

MACC X DEER



ALMOST
SILENT,

ALWAYS
AUDIBLE ●





7TH JULY, 2023 19:00

MACC-SOUNDSCAPES ©10

Alex Bal, Haoyue Chen, Aishwarya Korwar, Sophia Lam, Eva Rondo, Sijie Song, Birong Wang, Peiwei Zhu, Jiachen Zhu

PEER

Peer is a not-for-profit neighbourhood space for contemporary art, located in Hoxton, East London. We place artists and local communities at the heart of our internationally recognised programmes of public exhibitions, collaborative projects, talks, events and offsite commissions.

ual: university
of the arts
london

PEER

● Design: Haoyue Chen

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PROGRAMME BLURB



We are a group of MA Curating and Collections students from Chelsea College of Arts working on a sound-based experimental research project adjacent to the exhibition we are a group of people composed of who we are at Peer from 23 June to 9 September 2023. Attached here are individual positionality statements from our collective.

Through a sonic programme composed of field recordings, archival sounds and interview excerpts, we hope to re-examine sound as a tool of resistance, dispersive remembering and access to the otherwise invisible in the archive.

Our programme will manifest in three to four  15-minute audio essays, focussing on the issues of housing, unemployment, childcare and equal rights in the context of Hackney. The essays will take the form of mixtapes of voices and noises recorded from the borough's past and present such as old sites of artist-supported collectives and activism, and will be played at a live listening party coinciding Peer's exhibition on Friday, 7 July and archived on the gallery's website. Positioning the gallery as a vessel of production, metabolism and dissemination, we hope that the programme will amplify the quiet frequencies within the archive vitrines in the intimacy of a shared hearing experience. A supporting literature – which includes a description of the sounds and transcript of the interviews – will be in place alongside the audio works.



INDIVIDUAL POSITIONALITY STATEMENTS

Alex Bal grew up in Slough, just outside of London. He is a mixed race, cisgendered male. He studied a BA in Fashion Marketing at the University of Southampton, graduating in 2022. In his BA, Alex explored critical issues regarding race and ethnicity within the fashion industry. In his MA, he critiques this in a curatorial context; he questions representation on an institutional level and investigates themes of discrimination, tokenism and ghettoization.

Haoyue Chen, female, born in Ningbo, China, currently researching on new models of curatorial practice needed under the hybrid public space context, as a result of digitalisation and global public health crisis.

Aishwarya Korwar grew up in Hyderabad, India. After spending most of her life feeling a deep unwavering passion for challenging societal norms, she decided to pursue an MA in Curation and Collection. As a person of colour, her research interest is fuelled by advocating for underrepresented voices particularly in relation to issues of gender, identity, and power dynamics. She aims to curate exhibitions that celebrate the achievements of women artists, artists of colour, LGBTQ+ artists, and artists from other historically marginalised groups.

Sophia Lam grew up in Hong Kong and has worked locally in journalism and with art non-profits. With an education in translation and languages, she is interested in cultural nuances that manifest in language, visual art and more. She identifies as a cis-gender female. Her current research interest is imagining the archive as an organic flux and its potential to produce a site of resistance to hegemonic historic narratives and majoritarian cultures.

Eva Rondo was born and raised in Moscow, Russia. Back in Moscow, Eva's curatorial practice was focused on working with emerging artists and new media. Currently, the main theme of research for Eve is contemporary political activism and state violence.

Sijie Song was born and raised in China and her MA thesis is about socially engaged art/community-based art, which liberates the viewer from the traditional position of the passive viewer and focuses on the participation of the viewer and the positive ongoing impact of the art itself on the community.

Birong Wang, female, from Beijing, China. She researched on the preservation and restoration of traditional Chinese heritage in China, and now focuses on artistic interventions in Palestine, considering how Palestinian artists use, usurp or subvert power infrastructures to criticise and intervene in Israel's colonial power.

Jiachen Zhu was born in China, and lived and studied in Canada for seven years. Based on her art history and psychology academic background, her current research is about improving accessibility related to art and health projects within curatorial practice.

Peiwei Zhu was born in China, she studied International Relations as an undergraduate, and her current research is about activism and feminism, including how female artists work as activists to promote feminism development in Britain.



INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS



1- Unsafe Housing and Homeless

**In Conversation With Lizzie Homersham
& Danny Hayward**



2- Childcare

In Conversation With Veronica Deutsch



3- Equal Rights

**In Conversation With Donna Travis
In Conversation With Ken Fero
In Conversation With Eliel Jones**

UNSAFE HOUSING AND HOMELESS

In Conversation With
Lizzie Homersham (LH) & Danny Hayward (DH)
Interviewer: Haoyue Chen (HC)

16th June 15:00 - 16:00 (GMT+8)

CAFE OTO

18-12 Ashwin St, London E8 3DL



Cafe Oto indoor view (2023), photo by Birong Wang

HC

(music playing the background)

I'm very grateful to have Lizzie and also Danny to join the conversation. So at this point, we'll focus on the union's practices and also your opinions on rent issues and housing policies.

As a member of London Renters Union, what do you think of the current situation of unsafe housing and homelessness in Hackney or Dalston area?

LH

How would I begin? That is a really broad question. I think it's extremely difficult as a renter at the moment if you don't have some connection to a house. If we're talking about shared accommodation, houses for up to say, four or maybe more people, four or five people living in one house, and you're looking to rent a room, it's very, very hard to find that place unless you're in a position where you're already connected to a community and someone is moving out, and you happen to hear by word of mouth that's a place you can move into, and you happen to be favoured by the current housemate, and the rent happens to be cheap enough. There are some houses like this that get passed through friends and informal networks that renters hear by word of mouth. That's always how I personally found a house, found somewhere to live until very recently. The situation generally is that there's far too little social housing, rent is unaffordable. So if you're not in a position that I just described, where you're able by word of mouth to hear of a room that is affordable and there are very few of these affordable houses, you are looking at paying – I don't know how much currently, like if you're going to be renting with one other person, like barely upwards of 1500 pounds per month at least, as I was looking to rent with my partner not so long ago. Eventually, he bought a place. But when we were looking to rent, it was impossible. We were also, as a kind of unit, looking to rent a one-bedroom place in a really big queue of people. It's highly competitive. It's not only that the rent is high, but it's also a competition to be able to put in a bid, it's a relatively new thing. That is because it's competitive because there's not enough housing for the demand, at the prices that people that are kind of at the maximum of budgets. These viewing situations where sometimes a state agent will bring in, maybe five or so people to the same viewing or pack you in tiny time slots, one after the other, and then you will be expected to bid, so you'll be inflating the rental price, and this is pushing prices up. So it means that places that have traditionally been more affordable to live in are becoming unaffordable. It creates problems of gentrification and in other areas, there are really bad disrepair problems, where landlords have tenants who know that if they complain they might be putting themselves at risk. It's possible for a landlord to evade the responsibility to maintain the property that it should be, and this has created for some people really bad health issues. I could give an example of one of the actions that London Renters Union did. There were two renters called Max and Mary, who had such bad mould in their flats that they had respiratory problems. They were members of the Union. As a Union, we sort of came together to support their case, wrote letters, and stayed in action at Hackney Town Hall. They gradually made some progress on their case. I'm not sure...do you know what their current situation is?

DH

There's been some quite serious repairs carried out now in Max's flat, but that's only after there was a national media article about how he was suffering from an incurable autoimmune disease as a result of the neglect by the Council of this building.

LH

So that's within council housing rather than a privately rented accommodation. There are some, like, I think the majority of members of the Union are private renters, but there are also members who are in council housing.

So, for your personal situation, you're now looking for a private place to rent or council housing?

I'm not currently a renter now. But I'm still a member of London Renters Union.

Yeah, I mean, like, personally, yourself, when you need to find a place to live, what kind of landlord would you like to choose? Just personally asking.

If say my relationship came to an end which occurred, I don't know what position...I would be in a very poor position in terms of my options to look for somewhere to live. The social housing lists are so long that they've taken people often.

In Hackney, you can only be on the list of social housing now, if you either have a serious disability or you have several children, and you are in a situation where your housing is legally defined as overcrowded. So if you have, for example, three children that are in a one-bedroom flat. But otherwise, that doesn't mean that right, so that tells you to wait for perhaps several years to be assigned social housing, but otherwise, there is just zero availability. So if you're, for example, a young person on low income or even if you are a single mother on low income, you're just not eligible for social housing. It's not available, and you have no option but to look for private housing, in which case, you encounter all the things Lizzie was just describing.

So it's not...yeah, it's not so much about what kind of landlord. I guess I would want social housing to be good and available, affordable, like good quality, and for there not to be a culture where people are...there's a culture in this country where the property market is based on ownership. So there's not a culture, as there is in a lot of other places, of being able to live for a long time in rented property and to think of that place as your home for as long as you want it to be, and for any rent increases to be very minimal. But what happens in London, and in a lot of parts in the UK is that rent increases much, much higher in comparison to the increase that you might expect or actually attain from your workplace. So my wages have barely gone up since 2011. But my rent – I was paying like 350 pounds at one point when I was living in the first place I rented, but the last place I rented was 524 (pounds) plus bills, which is very cheap for London prices, and that was sharing with four other people (DH: That's 60% or something.) Yeah, that's still a large percentage of my wage. And as someone who like is working in the arts, who wants to work in the arts, you can't really expect...it's just not realistic to think that you're going to be able to have your wage stay in line with rent increases.

One thing you see in Hackney is that this has changed the demographics of who live in Hackney. So increasingly, unless you are already in social housing, as quite a lot of older working-class people in Hackney are, or you are able to live in a single room in a shared house, as Lizzie was describing, it is not possible to pay the rents to live here. So there's this strange polarisation where you have older, poor people who can stay because they're in social housing and then younger single people in individual rooms in the houses. Everyone else is moving away because there's just no way that they can pay the rents which are asked of them. And the way that this plays out is visible in lots of different ways. So for example, just around the corner from here, there's a primary school called Dalston Primary School, which is going to close down because there are too few children in the area now for it to be viable. And the reason for that is that families with young children can't afford to live here. They're moving away. So that's the sort of symptom of the way in which the unaffordability of private-sector housing in Hackney means that only certain kinds of people can afford to stay.

HC

LH

HC

LH

DH

LH

DH

LH

Yeah, I also saw this when I was volunteering for an organisation called NELMA, North East London Migrant Action. There was a campaign site to North East London Migrant Action that is campaigning on issues relating to people who are in precarious positions because of their immigration status. So, for example, there was a campaign around free school meals for people with what's called 'no recourse to public funds' because of their immigration status. The UK government says they will not be entitled to any state benefits like housing benefits, working tax credits, personal independence payment. (strong metal banging noise) Because they're not entitled to benefits, their children were not considered eligible for free school meals, but they will often be in pretty much poorer situation than people who were entitled to benefits and just happened to have a stable immigration status. So there was a campaign around that, but on the other hand, there was a lot of what this organisation NELMA did, was accompany often women, largely single migrant women with young children who, would be approaching social services because they have a child in need. Because they weren't eligible for benefits, they were being supported by another organisation to ask the council to provide them some minimal form of support. And that may have involved support with housing but according to a different system than the housing benefits. Because it would have to be at the...there's a law which says that if there is a child in need, it's the responsibility of the local Council to cater to that child's needs to make sure that they're not destitute, to make sure that they can be fed, clothed and go to school, all of these kind of basic things, and not be homeless as well. A lot of what these people were facing was homelessness, like moving from one place to another, so often they are relying on favours from their friends like staying on couches, these kinds of thing. What Danny was just saying about places in Hackney not being affordable and people moving out, when sometimes these people were offered housing, it was often in places like Margate, which are very far from, you know, it's over an hour away on the train, and people would be offered sometimes places to live, but they'd be completely severed from their communities. So they might have been in the country for quite some time and built up friendship networks. Their child might be at school and have school friends. And suddenly, the council would say, 'well, we can't offer you anything because there's such a long waiting list. There is no housing.' And so then they would be moved out. So that's a huge, huge problem.

HC

It's also a kind of safety whether you are able to live here because it's kind of like you're being controlled by the government or the council thing.

LH

What was the first thing you said sorry?

HC

(Regarding from what you said,) I think it's also a new form of unsafe housing as well. Because according what you and Danny said, you (the residents) didn't even have the rights to stay here since your situation is being controlled by the government or the local council. That's what I'm understanding towards what you guys suggests. So have you participated in or organise any events that related to these kind of subject that help people to get the house they need or get a good quality house through London Renters Union?



LH

I can't think of examples of people who I don't know, maybe you know, an example of someone who has in situation through member solidarity. I can think of eviction resistances. They've been really successful, like console cases where someone wants to stay in their home. They're being issued an eviction with an eviction notice. And because members of London Renters Union had gone to the person's house on the day that they're meant to be evicted. They've managed to buy the person some time because when the bailiff comes around to say, 'you have to leave your property,' often we're not expecting a big group of people to say, 'sorry, you can't do this today.' That often means that they would go back to the landlord and say, 'well, we tried to evict this person, but they're saying they won't move. What are we going to do?' This sometimes allows people to challenge their eviction. But maybe Danny can speak to it to a different example.

