directly. My analysis of the case studies above shows how important it is for feminist curatorial practice to actively address these differences, to ask who and what is being reproduced, and to carefully plot the contradictions and tensions between the shaping tendencies of capitalist social reproduction and the potential of struggle therein.

The 2010s in the UK saw women, and particularly Black and ethnic minority women, shoulder the repercussions of the ongoing programme of austerity inflicted when the financial crisis was converted into a public debt crisis. As policies intensified the fault lines underpinning the UK's 'high inequality economic model', their regressive redistributive effects benefited those with assets and wealth while women were impacted by the 'triple jeopardy' of welfare cuts,

rising precarity and service reductions. The introduction of COVID-19 into this already pressurized and fractured context shone a harsh light on capitalist social reproduction's prioritization of profit, its limitations and its violence. Yet, over the same period, workers' resistance against capital's assaults on social reproduction have ignited many of the most militant responses across the globe (including the women-led strikes of teachers in the US, carers in Scotland and Dalit sanitation workers in India), while the pandemic forced a recognition of the necessity of social reproduction infrastructures, pointing to the latent power held by the workers therein (Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser 2019). In illuminating the ineradicable bonds between different aspects of social reproduction – housing, healthcare and food, to take just three – the pandemic has also foregrounded the necessity to build connections and solidarity across different emancipatory projects and social justice movements. If, through socially engaged practice, the art field seeks to contribute to these struggles, two connected issues are key: first, it is necessary to venture beyond the thematisation of social reproduction to engage seriously with past and current debates advanced within this explicitly feminist perspective together with the associated struggles if the pitfalls outlined by Watkins and others are to be avoided. Second, thinking in terms of the curatorial life of socially engaged projects underscores that it is vital to address the question of what kind of art infrastructures and curatorial strategies are required to struggle effectively in the terrains of capitalist social reproduction.

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Biography

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¹ A similar trend is seen in museum studies literature which advocates integrating social services into a reformed institution, often through food (see Heumann 2020). It is notable that Stephen Wright. - the key theorist of usership in the art field and ‘Museum 3.0’ - is now himself a farmer.

² See, for example, Simon Grennan and Christopher Sperandio’s contribution to Mary-Jane Jacob’s *Culture in Action* (1993, Chicago) for which they collaborated with the Baker, Confectionary and Tobacco Workers' Union to design a new chocolate bar; Critical Art Ensemble’s GM testing lab *Free-Range Grain* (2003 – 2004, Germany, Austria); Michael Rakowitz’s *Enemy Kitchen (Food Truck)* (2012, Chicago). See also Cezar and Dani Burrows 2019; Purves 2005; Thompson 2012.

³ On the normalisation of foodbanks, the number operated by the main provider, The Trussell Trust, has risen from two in 2004 to a network of over 1,200 distribution centres in 2019 (Sosenko et al. 2019).

⁴ See Tom van Gestel’s comments in O’Neill and Doherty (2011: 339-368), or Janna Graham’s illuminating account of the Serpentine’s Edgwear Road Project (Graham 2017).

⁵ The dependency on art institutions is occasionally acknowledged (see Zinggl 2001).

⁶ For more on the challenges facing the participants and their experience of the project see Lloyd 2015.

⁷ One exception is when the artist constructs themselves or the project as the institution as in the case of Rick Lowe's Project Row Houses (1993 – present). See <https://projectrowhouses.org/>. Accessed 17 January 2019.

⁸ See 'The Making of Flat Pack Meals',. <https://vimeo.com/119880419>. Accessed 23 May 2019.

⁹ From discussion with CCA's Public Engagement Curator, Viviana Checchia.

¹⁰ Author's interview with participant.

¹¹ For example, the systematic devaluation of care work is closely connected to the erosion and denial of citizenship rights (Lorey 2015). In 1975 Silvia Federici referred to housework as 'the subtlest violence that capitalism has ever perpetrated against any section of the working class' (Federici 2012: 16).

¹² Unlike those involved with *Building as Body*, who were paid for their time as part of their role, WochenKlausur's participants can be placed in the category of 'decommodified labour' identified by Leigh Claire La Berge and described as 'a kind of work that is not compensated through a wage or available through a market purchase' (La Berge 2019). Though, as the budget published on the first page of the manual attests, Manual Labours own fee of £2,400 was hardly reflective of the labour committed to the project. 90 days of work are listed which amounts to £27 per day.

¹³ While the art institution is arguably drawn to the 'commons fix' argument more than any other type, social practice enterprises often enables institutions to experiment with a light touch version of commoning rather than embark on anything more thoroughgoing (See Massimo de Angelis 2013).

¹⁴ As Hesmondhalgh points out, policies in areas such as culture are constructed through internationally circulating ideas, rather than driven by the much shorter timespans of electoral cycles.

¹⁵ See, for example, Bina Choi at CASCO Art Institute: Working for the Commons, Maria Lind at Tensta Konsthall, iLiana Fokianaki at State of Concept.

¹⁶ Lara Perry's analysis of the infrastructures of the art field which reveals the importance of the domestic sphere and household labour to artistic careers in London during industrialisation offers a very useful historical perspective here (Perry 2017).

¹⁷ See, for example, the insights of the Black Women for Wages for Housework movement which demanded a move away from a myopic focus on the nuclear family and an autonomous domestic vision (Prescod 1981).

¹⁸ This follows Kylie Jarrett's analogy between the figure of the housewife and digital labour and consumption (Jarrett 2016).

¹⁹ Many thanks to Victoria Horne for this point.