In the Union, we have a thing called 'member solidarity'. So people who join the Union, who have housing problems, can go into the member solidarity group, and they get support and advice. And the idea is that once someone has received support advice and they've improved their housing situation, they can become a member too, of member solidarity and help others. ~~It's all about mutual aid and mutual support.~~ There are different things that we can do depending on the specific situation. So Lizzie just described eviction resistances which is kind of the last stage before you get made homeless. But also often people have disrepair issues. Often what happens in the private sector is landlords relying on tenants not knowing what their rights are with respect to repairs. So if you rent a home, you have a right to be safe and warm. Basic repairs ought to be carried out by landlords. Landlords often refuse to do that. They will say, actually, the tenant broke this and it's the tenant's responsibility. When your boiler is broken, you fix it and you pay for it. That's not how legal obligation actually works. But it helps within the Union that we have lots of people who have had experience dealing with landlords who know the law, so we can tell someone if they come to us – No, this is not your responsibility. What your landlord is saying isn't what the law says. And you need to come back to them and say, 'this is what the law says. ~~This is your responsibility.~~ These repairs you need to carry out.' So that's quite basic stuff just to do with that advice. And then if landlords or estate agents still don't do what they are obligated to do, there are other actions that we can take collectively. So often, for example, we will go as a group to a letting agent which is refusing to carry out repairs, with sidestepping the law and their obligations in other way, and we will deliver them a letter on behalf of the tenant and the Union, which says what the law is and outlines the actions that we will take if they don't do what they are obliged to do. And that can often help because tenants are often on their own with landlords or estate agents. Renting can feel quite isolating. ~~You don't necessarily know what the law is, what your rights are.~~ And frankly, landlords and estate agents can often be bullies. So they will just act in a very aggressive and stonewalling way. And that can be discouraging for you or frightening as an individual tenant, especially because, as Lizzie says, People are often very frightened about what will happen if they get evicted. How will they find another place to live? What will they do next? So going collectively as a group and showing that we have an organisation, institutionalised knowledge that we know the law and that we're willing to take action can be very effective. And our experience as a Union is that often just by doing that, like collectively delivering a letter showing that we know what our rights are, we can get action that we couldn't get individually. So often, landlords or estate agents will then take action. They will send around repaired, and they will carry out works needs to be carried out.

Sometimes it's quite effective to threaten reputational damage as well to the letting agent or the housing provider. For example, there was an action this week which involved making lots of phone calls to a housing provider called CETA Homes. There was a resident whose house is in a state of disrepair and she had been trying to get these repairs done, and they just weren't doing them. I wasn't part of organising this action. I was at work, but I did realise something I could do is to leave some negative reviews on CETA Homes website – not on their website sorry, on Google reviews and Yelp reviews. With lots of people doing that, it really annoys the CETA Homes. They got very annoyed, and it created extra work for them. ~~It's a nuisance.~~ They had taken upon themselves to respond to every negative review and say that this is a scam, these are hackers, don't listen to them. But obviously, anyone looking at this would wonder, well, what's really going on here. It'll still do some damage. Other people who have time to make a phone call will be calling up CETA homes and saying, 'please may I speak to the manager? There's this person who has these issues and she's repeatedly been ignored. They have repairs needed doing, why weren't you doing them?' This has been successful, this negotiating tool to get together and say you can't treat someone like this. You should fulfil your responsibilities.

HC

Yeah, so it's kind of like looking for help from a wider community, from the online platforms as well. When other people see these comments, they may not rent this place anymore. And profits could be lost, so it's like something really hits.

LH

Yeah, there have been instances where we've done this in person outside of letting agent shops as well, holding up banners and making noises and chants outside letting agents which makes them look bad to passers-by. There was a letting agent on Stoke Newington High Street, we stood outside – I forget the chant that we said – but it's also quite fun to get together, and it feels like you can actually change something.

HC

Yeah, another kind of solidarity as well, whether is now within the union like mutual benefits to all living in Hackney with house renting issues, also a collective thing. I'm thinking, because the current unsafe housing conditions in Hackney, for places like Evelyn Court, which suffers from a damp living environment, has the union paid attention to them or have solved these kinds of problems through focuses on rent or making rent as the crucial factor?

LH

Yeah, I know there is a campaign around.

DH

So Evelyn Court is a housing association. So a kind of third type of tenure. It's neither council housing nor private housing, but instead, people rent from this nonprofit organisation, the Housing Association. We, London Renters Union, met tenants there while we were doing some outreach in Dalston last summer, and one of the tenants told us about the disrepair issues that have on the estate. This has been very interesting for us because the Evelyn Court residents have a lot of the same problems. Their systematic disrepair issues, and we were trying to help them to organise with one another to meet one another, to come up with collective demands, and then take those demands to their housing associations. On the assumption that they will be stronger if they can bring their demands collectively, say, look, there are 50 or 100 of us who all have damp issues and problems with our plumbing, and we can't be marked off as individuals. There needs to be systematic works carried out on the building as a whole in order to improve the living conditions. We had a big demonstration, perhaps a year and a couple of months ago, outside of the Housing Association offices, which is in Tottenham, where lots of people came out from the Union, maybe like 70 to 100 of us, and all of the tenants were there, and they delivered the letter collectively to the management. Again, lots of chants, lots of banners, lots of noise – TV cameras there, the local media, and national media too. All these things convey to the Housing Association that this is a serious thing that they need to respond to. As a result of that action, the Housing Association did promise to carry out systematic repairs in Evelyn Court, and it has subsequently, to my understanding, carried out quite a few repairs to individual flats which previously had been suffering long term disrepair and felt ignored by the Housing Association. But Evelyn Court is an old housing complex. There were really serious problems and there were works that needed to be carried out quite majorly. Although I'm not personally involved still in that campaign, I know it's still ongoing, and the tenants are still struggling with the Housing Association to get everything that they want done done. So that's an ongoing campaign.

HC

So for this kind of campaign, have the Union involved government into the context, like Hackney Council (or any other institutions)?

We have tried to get support from the council. It's an interesting case with housing associations because often when we have members who are council tenants, so in a way, the landlord – the opponent – is the council. We go to them and say, you're responsible for this, it's your fault, you need to fix this. Whereas with the Housing Association, it's a slightly different relationship because the council isn't the landlords, and it's in some ways easier to get their support for that reason. So yeah, we've tried to get the council to go and see the site and make statements in support the residents, and they have done that. And they're very interested in being supportive around the situation of their tenants. But in the end, in all of these struggles, the organisation that you finally have to move to action is the landlord, whether that's the Housing Association, the council or private landlords, or the estate agent. So although the council has been quite supportive about the disrepair issues in Evelyn Court, it hasn't yet been enough to make the Housing Association, the actual landlords carry out works that needs to be carried out.

In terms of government, there's a Renters Reform Bill, and London Renters Union was one of several groups and other renters unions like Shelter. There are various demand that are under rent that recently went through. I need to check what bill actually passed. In Scotland, for example, there has been a freeze on rents, and in fact, that's not been the case in the rest of the UK. *(coughing in the background)* That was one thing that the London Renters Union's demanding, that there should be a rent freeze. (DH: And section 21 as well.). So Section 21 evictions are no-fault evictions, so it's not because you've done anything as a tenant but it's the landlord –

There are no grounds, so that's the no-fault perspective.

The issue with the notice in line with the notice period is in your contract.

So until the 1970s and 1980s in the UK, if you took out a contract with the landlord, they would usually be permanent contracts and so long as you've filled the terms of the contracts as a tenant – so you kept the house in good condition and you pay your rent – you are a secure tenant, and you can't be evicted. You can only be evicted if you fall into arrears – you're not paying your rent, or you are breaking some of the conditions of your contract. Then in the late 1980s, the law changed, and subsequently the great majority of private rental sector contracts are what are called the Assured Shorthold Tenancies, and those allow for this thing called no-fault evictions, which means that even if you are paying your rent and even if you have kept your house in good condition, your landlord can evict you with usually like two months' notice. So they just need to send you a letter in the right format saying that you need to move out in two months. And then, if you don't do that, they can begin a legal process of evicting. And that's been totally central to some of the things you were describing earlier to do with the massive increase in rents. Because it's very easy to throw out your tenants and replace them with other tenants who can pay more than the former. As a Union, from the very beginning, one of the main demands we've made to the government, to national level politics is for an end to Section 21 no-fault evictions. Because we think that's really a fundamental part of any programme of transformation of either renting and renting as a whole in England and Wales.

Is there another demand for rent control? Is that part of the –

Yeah.

Where London Renters Union says that rent shouldn't be more than 30 percent of your wage.

DH

LH

DH

LH

DH

LH

DH

LH

HC

I see that the Union used to have, as you mentioned, rent freeze actions. Is it something that's possibly supported by the government or have to strike for?

DH

There's some support from some of the councils and from the Mayor of London for rent controls, but not from the national government at all. They're extremely hostile to the idea of rent controls. And they've never shown any sign at all wanting to introduce them.

LH

I guess this is part of having a sort of property-led, property-ownership-led market where it is made attractive and profitable to own not just one but more homes, so that it's profitable, basically, to be a landlord. So the government policies, as they are, actually incentivise being landlords rather than make it kind of unnecessary. We, the Union, think that no one has to be landlords. Some landlords find the Union to be quite hostile and want to be seen as a good landlord. We say that there isn't such a thing as a good landlord. There's an exploitative relationship. Obviously, some landlords can be better than others, as they charge lower rents and carry out repairs, but you're paying for basically nothing, because you're paying for insecure housing of the way that landlords put up rents in a way that is not in line with your wage increase, or your lack of wage increase at all. The government, as it exists, just incentivises being a landlord, and many members of government are landlord themselves.

DH

Yeah, it has been government policy for quite a few years to bring an end to Section 21 - no-fault evictions. Ever since Theresa May was Prime Minister six years ago. It hasn't happened.

LH

It's just a kind of delayed promise.

DH

And I think this is for the reasons Lizzie describes. The government recognises that rental conditions for lots of people on low income, or even on middle incomes in places like Hackney, are intolerable and unsustainable. Because it's just obvious and everyone knows it. But at the same time, it has no other idea about how to stimulate the economy and promote growth other than to inflate the housing market. And the way in which you do that is by making life easy for landlords, and therefore difficult for renters. So I think that's been five or six years during which they've been saying 'we will introduce this law' but not introducing it is a representation of this contradiction that they face.

HC

Yeah, as you mentioned, there's a law change during that time, whether the residents would be evicted, I'm a bit curious about why was the law changing? Are there any movements that make this change happen or it's just for the landlords' interest (beneficial to house owners)?

DH

Right. That's quite a big question and has to do with the wider scene of politics in the UK over the last 50 years really. So in the same decade, that law changed around housing and also had many big political struggles of British life in the last half century like miners' strikes, the attempt to narrow the influence of trade unions and public life to marginalise the Left, and a major plank of Conservative Party policy under Thatcher in the 1980s was to try to draw some working class people away from the Labour Party. So another thing that happened was the introduction of Right to Buy, which allow council tenants to buy their own council flats and become owner occupiers, rather than renters from the government and from local councils.

I guess that's part of the incentivisation of property ownership. People who may, well, be very happy as renters, suddenly realise that if they buy their house, they could potentially, they have a valuable asset in that case, because property has this great value in this country, and there's a culture of potentially selling houses, making money from that.

LH

So you have this situation where there's less and less social housing, because people are able to buy it, and the government isn't building more. And as a result, there has to be other kinds of housing available. And the government's plan at the end of the 1980s was to increase the amount of private rental housing. And one way in which you increase the amount of housing which is available to rent privately is by encouraging landlords, and you encourage landlords by giving them more flexibility, including flexibility to throw tenants out of their homes. So these things all go together in a way. The attack on the institutions of the working class life, trade unions, social housing that came into existence after the war, and then an increasingly de-regulated private rental sector for housing, where landlords have a large amount of power to determine whether tenants should stay or leave. So yeah, in a way we live now in the 2020s, at the end of this process, which has begun in the 1980s. We hope it ends. *(laugh)*

DH



But yeah, the crisis of homelessness as well recently. So it was not only private renters being evicted, but there was just, on the 1st of June, there was a homelessness shelter set up by an organisation called Autonomous Winter Shelter in Shadwell in Tower Hamlets, and the police came and evicted this shelter. They came dressed in riot gear. So it's not only difficult as a private renter, but if you're homeless and you're sheltering somewhere, you're not safe somehow. It's completely obscene. I don't have the word to describe how inhumane that is.

LH

This kind of situation just sucks. As you mentioned, there's not enough housing for social rent in Hackney right now, but there's still some (other) houses. Talking about squatting, they still have places that haven't been allocated by the government or the council, (like) vacant houses that no one could live, so that's kind of like contradiction. Why would this situation have happened?

HC

Yeah, I mean, squatting, that was much more of a culture of squatting. I guess, up until the early 2010 was, when there was a change in the law again, and that meant that squatting residential properties...did it become illegal? (DH: It became a criminal offence.) And at the same time, companies arrived in London with what they called property guardianship schemes. So they're basically like security companies that take over the management of empty properties. But whereas those properties would have once been squatted, they're often occupied by so-called property guardians where you're paying to do what would previously have been done for free. So you're paying not that small amount of money actually, I don't know what any current property guardian is paying, but soon after I moved to London, I initially was staying in it with a friend in Kennington. Then I moved unofficially, I was staying with a boyfriend who lives on Goldhawk Road in West London, in a property guardianship. I wasn't supposed to be there but you know, it was a way to live cheaply. He wasn't paying that little, I think it was around 400 pounds a month. So when I found my first rented accommodation, when I was paying for one room, I was paying like more or less the same, even a bit less I think. I can't remember exactly how much it is I was paying but the cheapest rent in Hackney at the time.

LH

LH

That was 2011. We're not that much higher, you know. There's a kind of parity between the cheapest rents and how much you would pay as a property guardian. And you don't have tenancy rights if you're a property guardian. I think that was a two-week – it was definitely depending on the property guardianship company, but I think that was a two-week notice period in the place my boyfriend was living in, and they can also ask you to do really bizarre things, like tell you at very short notice that they're going to carry out an inspection, which would often be someone surveying the property to decide whether they're going to develop it or buy the property, because these places are often...sometimes property guardianship are in ex-primary schools, this places was in an ex-asylum seekers' accommodation, a temporary accommodation. It was just in such a terrible state of disrepair – I got quite a serious electric shock one time in the kitchen, and the lights are all completely gone out in the bathroom. So we had hazard warning stuck lights on the walls, these very temporary lights that are meant to be for emergencies when your car breaks down, because the lighting had just completely malfunctioned. Yeah, so it's like a really not a great place to live in. They could ask you just a drop of a hat, 'can you leave your doors open on this given day between x and x hours so that some surveyor could come around to decide whether they were going to buy the property or to develop it?' This place, I'm sure I haven't been redeveloped. I'm sure it's been knocked down and the land rebuilt on by now. But what was I gonna say...yeah, if you didn't happen to have (or) if you're working from home, so if you're a freelancer, I'm sure you could manage to be in your room on a given day. But if you're out at work, you are just supposed to have no possessions of any value, just like let someone (in), you have no privacy situation, and you have no place really to call your home.

DH

I think you were asking, like, why is this committed? What's the reason? Again, I think it's to do with a larger economic model in the UK based on increasing land values and property values. If you threaten the rights of landlords, also simply owners of land, if you reduce their freedom to buy and sell whenever they like, or to throw out tenants whenever they like, then the result is that the value of land declines, as does property values. And this is just anathema to the government in the UK, to the Conservative Party. So there have been moments in recent political history when there's been discussion in public, from some politicians, of the possibility, for example, of seizing empty second homes in London and using them to house homeless people. I think the most prominent moment when that happens was after the Grenfell Fire in 2017. When Jeremy Corbyn, ex-leader of the Labour Party, suggested that the empty houses in Kensington be taken over by the local authority then used to house people who have been displaced from the Tower that burned. And of course, that's still something that could happen. But it's just not in line with the agenda and the model of economics and prosperity which is of interest to the Conservative government. For as long as they continue to be in power, it's very difficult to imagine empty houses being used to house homeless people.

HC

It's really political issues. Will they use these (measures/statements) to attract votes?

LH

Yeah, I guess the Conservative government likes to create a kind of sets of aspirations among the electorate who will vote for them, and one of those aspirations is to be a property owner one day or even to be a landlord potentially. Those are the kinds of things that you might, as a Tory supporter, aspire to in the model they've created.

Yeah, but a lot of their core voters are landlords, or owners of property too. So although conditions of life in terms of housing are becoming worse and worse for large parts of the population, including many people who would have to vote for the Conservative Party to stay in power. Their needs and demands can't really be satisfied by the Conservative Party without the Party turning away from many of its core electoral base, whose interest in increasing land values and the situation where power and legal rights continue to be on the side of landlords rather than tenants or hundreds of (other) people. The Renters Union is like a non-political organisation that its organisation exists to service members. We support one another how we can and take practical action together. We don't have a position on party or politics per say. So what I'm saying is just what many of us think about the existing government in the UK, based on our experience.

DH

I would doubt that there are London Renters Union members who think that the Conservative Party is good, or a party they would vote for because it's just not in our interest to vote for this party.

LH

But the the fundamental demands of the Union, which are directed at national politics, aren't really being taken up by the Labour Party either. The programme we imagined for transforming housing systems is an end to local evictions, rent controls that push rents down towards 30% of income, which is the standard regarded as being achievable and internationally viable, that's just how much people should be paying maximum anyway for housing. And then also a massive increase in the provision of social housing. We've talked a little bit about social housing, but it's maybe also worth saying there's been this dynamic where in 1978 or 1979, 40% of housing overall in the UK was social housing, so it was owned by local governments and financed by the government out of taxation. A very small percentage was private rental housing. And now the ratio is completely reversed. So there's something like 8% social housing and maybe 30% of private rental sector housing. So as a Union, we want to see whoever is in power pushing to reverse those ratios and more social housing, less private rental housing. That would actually be made easier, in fact, if land values and property prices are declined because that will, in turn, make it more possible for local authorities to buy and build. It's very expensive in somewhere like Hackney, actually for the Hackney Council to buy a plot of land and build cheap housing for poor, working class people. That's to do with all the things that we've been describing. But if there were fundamental structural, legal changes to the way in which property rights are administered in this country – so that tenants had many more rights, landlords had many fewer – then the result would be property prices declining, and that in turn would make it cheaper to build social housing.

DH

I guess that situation is like the lands being unaffordable for councils to buy. One of the situations which makes for these friendly relationships being struck up between the local councils and property developers (is when) some of the other local activist groups, local organisations, that London Renters Union ends up kind of supporting...there's a lot of work with other organisations locally for mutual support of each other's campaigns. So there's the Ridley Road Campaign, where there's the threat of development of the market just down the road from here and the studio complex. There's also – Danny could maybe talk more about Ridely Road – but there's also Morning Lane People's Space, which is a campaign...Morning Lane is in Homerton and the space is just behind the big Tesco. It's being posted that this will be developed, and maybe the housing won't be affordable.

LH

LH

I mean, they may say that there'll be a certain amount of affordable housing, but what is currently being...*(metal banging noise)* is not... The local council may not put any opposition to these developments, but they will be pressurised by local campaign groups to support campaigns that demand that more of that should actually be affordable housing and property. There's also the instance of London Renters Union supporting Sistah Space, which is an organisation for African and Caribbean heritage women who are victims of domestic abuse. They were basically forced out of the property that they had been running the organisation from by the council. So there was an action by a number of groups – Sistah Space, Sisters Uncut, another group that were organising around domestic violence, and the Renters Union. We went to Hackney Town Hall and demanded that Sistah Space be given a long-term property for their use that was suitable to their needs. Because they've been told to go back to an old space, which was really unsuitable. It was on a low level and people could look in outside, abusers could go in and interrogate women who were sheltering there. It wasn't a safe property to be in. So there are all of these local campaigns that would be in solidarity with each other and lend support to each other.

HC

Going back to the rent freeze campaign and also the rent strike movements, I was wondering whether there will be a stronger housing system now or in the future, in which the government to adjust the housing policies?

LH

Whether our rent strike would be effective?

HC

Yeah, since these are two different measures on rent, what are the result or mutual benefits of these actions to the community right now?

LH

I think London Renters Union has never called for a rent strike. It could be effective if it was well organised, and lots and lots of people did it. But I think it would potentially put people at risk. People withheld rents during the pandemic, and what the campaign that LRU (London Renters Union) ran was called 'Can't Pay Won't Pay', because people were losing their jobs, didn't know what was happening in terms of...if they were freelancing, what kind of work was going to come in, like having things cancelled. There was this campaign which was providing a template letter that you could write to your landlord asking for a rent freeze or rent deduction in line. So this was quite successful – in my house that I was looking at the time, we collectively wrote to the landlord, and we did get two months without paying rent, and then another two months paying half rent, and this was a really effective form of collectivisation; like a carefully worded letter. If you have a sort of relatively sympathetic landlord, you can make a case of yourself because that was an eviction ban for a certain amount of time during COVID. But in circumstances where there isn't an eviction ban, a rent strike...yeah, there have been historical examples of successful rent strikes, but I think a lot of people would be very nervous about doing that.

DH

It helps when people have one landlord, too. So, for example, in a housing association situation, you may have 20 tenants with one landlord, and they will have the same problem. So if they do withhold their rent and go on a rent strike, it's quite hard to punish every single one of them. But if you're dealing with hundreds of thousands of private renters, all of whom have individual landlords, then it's quite hard for people to gain strength by acting together. Those are some of the tactical conversations we've had about rent strikes in the past in the union. I think it's something that we're interested in, in relation to block organising where you work with tenants in a block and have one landlord, but again it's less likely that the Union would call for a general strike because it would just expose individuals to victimisation by their landlords and it's difficult to collectivise that action in a meaningful way.

So it seems like the rent freeze action is universal to all, to apply for these kinds of situations. It's kind of like a social movement where individual renters do not state personally but contribute to this movement through the collective.

Yeah. So we freeze the rent. That in a way is one of the biggest demands of the Union, now that it's been introduced by the national government, and the way in which the Union sees its power is that the bigger the Union is, the more members it has, the more able we are to take action together. The more national presence and strength we have, and the more likely we are to be able to exert pressure for these national level legal changes. So freeze the rent is something that we used to guide our action. We don't think that tomorrow we can say to the British, to the UK Government, 'freeze the rent' and they will do it. It's more like if the Union succeeds in becoming a really mass organisation or if there are lots of different renters unions, which bring together a majority of private renters, then renters will become a much more powerful political figure in national political life, and that will make it easier for us to push for fundamental structural changes. In the meantime, what we do is we support one another in the ways that we can, in all the ways we've already described, by taking the fight to individual landlords or by pushing councils of Housing Association to carry out repairs, to introduce changes. Does that make sense? So there were struggles of different levels in a way.

Ok, that's all my questions, thank you so much for joining!

HC

DH



HC

● Lizzie Homersham

● Danny Hayward

CHILDCARE

**In Conversation With
Veronica Deutsch (VD)
Interviewer: Jiachen Zhu (JZ)**

**19th June 16:00 - 17:15 (GMT+8)
Online - D Block, Chelsea College of Arts
16 John Islip St, London SW1P 4JU**



Chelsea D Block indoor view (2023), photo by Birong Wang

I'll start with our interview questions, is that fine?

Yeah.

So our first question is what do you think about the change in the definition of motherhood? Compare the time when "Who is Holding the Baby" was exhibited and the current situation. Is motherhood only defined by holding the baby?

Yeah. So how motherhood has kind of changed in the past sort of 40 years, do you mean?

Yeah, like the 70s and 80s in Hackney, and now, what's being improved or what's denied?

I think it's interesting. I don't know in the past 40 years. You've obviously seen a lot more women entering the workforce. We've seen more women able to access well statutory maternity pay coming. So on paper, we should be more equal. From my perspective, what's happened is more women have entered the workforce, but the expectations of women in the domestic sphere haven't changed. If anything, they have intensified what we're seeing now as women working full-time hours, but still carrying the responsibilities of managing childcare and domestic duties and this kind of intensification of labour for women. So in some ways, we're more equal, but in a lot of ways, women are still very much expected to be responsible for childcare.

And I guess... such a big question. I think that... well... there's something called that Sharon Hayes, who's academic, talks a lot about, which is an idea of "intensive mothering", and this idea of women not just being responsible for like feeding and clothing and keeping children safe, but also for their kind of conduits for class transmission and their job is to transmit the culture and class of their respective backgrounds. And so this idea of women also have to carry out this emotional work of not just keeping a child safe, but also building them into a person.

Especially for middle-class women, there's this additional pressure to transmit culture and class as part of their labour. And so often you'll see women who are managing work like day with a 9 to 5, and they're paying incredibly high childcare costs. And then around that, they're also expected to adequately carry out all of these other extracurriculars that kind of prop up their mothering. I don't know, I think that overall it's incredibly pressurised, and I think in a lot of ways there's hugely exhausting. There's a really good Nora Ephron quote about how parenting used to just build like to be a noun, and now there's this idea of two-parent as opposed to just being a parent. You have to parent a certain way. And I suppose within that context, women are feeling really stretched and really exhausted, and it can become quite easy to, silo women who are working as childcare workers and women who are parents, who are relying on childcare work. Silo them from one another. I don't know if that makes sense, what I'm thinking about in terms of that is that there are so many mothers who are carrying all of this stress and burden of parenting. Then on top of that, we have really, really high childcare costs. So guess what shifted is this kind of false dichotomy between childcare workers and mothers. That's kind of emerged. The higher childcare costs get, and the lower wages get for childcare workers. It becomes harder and harder to unify women together to demand better. And obviously, in the past, we've had like "Who's Holding the Baby", but we've also had like the wages for housework in the 70s. I think it's actually becoming harder for women to mobilise for the better. Because we are so stratified according to class and according to who is and isn't working in the sector and who is and isn't relying on the sector.

JZ

VD

JZ

VD

JZ

VD



JZ

Yeah, definitely. I think during the 70s and 80s, there was isolation faced by mothers, and they have to be the main person to take care of their children at home. And also there's a kind of lack of awareness that the father should be present as well, as a part of childcare. So do you think the challenge of this kind of idea that fathers should be a part of, should be helping with the nurseries or the childcare workers together, do you think people get more aware of this?

VD

I definitely think that. I mean my partner; he does full-time childcare with our son when I work full-time. But I think that what we're missing now, which we previously had, was an analysis of class and our labour movements and our political movements more generally. In the past 30 years, we've really individualised precariously and the idea of gender inequality has become so disconnected from class inequality. Now when you look at the labour movement, it's so focused on gender, race, and immigration, and rightly those things are so important. But I think that we have lost the thread of how class impacts these experiences and why I think that's important is because now we've got things like pregnant then screwed, who are talking about the need for mothers to have more rights and more protections at work, but actually they're putting forward this very liberal feminist analysis of care and motherhood. It's really politically useful that they have a lot of leverage, and they've been able to advance conversations around childcare in Parliament that weren't happening before. But I think overall, the care movement feels really fractured. It doesn't feel particularly strong because we've lost an understanding of how class impacts that, it's become the idea of care and motherhood, feels like it's just become about gender, and it's become about achieving gender equality and gender pay parity for women. It's become about women having the right to choose to go back to work, and all of those things are totally valid. It leaves us with an argument that feels quite brittle and quite narrow and doesn't necessarily encapsulate everyone, who needs to be supported. It would be great to see, and I think that there are more dads now through like fatherhood institute and through the shared parental pay equality campaign. There are a lot of people talking about the need for more gender equality when it comes to post-natal and childcare, saying that dads can step up and take on that role. I definitely think that dads are precluded from being able to take on a more equal role in childcare because of things like self-employed fathers aren't entitled to paternity leave and pay, for instance. I don't think we're going to see those issues addressed until we can also incorporate a class analysis into our care movement because I think that we just need to restructure how we're talking about it. It can't be about women needing to get back into the workplace. We need something more sustainable than that, or something that addresses the importance of care more broadly.

JZ

Yeah, definitely. And this I think directs to our second question, you were talking about the school and also motherhood and fatherhood. So actually the term you've written about in your articles talks about "cooperative childcare" as a concept and solution for childcare struggles since the 1970s and 80s. How it actually worked at the time and how it works today?

VD

So... I'm not a historian, so I can't necessarily speak to the historical context in loads of detail, but I think that there are, especially in East London, some fantastic examples of cooperative childcare through the Market Nursery, which was in London Fields. First neighbourhood cooperative nursery Grasshoppers, which are still going. There was a Dalston Children's Center, which is now a cooperative nursery. And we're seeing a resurgence in cooperative nurseries and cooperative stay-in-place and things like that now. So there's a Stone Soup, which is currently incorporating themselves in Walthamstow, and they are stepping stones.

For at least what stands out to me is that cooperative nurseries and cooperative solutions seem to emerge from precariously and from desperation, so it's people who don't have access to childcare, who can't access childcare, or people who can't afford childcare. It's then this idea of creating their own solutions, and I think that we've seen that really successfully in the past, and why we're seeing it again is because the childcare crisis is at this point where so many childcare workers leaving the sector and so many funded places at nurseries have certain eligibility criteria that not everyone's going to meet, childcare costs are super high, childcare workers are leaving the sector, so we have nurseries closing everywhere. We're seeing this rise in cooperative care because people are looking for alternatives. And what was happening in the 70s as well, was that women were entering the workforce in huge numbers we hadn't seen since the Second World War, and they needed childcare. And so I feel that we're in this situation now where we're at such a crisis point with care, but actually, it feels like if we can take this moment and start to put forward alternatives that challenge the dominant private provision model that exists across most of the childcare sector, then it feels like a really exciting opportunity. I think that cooperative care can work really well.

There are obviously challenges. Something that's come up a lot in the cooperative nurseries that have established themselves in the past couple of years is that the parents who are able to... so cooperative nurseries work that you have paid childcare workers on staff, and then you'll have parents who dedicate their time for a day a week or they kind of dedicate some time and then to help support the childcare workers, to help keep the nursery running. Then, in return, they're able to subsidise their fees that way. In practice, what can happen is the parents who are the most privileged of the ones who have the time to dedicate to that cooperative. So it will be the parents who are working flexibly, who are maybe more middle-class, who can participate in that cooperative element.

And the parents, who were maybe on low wages, are working shift patterns or can't commit to that time commitment, maybe can't engage in the cooperatives in the same way. That can be a challenge for cooperatives organising today. It's about how thinking about accessibility and who we're actually reaching with these solutions, but they can be overcome. Also in terms of our understanding of how to build and run a cooperative, it can be really hard to start from scratch, you can have all the best intentions in the world, but it can be really hard to start a cooperative when you don't know what to do, or you know it's something you want to run, but you don't know how to run it. So a lot of my work has been around supporting people to have a bit of a framework to operate from. With the "Grow Your Own" project, the oral history project, what we've been doing is capturing the experiences and stories of past childcare campaigners and past childcare organisers who have built cooperatives. And the idea is that we can then share those stories with people who are organising now, so they're not having to start from scratch. They have a bit of a framework that they can look at. Some other work that I've been doing with the RadHR, just as a freelancer. The RadHR is a user-generated website that gives space to different groups to share anti-oppressive policies, and that's another way that I guess we can draw different groups in and build those connections. So people who want to start cooperatives have a bit of a framework to work off. I think that we're seeing a real resurgence in these kinds of alternative models of provision. But what I think we're missing is the foundation and the connection that helps people to build these things in a sustainable way. What we don't want is for everyone to try and build cooperatives and try and have all these great solutions and for them to not work because we don't have the support. We don't have the same kind of community support.

JZ

So basically we need to have everything going at the same time to build up this strong bond between different groups of people to improve the childcare system. So what do you think about today's childcare policies, especially migration policies? Can you tell us a little bit more about this kind of issue, and what is missing in the policies?

VD

So many of the policies, like the childcare policies and the employment policies in the UK, are shaped by the hostile environment. It means that we have workers who are working in really precarious ways, and we have children who are not able to access the care that will benefit them. I kind of think of it in two strands. There are obviously childcare workers who are affected by hostile environment policies. So pairs who are affected by the family worker exemption who aren't entitled to the minimum wage, aren't entitled to proper break times, maximum work times, or any kind of employment regulations, but are being exploited by employers to work full-time weeks for as little as like £1.00 an hour. We have a childcare workforce that is largely made up of migrant women who are unable to advocate for themselves through unions because things like strategic litigation aren't accessible to them because they don't have a collective employer or collective workplace. They're not able to enforce employment regulations through a court because they don't have any employment regulations that apply to them. And they're not able to strike. So we've got a workforce that is being exploited but doesn't have the means to engage with or advocate for better pay and conditions. And then on the other side, we have this really messy, patchy kind of subsidy for childcare that treats childcare as a service that is provided to parents who can afford it so that they can work. So it's even in the spring budget where we saw the childcare announcement, where they were going to roll out additional funded hours, which is a whole other issue. The argument that was put forward was that childcare is beneficial for the economy, and while that is true, we also need to think of childcare as a workforce. We need to think of childcare as early years education that can support children, and when the issue with the government policy on childcare is the funded hours have really strict eligibility criteria, that means that both parents in the household need to be working in order for children to take up a funded nursery place and that means in the bottom third of earnings in the country, only one in five children are actually able to take up that funded place.

So it's largely the parents of children who are migrants, children or parents who are studying, who aren't able to access childcare, and that means that children are suffering and parents also can't work. It's incredibly hostile to migrants on both because we still view childcare as something that will serve the economy as opposed to something that should be part of our social infrastructure and as basic as a public service as healthcare.

JZ

I think also go back to the Market Nursery. It's basically a community nursery thing, but it only takes care of a small group of people. Actually today, as the same as what we needed before, we need more of these kinds of institutions or nursery houses for helping the whole social system. And then I will go into a little bit more related to unemployment. So... how do you perceive the influence of accessible and affordable childcare on parental unemployment in Hackney? In what ways do gender dynamics shape the connection between childcare and unemployment in Hackney?

I mean, again, I am obviously working on "Grow Your Own", but I've done a bit of work around East London. And as we dig into the archives and as we speak to people, I'm still kind of learning, so we're in the early stages of the project. With the funded hours and the way that childcare structured now, childcare is incredibly unaffordable and even for people who can afford it, there is a really strict eligibility criteria for accessing funded places. So obviously we know that in Hackney there is quite a low take up of the funded hours places for children of parents from deprived backgrounds. A lot of that has to do with potentially not being able to afford childcare, so they're not being able to work and not being able to contribute economically.

But also I think that it can and should be a choice for parents, whether or not they want to be a part of the workforce during their child's early years, and whether they want to carry out that care themselves. It definitely has an effect on unemployment, but I also think that when we use employment as a marker of societal stability, we move away from the idea of a well-being economy, which is something that I would like to see and towards this idea of all of us being in this kind of capitalist production line. I think that we should if we want to, mothers and fathers should be able to take time away from the workforce if they want, to raise their children. I think that unemployment can be an unreliable marker of what's actually going on in society. I guess what's tricky then is that there are campaigns and organisers, who are advocating for parents' right to choose to stay home and look after their kids if they want, but a lot of those groups have a fairly conservative or quite right-wing analysis of that. I see it as more of a socialist progressive argument, I don't know if that makes a lot of sense. Obviously, unemployment is an issue and people should be able to work if they want to, but I think that there are people who want to work and aren't able to because of high childcare costs, and there are also people who maybe don't want to work, who want to stay home with their kids. When we turn it into an argument about getting people back into the workforce again, I think it can feel quite exclusionary and capitalistic. I don't know if that answers your question.

Yeah, I think so. People should have the right to choose whether they want to go to work or whether they want to just raise their children at home. It definitely makes sense.

I would love to see if childcare was a universal basic service that was free at the point of access so that the government was subsidising providers. So there was subsidising the supply side rather than the demand side. It would be a lot more straightforward. And then if we had a social safety net that provided enough support for parents to be able to take time off and raise their kids if they wanted to, then economically it would balance itself out in terms of parents being able to return to work, green jobs being created through childcare, because childcare workers will be able to be paid properly. And also, people would feel supported to stay home if they want to. So I think that the economy should work for us and not the other way around. So I always feel this idea of getting us all into the workplace can feel a bit like, well, what does that actually for? Because the idea is that if we have a society that's thriving, well-being would be at the centre of that, and it would look like presumably, not everyone working or some of us taking time out. And then when we go back into the workplace, that would then support other people to take time out. The idea of the welfare state has been really weaponised. The way that we look at welfare and universal credit now is to kind of demonise people who rely on that, but actually like having a strong social safety net where people can take breaks to care for themselves, and for others, or take breaks to do other things. I think that then balances out into a society that overall has well-being at the centre of what it's doing.

VD

JZ

VD



JZ

Yeah, right. So maybe we can now discuss a little bit more about what you have done or what would you do in the future, for example, what you have done like “Grow Your Own”, the project, tell us a little bit more about how you do it. And also anything you can suggest we as ordinary people or the general public can help with this kind of issue?

VD

So, “Grow Your Own”, I am a freelance researcher and community organiser, and I am working with Rosa Schling from On the Record on “Grow Your Own”. So Rosa is coordinating the project and is an incredible oral historian with loads of experience looking at the history of London. And I've come in from an activist background to kind of support with more of that present-day campaigner engagement. The idea of “Grow Your Own” is to capture past campaigner and organiser experiences around childcare in Tower Hamlets, Waltham Forest, and Hackney, and to be able to share those stories with present-day campaigners and organisers, in the hopes that it will support their organising and help us develop solutions to the childcare crisis. So part of that work has been firstly mapping childcare action across East London over the past fifty, and sixty years, carrying out interviews with past and present campaigners and organisers. We have a critical friends group of active and like past campaigners and organisers to feed into the project. We meet here every couple of months, so they can hear what we're up to. They can feed in, they can connect us with anyone who they think might be relevant to talk to, and then our outputs are we've just finished a podcast course.

We are running a series of 12 events over the next year and a half, and we are developing a stay-and-play resource, a digital map, and a toolkit. I don't know how useful it is for me to go into detail. The idea of the digital map is we'll have a website, where we are able to catalogue examples of childcare action across the 4 boroughs and people will be able to go onto a map and click through different bits and sort of see. Oh, this at this point in 1988, this happened in Hackney. And we can kind of see a bit of a mapping of childcare actions across the boroughs, and hopefully, it will be that users of the website can also add their own stories. And then a toolkit, the toolkit is still being fleshed out, but I think the idea is to disseminate some kind of really practical tools for taking your own childcare action. So working with groups who are active today in building cooperatives and campaigns to help develop this toolkit so that we can share around. For people who are interested in childcare action but maybe don't know where to start, they have a really practical guide. And then our podcast, which is hopefully being released at the beginning of September, we've worked with Hannah Kemp-Welch, who is a sound artist working primarily in social justice projects. We've got 10 participants from across London who have a relationship with childcare. Maybe they're parents, maybe they're childcare workers who design, write, record, edit, and produce their own podcast episodes. And so it's a series of 10 episodes, and everyone's talking about something really different. We've got some people talking about breastfeeding advocacy, we've got people talking about the rights for pairs, people talking about single parent rights, so it's this really kind of broad church of childcare experiences. And the idea with the podcast is to amplify voices who are organising around childcare and thinking about childcare now, but also to give these people the skill set to then go on and produce their own podcasts so that people are kind of being given the tools to keep sharing and keep campaigning and kind of build what they want from that. So it's been a very big project, like the scope is quite broad, it's been really fun to work on.

Rosa has been doing a huge amount of archival research. So I'm kind of tracing different campaigns, doing a lot of research on Hackney. And hopefully kind of drawing all that together, but it just really stuck out to us. I think amidst all the childcare action that kind of happens during the pandemic, we saw a real uptaken in childcare organising. It just felt to us like so many people were going. God, childcare is at an absolute crisis point! What can we do about it? And Rosa was kind of saying, well, there's all this great stuff that's come before, and we need someone that is documenting and collating this so that we have something to work off. So it just felt like a bit of a missing piece of the puzzle that we could work together to provide for people and work with people who are already thinking about this, to give them a bit of a platform.

It sounds really intriguing and like massive things going on.

Yeah. And it would be worth trying to talk to Rosa because she can definitely speak to the historic side of it. I feel like I've learned so much from the project, just in terms of learning about the historic campaigns in East London. So it's been really eye-opening and should be great to talk to.

Yeah, just a question related to this, for maybe your personal experiences during the pandemic. How did you feel about the childcare issues? Did people get more suffered compared to regular days? How are these things being affected, and how have people tried to find solutions during the pandemic?

So a bit about my background... I was a childcare worker. I was a nanny for nine years. At the beginning of the pandemic, I was working with three different families. I was doing a nanny share and then another family, so I looked after seven children. Not all at once, but sometimes I'd have four at once and then three on another day. But I was full-time nannying. I'd been doing that for years and years and was really exhausted. I'd gone to the hospital a month before the pandemic. I had some issues with my asthma, but basically, I had been working way too much. I'd got to a point of really exhaustion and I ended up in hospital. By the time I got better, I went back to work. I was back at work for a few days and then the pandemic hit and I got put on furlough. And in retrospect, I was so incredibly privileged at that time to be on a proper contract, which meant that I was able to be furloughed, and I was able to keep myself safe at home.

And so another nanny and I, who were in South London, who were also furloughed, we realised we've got so much time and there are so many nannies who are still being expected to go to work, or being fired without notice. Just like don't have any work. And we should do something about it. So we, with the help of Miranda Hall from the New Economics Foundation, started the Childcare Worker Solidarity Fund, and we started giving out hardship grants to nannies with no pairs. Well, it's open to all childcare workers, but it was primarily nannies no pairs who applied, and we were giving out £200 grants to people who needed support, who'd lost their jobs or were made homeless due to the pandemic. Initially, we'd had these discussions about wanting to organise nannies with no pairs for better rights, but I don't think we fully understood. We both had experience of precarious work in the childcare sector, but I don't think either of us was fully prepared for some of the stories that came up. So when we started the solidarity from people coming to us saying, you know, I've been pairing with this family for so this many months, and I've come home, and the locks are changed, and they've gone to the Lake District, I can't get in.

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Or I just arrived in the UK, and I was supposed to be paired with this family and like they've told me, they don't need me, I don't have anywhere to stay. So, we realised there's a real gap in terms of support and provision for informal childcare workers and in-home childcare workers. There are not really any unions that are representing them. There are not really any organisations. There's no equivalent for childminders and in-home workers. So, we need to do something and from that, we started organising the Nanny Solidarity Network, which is still going now. It's a grassroots mutual aid organisation. Primarily migrant nannies and pairs based in London, and the network provides support resources, space for community and collective action, but also emergency aid. I am not there anymore, I left when I went on maternity leave last year when I had my son, but that's still going. I think this is all very tangential.

To get back to your question, it became really clear that there was this completely undervalued, under-supported workforce that was already operating really precariously. It was predominantly really, really young migrant women. I started nanny when I was 15, a lot of the people who came to our group were 17 or 18. I take the median age was like the mid-20s, who would just not be supported, not represented by anyone. We started a union branch, but even then, we can't strike. We don't have a collective employer. We don't have a collective workplace. How do we, where do we actually start? It felt like we couldn't really find another example of a workforce that was this precarious, other than sex workers actually have been really great in terms of being allies and having kind of a similar experience of having to operate outside legal frameworks. It was tricky to find a way into, how do we ask for better pay and conditions when we're this precarious. The pandemic was incredibly difficult for childcare workers and incredibly difficult for parents. But I also think that it acted as a catalyst for conversations around childcare, and so it feels like a lot of people now are talking about childcare. Childcare is obviously on the agenda for both labour and the conservatives, so it's been a horrendous few years. It's also put care front and centre and then hopefully what we're seeing now with like the Women's Budget Group earliest coalition and with Nanny Solidarity Network and voice of domestic workers and pregnant then screwed across the board, we're seeing so many people talking about the care. I'm hoping that we can leverage it to then create sustainable solutions.

JZ

Yeah, the pandemic is a huge crisis globally, but also finds lots of opportunities as well. It also reveals lots of huge issues to people, especially for example disabilities and all these kinds of things. I think your project definitely going to support lots of new newcomers to this country. That's a really good thing for the whole society, I mean. Would you like to introduce a little bit about your Feminist Zine Making Workshop with the Peer Gallery this coming August?

VD

Yeah, sure. I didn't realise that we were talking so much about "Grow Your Own", cause otherwise, I would have invited Rosa. So our Zine Making Workshop is happening as part of Hoxton Fair on the 12th of August, and we will be running a small workshop outside where we will be sharing a bit about the "Grow Your Own" project, and then we will have some photocopied archival materials from past campaigns. Things like the Market Nursery Campaign, National Childcare Campaign, sort of anything that we're able to get our hands on and share with the general public. We want to photocopy, and the idea will be that people can come and join and get a bit of a sense of how to make the zine, make their own zine. I think it'll be quite crafty. We're hoping that it will be child-friendly, so kids from the age of around 6 and up can get stuck in.

It will also be a really great opportunity for people who maybe are interested in local history but haven't really thought about childcare history to just engage with some archival materials. Have a look at some pamphlets and some images and just get a bit of a sense of what's come before. I think it should be nice. It should be quite casual I think. Hopefully, it won't rain. So it will be for three hours in the afternoon on the 12th of August, and it will be outside the front of the Peer Gallery. You will be able to book a space ahead of time, and I think we're planning to have a bit of a structure at the beginning where we go over the "Grow Your Own" project, and we also go over the basics of how to make the zine. But it will also be drop-in, so if people are walking past and kind of want to come up and have a look at what we're doing and maybe have a go at some crafting, they're also welcome to join. It should be fairly laid back. I think it would be really nice.

Yeah, that's very nice. I think we are at the end actually to our conversation. Do you have anything you want to add or say?

No, just thank you so much for chatting with me. I hope I answered all your questions, I am not quite well when under pressure.

No, they are all very nice.

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EQUAL RIGHTS

In Conversation With
Donna Travis (DT)

1 Interviewers: Sophia Lam (SL), Jiachen Zhu (JZ),
Birong Wang (BW)

20th June 09:00 - 10: 00 (GMT+8)
CAFE OTO
18-12 Ashwin St, London E8 3DL



Cafe Oto outdoor view (2023), photo by Haoyue Chen

Would you be able to start off by describing your relationship with Hackney?

Currently, I run a project called Future Hackney, it's about Dalston, which is part of Hackney, and I'm being funded by the Heritage National Lottery to document Dalston's radical Black history, African and Caribbean communities that have been here for years. But aside from that, I have a personal relationship with Hackney because I was born here. I haven't always lived here. And I grew up some of my life here and in North London. I think it's always to me in terms of looking at someone who's lived all across London, Hackney has always been very artistic, diverse, and politically active. So, it was one of my favourite boroughs in the city. Also, it has a real street culture, which means a lot of people come out on the streets, there are lots of festivals and things where people congregate, and it's quite green in Hackney. There's a lot of parks and markets. So for me it's a space where people come out on the street and talk to each other. It means it's a really great place to live and work. I suppose in answer to your question, my relationship with Hackney is very personal and also political. And it's now where I focus my work, which is street documentary.

I guess riding on that, as an artist yourself, how would you describe the use of photography, documentaries and street art in documenting community history and resistance?

I think it's the only way to document community resistance because if you're a street photographer, then you're constantly looking for things on the street that are, I suppose, when people can't reach politics – in other words, the political system is so corrupt that people can't get into politics unless you are a billionaire. So for me, you know, the street represents a political space first and foremost where people can come out where they don't feel they have rights or the power to go into the traditional political route, which might become an MP. You know, when that is taken away from the Ministry becomes that resource, and you're able to collectively get together and try and make a change. Like, for example, at the moment, we're documenting, as I said, protest stories. At the moment in this country, lots of young people want to stop new oil. So no more digging for new oil, basically. So at the moment, they're blocking all the roads around London, just stop oil. And for me, that is really an example of civil disobedience. When people want something, they can go into the street and cause civil disobedience, which hopefully will eventually make the government change its policies and be more environmental (friendly). And the same with Ridley Road where I'm going to take you to, from back in the day when there was an Anti-Fascist movement on that road to more recently where the black community has had to really struggle to grow to attain or maintain their rights. Be allowed to stay there and get support as small businesses in an area that's kind of demographically changing. Much younger people here now, richer people as more of the White community. So they're struggling in that space that was traditionally African and Caribbean. But yeah, in answer to your question, the street is somewhere I think people can achieve political aims.

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When you said you know, with a change in demographics, more young people here in Hackney, in the borough, do you also see a change in the protest patterns or the things that they're fighting for?

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Yes, I do. I mean, obviously, I think some of the issues have stayed the same from the 70s, which is interesting because of this exhibition you're involved in. In this country, there were lots and lots of protests in Hackney for fair unemployment, women's rights, really high up, and the NHS, all those problems are still with us. And they're still being neglected by a Right-wing government. However, I think what is superceding that right now is the climate because we are heading toward a global catastrophe. Unless we stop animal agriculture, eating animals, and digging for fossil fuels. We are actually coming to the end of the planet... (*metal banging noise*) but I think lots of young people were protesting know that if we don't make these changes quickly and effectively, you know, become plant-based, and also stopped digging fossil fuels, that we are heading towards a global catastrophe. I think the climate issue has superseded all of those other issues because it affects us globally. And I think that there are a lot of young people in Hackney who are on board with this. And I think that's a really good thing, that's really positive, and young people know they have the energy for this. They understand what's going on, and they're willing to give that time. They're willing to sort of not go out so much socially and give time to these pressure groups and civil disobedience on the ground to make these changes. So does that answer your question?

SL

Yeah, that's very interesting because when we were talking to Ken Fero, who is the founder of migrant media, who did a lot of activist work through documentaries, he also mentioned that young people these days are very radical. Then maybe there are times, and they're very willing to, as you said, put the time and effort to fight for something, probably also because climate catastrophe is urgent and in their time, and they're sort of handing over this, I don't know, broken Earth that they have to contend with. It's up to them, as I guess, to make it a better place. So back to Future Hackney. I noticed that co-authorship is very much the emphasis in the Future Hackney. wondering if you can talk a little bit more about that?

DT

The reason we decided to do that is when we started documenting Ridley Road and Gillett Square, which are the two areas that we go back to which have a really huge African Caribbean history. Me and my colleague Wayne, and Wayne are actually from the Black community. But still and I grew up around here. So I knew a lot of people, but we were still seen as sort of something to be suspicious of because we were, you know, we had cameras. People wondered what we were doing. They didn't like being photographed because they've had negative press in the past. So we thought a way around this is to actually include them in the project so we don't just run in as photographers and then walk out and then make a coffee book that they never see. Because it's not something they would buy, for example. So we thought the best way of doing it was to include them in writing their own stories. And sometimes, we actually design the photo story with them as well if we have time. So we decided to with some of them...well we decided to bring in local young people with us, some of it, not everything but decided to work with some young people. So that they really understood that this was a project for the community and not just for us making a profit out of a book or something. So over the last few years, we've worked with them to write, like we take our laptops there, we write their stories with them. We make sure that you know if there's something in the story that they don't want in there, then we take it out. So they have ownership, and I think when you give people ownership, (A) they have more respect for you and what you're doing and (B) they relax more, they're more inclined to tell you the real story because they trust you, so co-authorship really essential for us is about gaining trust. And also, it made the projects much richer because they felt that they had ownership.

Giving people ownership gives them power. So then, once we had sort of collections of images and oral histories. The Guardian started printing us. So we made sure we sent them, or we took them out of print. And then, when we decided on taking images out there, we decided that they had to either be on the street, where they will again be accessible to the community, also in the area. So in the last three years, we've had four exhibitions about Hackney and Gillett Square and Ridley Road, all road or street exhibitions. Plus we had an exhibition next door to Ashley Street. That was a repeat of this street one, but we thought we'd because it was sort of free and for the public. Again, we thought we'd put it somewhere locally. So we've actually had five exhibitions free for the community. The outdoor exhibitions are brilliant. They're very expensive because they do have to be weatherproof and graffiti proof. Each exhibition costs 3000 or 4000 pounds. So every time we do one, it's quite a lot of money, but we leave them up for six months to two years, depending on the space if people are offended by it or whatever. And we tried to put up to six months, and it was just so that people have time to see them and they can visit them at their own leisure and also I think our... you know, again it's about co-authoring. The exhibition is by them, it's with them. They are included. They know everything that's going up. If their image is going up, they know their image is going up. We need them there. So this, including people for us, has made the project, I think, much stronger than it would be if Wayne and I have just been lone documentary photographers. I think we would have seen barriers and resistance, and people wouldn't have trusted us. Why are you doing it? You know, where's the money going? Why should we do this? And I think again, that's like communities becoming stronger. If you are going to work, the people should have some rights. Also, we try to get some volunteer expenses to give the young people bursaries, so we're also trying to share the money. People have some money to eat, especially in these times. We find that we think it's important that if people help us then we share those not really profits because we're not for profit, but we do get paid, and there are expenses for people. So I think co-authorship is fundamental to the work we do.

Gillett Square has a complex past of black and working-class history, police brutality and structural racism. However, in recent years it has become a vibrant space with regular events and young voices. NTS Radio, which is based on the square, holds events there alongside Albion Hifi and other music organisations

Photograph: Donna Travis



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I wonder what the feedback is from the rest of the community. Like those that aren't necessary for all the pictures but maybe people walking on the streets. How do you engage with them?

DT

Yes, you do. Obviously, when we put our exhibitions that are proposed today, we have a professional organisation in Coloursonic who come in, and they put it up for us on a small scaffolding type thing or a cherry picker. And when we put that out, we obviously engage the community as we're putting it up. But a funny story about this is when we put our second exhibition in Hackney Central about the African and Caribbean Community in Dalston. It was up for a year. We then decided to take it down and put up *Protest Stories*. And a lot of the community reacted really badly to us taking it down. Because they wanted it to stay up, and they said you know we never see black faces in advertising still in our community. Everything's always getting someone to sort of a more middle-class white community. You know, why are you taking our pictures down? So we had to explain that look, sometimes we have to turn our exhibitions around. That one was up for a year, but then we had a new one. But the new one, although it includes climate mainly, there were also Black Lives Matters images in there. So we had to explain to people that, look I know we're taking this exhibition down, but we are putting one up that does include the Black community again, but just in a different context. In hindsight, that's very positive, isn't it when people are telling you off to taking it down? Why have you taken this exhibition when we like it? You want it to be up. So that's really reassuring for us. You know, it's like okay, again, everyone in may with everyone in the images. I think there are 18 images in there. Images were 36 people in the exhibition. Everyone knew they were going to be out. Everyone was included. Everyone got some sort of payment or bursary, or volunteer money. And everyone was happy knowing that they were kind of in it together. And then we had a little event, and we celebrated it. So people generally are very positive about having street galleries. And also our high streets aren't just about buying and consuming, you know, there is time to stop this type of art, this type of photography. I think that's what people will think back to us. The high streets should be more about us as individuals and communities rather than selling products.

SL

I'd like to go back to the point when we were talking about the gap in the archives for the representation of the Hackney community. Can you tell us more about how you think they have shaped this community's history? And also, how do you think your work is bridging that gap?

DT

So the Caribbean community came here first in the 60s, early 60s, and they settled in Dalston because it became known as a safe space for them. So remember that, back then, we were in a time in London where there were still signs on the door that said 'no dogs, no blacks, no Irish'. So if you were a traveller or you were Irish, or you were Black, many spaces allow you in pubs, guest houses, and places to rent. And then certain places in London, Notting Hill, Dalston, that were already... Black community have made some settled settlements, and they were reaching out to other people in the Caribbean to communities who were coming here saying it's okay, you can come here. We can find your landlord that will give you rent and the house will be okay. So, I think, as the community started congregating here, the Ridley Road market became known as a Black space selling also, selling foods from that community. So I think when people came here, they felt the Caribbean community came here. They thought this was a little bit of home. I see. Welcome here. And see other black people who are like me, you know, slowly they started to build themselves up. There was a really famous club that was here with Stevie Wonder coming.

And also, there was, by the 70s and 80s, a place called Centerprise, which was the African and Caribbean bookshop. So they were starting to spread their business and they can support each other as communities. But that was not be easy, maybe struggle to survive in a city that was essentially, and a country that essentially had quite serious issues in structural racism, okay. Our police force, our education system, but I think over the years, they've really built their businesses and their communities. And they *were* this vibrant space. I mean, it happened because of the African Caribbean community making it a vibrant and welcoming space again. They were a community that came out on the street, you know, in the 70s and 80s. When I was young, I remember going there and being in huge big boxes, playing reggae. There are people sitting out on the street, eating, talking to each other. Often meet each other from it. They'd know each other from their churches. So the church has brought people together in that time, and they would meet in the market buying their food, their children would know each other. So, you know, over the years, I think we created an almost carnivalesque type of street sense of belonging, a sense of happiness really for me, as someone who grew up here was really to be thanked should be the Caribbean community mainly. The African community then moved in the 80s because they heard that the Caribbean community had been made to feel welcome. And again, there were landlords that would welcome them, and there were spaces where they could get businesses and stuff like that. So the African community again felt that they are the Caribbean community here! You know, again, we're seeing our people if you like, and so we will have a scenario weekly and it's very mixed but you have a lot of African small businesses, again that going back to the 60s when we're having (these issues).

You talked a lot about community, unity, and talking to each other in real life. I wonder what your view is on kind of, at this time of social media, kind of AI influence dispersive mobile knowledge, the community kind of shifts online. I wonder how that impacts civil activism work and how you see the future going?

I think social media is really useful for letting people know information if there's going to be a protest here. Everyone can know. I mean, God knows what we did back in the 80s. Printers. How did you let people know? They had their ways. I think social media now is very good for letting people know information about certain things. However, I think speaking personally here, you know, how much time do I spend on Instagram really? Am I wasting my life? These are the questions I really ask myself, do I care if people send my love heart. I would much rather go into the gallery, meet people, you know, have a glass of wine or green tea or whatever, and talk to people face to face, and I think we are losing that. The fact that human beings learn to identify with each other face to face, I think we're losing that bandwidth. So that's what we need to always keep an eye on ourselves. Because you can get it, I think this is a comedy program. I watched it a while ago. Again I forgot myself, sorry, Cindy Haley. But been going down a digital hole. You know, and I can reflect on that since I think God, you know, I've been on my Mac. I've been out. I've got a huge studio Mac because I photo-read it at home. I think I've sat on that for three hours when I sit on the phone. I think we need to really re-address our relationships. At this point, I think we need to think about our relationships with social media and our phones.

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JZ

I want to jump in a little bit. You're talking about social media because we were just passing this like pandemic issues. It's largely affected how people go to galleries and your exhibitions or how that would affect you to maybe change your way of presenting your like those documentaries or those photographers to people. And anything changes during the pandemic?

DT

Yes. It was really the pandemic, so we were interested in putting the images on the street for local people, but we weren't quite sure how we were going to do that. Then COVID here. And fortunately, it's a strange word to say. It kind of forced us to think, well, actually, now we have to put something on the street. So that was when we actually put up our first exhibition about Hackney or about Ridley Road and Gillett Square in the middle of a pandemic. And that was when we got lots of press, Thee BBC came. BBC Culture came to the Guardian; we have the observer. We had a huge response to the national press because I think we were one of the only galleries that you could visit because it was on the street, and even though it was tiny, it was only like ten images. It kind of made a statement, I think, and I do think now, going around the city, I'm seeing more and more things outside. And you know the way we are heading with our animal agriculture. We are heading towards another pandemic for sure. If we are there, it would be useful to be able to have street galleries. If we reach another point where we can't. We have to sort of keep ourselves inside. You know, obviously, I'd rather not have another pandemic; *(laugh)* what I'm saying if it comes again, and I think we've all sort of realised as well, alongside the digital media, we do as human beings we need to go out. We need fresh air, we need to be in forests and around trees. And I think that's why cities are gradually unchanging, less cars, less pollution, more kinds of spaces for us to walk. And, I suppose we value our health more than automobiles. Years ago, they were the focus, shifting slightly. So yeah, so the pandemic really pushed us. You have to go to the gallery. Let's do it now. Because it's perfect timing and people want to come out, and it's something to go to, that doesn't mean going inside.

SL

I guess going back to community and activism. There was Centerprise, and there were a lot of artist-led or supported collectives during the 70s and 80s. And I wonder if you have one piece of advice for people who are organising civil activists today?

DT

It would definitely be co-authorship, you know, whatever community or documenting or group it would be to do it with them and be with them every step of the way. Rather than going in and leaving them type thing and then doing something else with the images or whatever it is, your art, wherever you're getting from them, is to be inclusive. Participation is kind of everything. I think I use social media for information only. You can use it to show your work as well, but I wouldn't be too hung up on that. I think you definitely create spaces where people can come to see your work on the screen or in a gallery. If it's an open space and it's welcoming, even if it costs a little bit of money. I still think that's fine as well. But I would say the whole push may be to get people together because I think if you get together, you can make a change. And I don't think that change can happen through social media. It can be helped by social media developed by social media. But I think my advice would be to do things collectively, be organised, and be consistent. Do things over time. I've been documenting. I've actually had a break for a lot of things; I've had a private project. But I've actually had a bit of a break from its materials because I've been documenting it for four years, and it can't get a bit sort of or too much when you're walking over four years; I don't do it every day but still become a bit more. I'm here again; a bit of text here. So I've had a break from it, and then I'm going back in July to stop photographing, again talking to the community again. So I think consistency is even if it sometimes feel... We live in an age, I think, and we've documented that you can't do it. You can't do that fast. There has to be slow growth. So you know, going back and going back and continually telling people that we're here and working with them and to trust you is necessary.

I want to ask some unemployment questions in Hackney. Can you tell us what you think about the history of the past 70s and 80s and how it continues to the present situation. where young people are still the main group of unemployed people in Hackney? What do you think?

It's a big question because it connects to much bigger political issues. And the bigger political point for me is as somebody who got free education in this country. I did. I've got a BA in culture, the media and sociology, and I've got an MA in audio-visual production. As somebody who got those two degrees in this country for free, and I come from a poor background that was instrumental in my whole life, nothing I do now would be this would not be happening unless I had that education for free. What I think has changed young people is that now because of our political system becoming more and more right-wing, is that now you have to pay huge amounts of money to get that education system. And I think that has created huge inequalities in this country. Hence you then have young people who don't want to do, you know, underpaid manual labour their whole lives and would rather not work, and to be honest, I don't blame them. I mean, I'd rather not. I would rather sit around and see my friend's family read a book than go out and do manual labour for 12£ an hour. So I think youth unemployment has always probably been an issue because of lack of respect. That people got, I think it's probably going to increase with the; it's dividing this country and taking away the most vital thing that I thought was accessible to young people, which is education. They took that away from making people go into so much debt, 30,000 or 40,000 pounds, just to get a degree. For me, it's criminal. That's the real foundation of the future. And if you take that away from people and if you go to other countries, there is still a system that supports the young in education. I know it's not specifically happening in Hackney, but for me, that is affecting young people in Hackney, even though that is potentially a global, definitely a national issue. Is that education should be free up to universities up to the MA Ph.D. want to pay for it fine. But I think the MA degree should be accessible. It should be free for all young people. In Hackney, there's also a high, even though younger and richer, population moved in we still have our council states, our social housing, and you still have poverty here. So, youth unemployment is entirely connected to that as well. And again, it's about young people not being offered a decent future. So if you live in a council state, you're on low wages; you can barely pay the rent and barely afford to live; then, the life I said it's going to be, why should you pay for it? Why should you get a job for minimum wage when you know that doesn't really buy you anything? Or give you any sort of life, but I'm always very positive about young people. I always think that if you invest in the future, they get ready for the future. I work with a lot of young people in Hackney, especially groups including Guys 365, a group of young people who are trying to change the stereotype, as the young people being seen as easier, or as a power traitor or victim. So causing the knife crime or victim crime, and so they're trying to change the stereotypes, and for example, we worked with them, we go into their estate with them, they do wonderful images, and then we get the photos in the stories. I think we had an exhibition with them. So twice a year, my colleague and I do a youth project as well; we kind of feel that we're feeding back into the community, listening to what's going on. And we like working with these kinds of really strong slides. So this is fine.

BW

DT



BW

And I just see the Future Hackney and use some cinema to record the photograph and to improve the skills of young people and assist them in unemployment and finding a job. And how do you think this form of individual group support differs from compulsory schemes like the government's previous "Youth Training Scheme" in the 70s and 80s? What do you think differs?

DT

I was around then when I was very young, but I do remember that youth training schemes are basically a way of getting to work for nothing. There may have been instances where they did really train someone, and it was really valuable training, but I think they were few and far between. I think mainly they just got young people to work for nothing. However, there are things in this country like apprenticeships with galleries. There are many positive things about training young people, and that's the difference.

When I was young, I did lots of things. I worked in film festivals for free. I did enjoy them. Youth Training Schemes for two years, I thought, how do people eat? When I worked for the Raindance Film Festival in London, I did it for a couple of months. That's okay. I could do part-time waitressing or whatever I did to keep myself alive. And then I would do the smaller things, as you know, because I wanted to learn and I think they can be really useful in moderation, but I don't think two years of doing the job for free benefits the person because I think it's too much. We have to be respectful of the cost of living now with young people. The food is so expensive going out. And I think we have to be respectful of that. So all young people should have something, even if it's just volunteer costs, something where they can buy food for that day to get to where they're going. There are some respects there that kind of mention them.

SL

I guess maybe writing on what Birong just asked, could you tell us a bit more about the skill-based workshops in Future Hackney?

DT

Right, so when we run our workshops individually, sometimes I do one to one, and sometimes I've worked with young people who are very hard to reach. And what that means is maybe they're doing things they shouldn't be doing on the street. They are going into much more detail. Okay, so I will go in. I will work with that person. I will tell their story. I will work with them to create a photograph. I've got one young person who actually won't mind me talking about it. So I will, for example, as a young person you told me I will show you here in the exhibition. Tony has been through the care system. He had a really tough life. He had been in a young institute. It's not for anything violent, just for finding jobs, but he said to do that in order to survive. So I worked with him very closely. I created this photo with him over the weeks I read a story with him over a period of weeks. And on that level, Tony isn't pleased to go to the university, a local university. But what I found was that it gave me a sense of belonging. I also sent some, you know, that he has an individuality that is worth telling us. So he was over the moon, you know when he was in *The Guardian*, and when his exhibition was up, he was like, wow, you know, my history is worth something. And, you know, it wasn't. It's not like it. It's up to me to tell them that, but I felt he got that from me being a part of this project. You gained a sense of pride and confidence. I may not change his life because he's already on a sort of path. However, I think now, when he thinks about himself, he thinks that his past has been worthwhile and that it has taught him something that has made him stronger. And also, I think it was really good for him to kind of get that story out. And, you know, he really wanted people to know that the care system in this country is failing, failing young people. And he got that through in his story. And he was really proud of that.

So I think on a one-to-one basis, there are those sorts of ways young people, when we work with larger groups, we give them training in... so, for example, in one of the exhibitions, we worked with a young boy who was already into photography. And his family ran a vegan restaurant just around the corner from here, and we got him to document. We worked with him so that he photographed his own family. And then the story I wrote with the mum, so we wrote the story together. So the whole family were involved in their photograph, I think. Atrika has got like six children. So the whole family became involved in, you know, the son was taking a photograph, the mom was writing the story with me, and they were so, again, so proud to have that experience. And that was one-to-one again if you've got photographic training from us, and who produces a picture. When we go into other groups, we just do basic camera training, how to take oral histories using a phone and then type them up, which gives you lots of that with young people. Sometimes we pay young people to transcribe for us to some really useful and generally we hope that they learn the things in the composition, how to use a digital camera, a bit about the photography, how to manage the skills and photography if you're doing a street portrait has to ask somebody always to feedback to people and feedback the image they can and then as I said, often, we'll do, if we run the workshops, we're going to turn an exhibition somewhere for them, so that they can see the input products. But it's really fairly that I just this is a kind of work knew like that diverge kind of people that use iPhones with photography, the black and white, so it's really useful for them, and just produce this kind of stuff. But they really experimented. And they really got something out of just walking around the city. And also that kind of thing, you know, if you haven't got the latest 5000£ digital camera, you can use your phone and you can then create something on social media. So that's kind of the gist of it it's hard to reach young people who want to watch wider workshops around actual, you know, more technological-based workshops and then exhibitions with their stories.



Gillett Square has always been a space for music lovers, artists, writers, drifters, kids, cool people and those who like to shine, Photograph: Donna Travis



Back in the 1980s, Dalston was like a magnet for black and working-class communities with weekly shebeens and parties. Many of these people found refuge in the area at venues such as the Four Aces, Centreprise and Cubies, Photograph: Wayne R Crichtlow

SL

DT

I wonder, going back to the kind of gentrification of Hackney, do you see that? How do you see a kind of changing the demographics? How do you see it changing what people are concerned about? Because I think housing and unemployment or issues that have been around for decades, just maybe take on different forms. So I wonder if you see that change and what people are thinking about, as well?

Yeah, I mean, I think a really big concern in Hackney for young people is housing, and I think it knows the housing is machine back to 70s and 80s and 90s, you know, I rented in Hackney in the late 80s, and it was affordable and had a studio. The fees are about 50£ a week. And now I think, again, it's about a young they're exploiting landlords exploiting young people. The rents should not be that there should be more social housing. I think it's kind of stepped up. I think the concern is more worrying and should be. Also, in Hackney, in the 70s, 80s, and early 90s, there were a lot of squats. There are a lot of people who are squatting. I think New York's quite similar in that time, you know, there were builders that they would leave people alone, often the council didn't have the money to kick them out. So there were ways you could survive. I think all that is taken away from young people. And landlords have become exploiters. I think charging, I don't know...something ridiculous, like three or fourty percent of our wages just became accommodations. (Coral: Yeah, super expensive right now.) The 90s weren't so long ago. Wages haven't increased so much. So that puts it into perspective.

Gentrification. It's also kind of the place to live, I suppose. People like living here. It's like I say, because it's very vibrant. It has a lot of green space here, which is quite important for people. In terms of the issues affecting unsafe housing, cost of living climate, all these things, it's quite a good Green Party in Hackney, so I know the young woman that runs the Green Party here. She might be worth contacting, at some point, the peer gallery. She's very dynamic. With you are younger, and more middle class. That's good in some ways. Because you have this more dynamic Green Party, for example, you have an extinction value in Hackney, very active. Although I'm opposed to some parts of gentrification like the high rents people being pushed out, also creating just a white pass Borough, isn't respectful of what's gone, inclusive. I think there's some aspects of gentrification, which is a more radical rule for some extent.

'A space of radical black history': Dalston's Gillett Square - in pictures

With a long musical history, this east London location is now the source of moving community stories, from growing up in care to battling addiction

Thu 15 Dec 2022 07:00 GMT

'A space of radical black history': Dalston's Gillett Square - in pictures, available at https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2022/dec/15/a-space-of-radical-black-history-dalstons-gillett-square-in-pictures?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other



Future Hackney Exhibition (2023), 92 Dalston Lane,
London E8 1NG, photo by Birong Wang



So what do you think about some of the policies that relate to improving unemployment, that thing to only benefit white people? And how can we get the government to focus on the range of inequalities faced by immigrants and people of other races?

I think institutionalism goes way back. That means it's kind of throughout our laws, our systems, our housing, and our schooling. So I think those things are very difficult to change. However, I do think that essentially all people want the same thing. You know, and we do, they say in London, there's a saying that you need to live cheek by jowl. It's an expression. For example, Paris, well from Paris, is all in the centre. And the ethnic minorities and the poor tend to live in the bad news, which is around in Paris. London was like this so I think personally with London in the benefit, if that area is good, it benefits everybody. We all live. You'll get a mansion next door to a housing estate. So, for example, with what happens to renters, with the tower block on fire, I think so many people from all classes are also passionate about that because again, you know, next door to that tower block was really rich houses. So I think there is a sector, thankfully, that, you know, we need to make a city safe, you know, we all live together. And I'm hoping in my lifetime that there's more fairness amongst, like, treating ethnic minorities and working class people with a bit more dignity and a bit more fairness in terms of housing, in terms of schools. Whether that will happen or not, I don't know, but that's I think one of the things that I kind of fight formally, is to make sure that, yeah, that happens I think. Is that sort of answers your question?

Thank you.

JZ

DT



SL/JZ/BW

EQUAL RIGHTS

In Conversation With
Ken Fero (KF)

2 Interviewers: Sophia Lam (SL), Aishwarya Korwar (AK)
13th June 11:45 - 13:00 (GMT+8)
Le Grand Jour,
399 Green Lanes, London N13 4JD



Outside of Le Grand Jour (2023), photo by Sophia Lam

(rumbling of coffee machine)

Just a bit of background of why we reached out to you: the inspiration came when Hackney Cop Watch projected your film onto the wall of the Stoke Newington Police Station during one of the protests. We think the topics in your films are very relevant and part of an ongoing discussion.

Huge area. Let's see what we can cover. You'll have to control me because there's a lot of history. There's a lot of history.

My first question will be how you often overlap multiple layers of sound and images in your documentaries, how there is this official silence from the police that you mentioned, I think, at least two of your documentaries, there are these agonistic cries from the families, there is the gasping of one of the people in custody while the police officer was kind of joking around on CCTV –

Sophia that's about five questions *(laughs)* Can we take it one at a time?

(laughs) Okay. The question is how would you describe the role of sound in resisting power structures – especially violent power structures – and silent oppressions?

I'll have to start at the beginning where we started as a collective. Migrant Media actually began in Hackney in the late 1980s. All of us had come from migrant, refugee or Black backgrounds. We were all filmmakers or artists working individually and were also involved in social and political struggles. A lot of the media focus was very mono-form and one-dimensional. Our interest in the issues that were happening in the community surround state violence and different forms of oppression and repression as the resistance to them. If you look at issues around race, there's always been coverage, but it doesn't really cover it. So we decided to set up our own film collective, and the main focus had to be around resistance, about the different forms of resistance out there. But we also wanted to have an approach which was different to conventional media. For us, the separation of sound and image is really important because sound can be just as powerful as image. Very often in terms of media, people talk about film as just the visual. But of course, audio has so much potential and is really underused. So what we try to do with our images and our sounds is to – not give a voice, because the voice is already there within the community – actually act as a platform or a political platform. For us, sound is a weapon and so is image. We know how to manufacture that, and we put that at the disposal of the people that we work with.

I think it's very interesting how you say you're not trying to give a voice to the people, but to provide a platform. Because when I was thinking about it, I thought about how it (our programme) would amplify these low frequencies from the archival materials that might not seem that visceral when you're looking at it. Having people's voices – because sound is also kind of a wave that goes through a body – gives it a more 'emotional wavelength', which makes it quite interesting the way you put it.

SL

KF

SL

KF

SL

KF

SL



KF

Well, in terms of the work we do, we don't really prepare in advance in terms of what the product is going to be. Our work is archival in the sense that we document issues within the community which then organically turns into something, a piece of art, which in our case is a film. This organic development of the film and the art goes hand in hand with the kind of the organic development of people who are in struggle. If you look at someone like Gramsci who wrote about the organic intellectual against fascism, that's what we have with lots of the families. They're forced into this position where they become leaders in a sense. Their voice gives a voice not just to their pain, anger and resistance, but it also becomes the voice of many other people who have experienced whether it's police brutality, immigration, war or any of the issues that we deal with in our work. So I think it is important how we organise, and I think that's very different to how mainstream media organises. For example, we have people in our films who have been in three or four of the films. That's a community. When people talk about community – well, how do you define that? We define community as not just us making films, but us making films with people over a long period of time. You have decades and decades of work and resistance going on. That becomes a voice against the silence, the silence that's been there for so very long. Looking back now... I think your friend is here. Hi.

SL
AK
KF

(Aishwarya enters the café) Hi. We've started. This is Aishwarya.

Hi sorry, nice to meet you. Thank you.

So, looking back over, when we started in the late 1980s in Hackney, we in fact had a squat for about ten years. As we were signing on, that gave us the possibility to do what we wanted to do. We were completely free, with us being able to move around. We spent a lot of time politically re-educating ourselves and getting involved in different struggles. Of course, because we were on the streets and we were just documenting, we weren't producing. We were just documenting what was going on. People used to come to us when something happened. A film like *Injustice* started because people knew we had done work around the murder of Joy Gardner, so they just approached us when Shiji Lapite was killed by police officers in Stoke Newington. But what's happened since then, reflecting over the past 30 years, since the Joy Gardner film and actually beyond that, when we first started, and it ties to what we were talking about before, there's a kind of obstinate memory in the community which will never ever go away, despite how much the state tries to silence people. It doesn't matter what they do, whether it's ignoring them, suppressing them, or creating, I guess you could call them, 'symbols' of what the state would like to project in terms of progress. So you have people, for example, talking a lot about Stephen Lawrence, who was killed 30 years ago; but very few people talk about Joy Gardner, who was killed two months later. And the fundamental difference between those two cases is that Joy was killed by police officers. The state will never ever deal with an issue like that. (thumping sound of emptying coffee grounds in machine) So what we try to do is go for the things that people don't want to talk about and the state wants to suppress. Very often it's not just the state, but even people within activist communities who are prepared to accept less than we should.

SL
KF
SL

One of the things that was really striking to me was that, if not all, most of your documentary films are available online, under Migrant Media's Vimeo account.

Oh my god, you've watched them?

(laughs) Yes! Reacting to what you said about how maybe some of the activist groups would not be as straightforward or as critical as your films are, I wonder if you have met with any hindrances or problems in your production and distribution of the films? And is that the reason why it's all – (distributed online as opposed to in public cinemas?)

Well, there are two elements. There's the state, and there's the suppression from the state. For us, we consider Channel 4 and BBC part of the state because they control the narrative, they control the stories, they decide what can and can't be told. For example with Stephen Lawrence, when Stephen was killed, nobody cared about Stephen, and they hadn't cared about hundreds of other kids, basically Asian kids who had been killed in East London, in Hackney and other areas. Because of the Labour government that came into power, who wanted to co-opt the police monitoring movement and show they had some control in terms of policing, that's how Lawrence's inquiry came about. The media then jumped onto it, and then we had five or six films made about Stephen Lawrence. That happens all the time and that's absolutely fine. Stephen should be remembered – but so should the hundreds of others. They should be remembered as well. So that's one thing.

The second thing is, when we made *Injustice*, people had been killed by the police, particularly Black people, since 1969. And nobody had actually looked at it in terms of a systemic pattern. There'd been individual cases which had been highlighted. Across London and across the UK, there'd been groups – activist groups, police monitoring groups, the Socialist Workers Party, the Nation of Islam, individual activists – who had all supported individual families, and that's absolutely fine. But nobody had brought the families together.

So when we made the film, when we make art, we tried to use that as a vehicle for actually uniting people. The United Families and Friends (Campaign), which is the coalition of (families of those affected by) deaths in custody – well 'police killings' we should call it, not 'deaths in custody' – came out of the production of the film. So, there was an organic growth of the political struggle, which was trying to challenge the legal parameters, and the film as well. And then you know about the history of the film being suppressed. This is a huge area. (*large metal clanging*) So yeah, I've lost my train of thought now. Am I making sense?

Yes you are, for sure, (you were talking about) uniting...

Yeah, so basically what was happening is that individual families would be supported. So we would have Shiji in Stoke Newington, Brian Douglas in Brixton, and so on. But nobody had actually put the families together. So we met with the families, and we arranged a meeting with Myrna Simpson, the mother of Joy Gardner, and Brenda Weinberg, the sister of Brian Douglas. Migrant Media is not just an arts collective, it's a political entity as well, and we have relations with lots of other radical groups. So there was the Black Unity and Freedom Party with Minkah Adofoh. We came together. I wouldn't say we put people together, we came together, we made that happen. Because we took control, lots of groups found that quite threatening, that the families took control of their own struggle. I think that's really still there, this issue of, "whose voice is it?" For example, I know for a fact that some of the families, there would be a public meeting, and the speech given by the family would be written by one of the campaigners. It wouldn't be the families speaking from their hearts. And there's nothing more powerful... (*emotional pause as he gathers his thoughts*)...there's nothing more powerful than the voice of people in struggle. It's not just about the pain, and it's not just about the suffering, which obviously is traumatising for the families and for people listening as well. But it's about them taking control, and them breaking through the legal talk, breaking through the political discourse at the time. The voice of families in struggle, especially when they're united and in support of each other, they come from a place of...I would say it comes through a place of resistance and love as well, because that love is created through connections, through (being) with people. These are very emotive, strong feelings that we're dealing with, and of course that feeds into the work. I think that comes through, and that's what people respond through. Because it's not just the political sloganeering, it's the personal stuff.

KF

SL
KF



SL

So when you were talking about how personal and emotionally powerful these platforms of resistance could be, I wonder how you, as film director, deal with such delicate subjects? How do you take care?

KF

I mean it's not just me, because obviously we're a collective and there's a few of us, but I think we all come from a place where our pain and whatever we suffer is nothing compared to the families. So, you have to show humility. I mean I understand when people see the film and they sometimes talk about how it triggers them and traumatises them, and I get that, but it's nothing compared to what the families are going through. Sometimes to be able to understand, to feel and to do something, and take that pain and anger and channel it towards resistance, and challenge it towards change, I think that's really important. I was talking before about this idea of obstinate memory, which is there with Myrna, with Brian Douglas' sister, it's still there after 30 years or 20 years. When someone like Patricio Guzmán in the 70s was making films about Chile and the students that Pinochet had arrested and killed and then made disappear, there was a group of mothers that came together to resist that. That fed into what we do, because we have to talk about history. We're not starting from scratch. There's a huge history of struggle across the world in terms of anti-imperialism, resistance against oppression. So that is part of our background: we come from anti-colonial struggles, we come from anti-imperialist struggles, and that feeds into what we're doing, it feeds into what we try to do. I think it's very important, this documenting of history, whether it's Hackney, the UK, Latin America or whether it's the Middle East, Africa or whatever, it's very important that we continue that legacy, because our families and parents did what they did to prepare us. We have to be conscious of that. I think what we're trying to do now in terms of after 30 years is to say, 'okay, what can be done which hasn't been done before?' What's happened recently, particularly after the murder of George Floyd, is you have this very fake reaction within the UK by lots of organisations who started talking about decolonisation. For us, decolonisation is ridiculous, because colonialism still exists. It's still there. Imperialism still exists, it's still there. We don't feel we're in the post-colonial world. The colonial world is still felt all over the world right now. It's felt in Palestine, it's felt in Yemen, it's felt in Gambia, it's felt everywhere. These are important factors that feed into what we do. We take that history of resistance and take it to Hackney, and we stay in Hackney for 30 years. Of course, there are other people there who preceded us, like the Black Audio Film Collective with John Akomfrah, and *Handsworth Songs* which was a really important film for us because they also follow this creative line of separating the sound and the image. And they were called Black Audio Film Collective for a specific reason. Obviously, the identity was Black. Audio came first for them, film came second, and the collectivity was how they organised. (*banging noise from behind the counter*) I think if you look at their work, which influenced our approach, I think it's very important. I keep saying it's very important, don't I?

SL

It is very important.

KF

It is, yeah. But this legacy of resistance and struggle is all about giving people hope. If you don't have hope, you have nothing. And if somebody whose daughter has been killed by the police in front of their son can still have hope and can still fight on, what else can we do as artists or filmmakers or curators or activists? We have to keep going.

When you mentioned legacy, it kind of reminded me of one of your films – I think it was *Ultraviolence* – where the narrator takes this position of writing a letter to his son. Also I remember a quote about how memories are so fragile that they need to be spoken to be kept alive and remembered, which makes me think that's a common thread that runs through all of your films. I wonder how can we as members of the public also be part of the resistance? We talked about it a lot when we were discussing our positionality and our subjectivity in the project, because basically none of us really lived in Hackney and none of us really went through those times, from the 70s to present.

Those times are still here. Hackney is still here. People often look back at the late 60s, 70s, and they talk about Vietnam, the Black Power Movement, the Panthers, and the feminist movement of that time. But if you look at now, we have #MeToo, BLM, Syria, we still have imperialism, people are still fighting. So there is actually no difference in terms of the amount of struggle that's there in the world and the amount of pain that's there in the world. What's happened, I think, is that during the 90s, and this is all largely to do with the Labour Party who were feeding off Thatcherism, there's been a suppression of resistance, and I think the education system has absolutely failed to teach young people, not just in the UK but everywhere, what's happened before. And of course, that's its role – its role is not to create revolutionaries, but to create workers for factories or for the capitalist system. So what you can do, what young people can do, is what you're doing already, which is to be engaged, to research, to find out what's happened before. But I think the most important lesson for us that we would give is: it's about collectivity; it's about how you organise as a collective. Not as individual artists or directors or people who are doing things on their own, but how can you work as a collective. Because if you work as a collective, you have support, you have strength, and also you're accountable. You have to justify what you're doing. When we make films, although I may be the director or co-director or whatever, but every person within the collective and the families involved all have a say in where this thing goes. They have a say, not just in terms of what we cover – I mean they don't have an artistic say – but every film has an impact. 'We want something to happen.' It could be we want particular police officers to go to jail, it could be we want to have a very direct political impact on the legal system. or we may just want to agitate people. It could be several things. All those things are determined by the political struggle and by the families that we work with. They're not just determined by us. So sometimes, politically, we have to tone down our politics to make it fit with the families. But actually that is more revolutionary than any protest or rebel.

In your upcoming film that you're working on –

Which one?

The one with migrants, Asian –

Oh, the Bradford 12 film.

Yes, can you tell us a little bit more about that?

SL

KF

SL

KF

SL

KF

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KF

I can. When Migrant Media was organised, we had very little support. We had no funding for ten years. We simply lived off signing on. We didn't have jobs. We didn't *want* jobs because our job was to build a struggle and help support people in struggle. So we gave all our time to that. Now, what that allowed us to do was to actually buy our own equipment so we didn't have to rely on funders. And because we had our own equipment, it means we could go and document things. If something was happening, we'd go and film it. We didn't care where it would go. Would it be a film? Would it not be a film? It didn't really matter. It was about an archival process of documenting – (*loud metal banging sound*). It was about an archival process of documenting what was going on and then seeing what could happen politically with it. I think what you can see if you look at Migrant Media's work is that we don't use archive. It's all our work. That cuts out a lot of issues, financially and in terms of copyright. Our material is so strong because it's at the very heart of this struggle. When we make a film like *Tasting Freedom*, we organise with asylum seekers in detention for them to go on a hunger strike. It was a joint decision that we made and they made. We were there and part of that hunger strike. We documented the hunger strike. Nobody else knew what was going on. Not the BBC, not ITV, nobody. And that was just one example. When you do that, when you end up with this incredible living archive of resistance, it's very easy then to do something which gives people the spirit of the struggle. It gives people some kind of hope that yes, something can happen. I'm hopeless at straying off subject, sorry. What was your...? What was that you were asking?

Your latest project.

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Sorry yeah, the reason I was talking about that is that historically we've always been there, filming it and being part of it. But with the Bradford 12 story, it actually started in 1991. When we set up in Hackney, we were looking around to see who else was there that shared our political and artistic direction and we found a group in France called Agence IM'média, who started in the early 80s and were part of the Beur Movement in Paris and France, which was basically the young Algerians living in the suburbs and also people from Senegal and other countries that were (under the rule of) French imperialism. They had a very good project in Paris, working with communities and it was exactly the same kind of political direction and artistic direction we were going for: the idea that we could make films about our struggles in a much stronger way than the state ever could, and the need for building resistance, the need for education, the need for screenings. It's not just about films, it's about the screenings and this idea of Third Cinema, which came from Solanas and Getino during the revolution period in Latin America. First Cinema was Hollywood; Second Cinema was the kind of European auteur, (like) Godard; and Third cinema was about films that came out of the so-called Third World, the South. And the idea of Third Cinema is not about making a product, it's about doing things, showing it and changing it depending on what people say. So for us the film screenings are really important, especially when the families are there so we can understand and feel what that struggle is. This idea of Third Cinema is really important and is something that people need to look into again I think, because it frees you from the kind of shackles of media commissioning and broadcasters. So Third Cinema, the collective way and the archival approach is how we've worked so far with this film. We got to 1991, sorry I'm backtracking again, but we got to 1991, we met this group and we couldn't edit anything, we couldn't afford an editing fee. We met them and they were very interested in Black struggles in the UK. And so they said, let's make a film about 30 years of the history of self-defence.

Because for us resistance is about self-defence. It's how people have defended themselves and the community over the years, and that resistance and self-defence has been there, it's really massive. It's not just within the Black community, it's within working class communities as well. But this is not the history you get taught in school, so how are people supposed to know about it? What we decided to do was we made a film called *Britain's Black Legacy*, which dealt with issues like the Mangrove, which now everybody knows about, what's happened in Southall with the Southall Monitoring Group, and the Newham Eight. One of the cases from the time in 1981 was the Bradford 12. When we were making *Britain's Black Legacy* we met a couple of the defendants of the Bradford 12, and we started in 1991 working with them. So we were building these relationships with people in struggle as we go along. We didn't know it would take us 30 years to make the film and lots has happened in the way, and we've now come to a point where we want to make this film about the Bradford 12. Of course there's no archive, because we weren't there in 1981, so what do we do? That's when you have to start getting creative and use techniques, sound and image to bring different things like animation and whatever it is we're going to do. So that's where we are at the moment, we're telling this story, and it's an incredible story. The reason people wholly know about the Mangrove Nine is because of the film by Steve McQueen. You know about it? So basically he made a film about the Mangrove 9, which was directly a response to the upswell after George Floyd. Everybody's looking around saying, 'oh we have to have more Black faces' – what they now call Brown faces, but we called Black faces on television – so when you look at adverts now, there are Black people selling you everything. It means representation, but it doesn't mean anything else. In fact it really serves to cover up what's really going on in society in terms of repression and what people are feeling. The reason again, when I made the corollary between Stephen Lawrence and Joy Gardner – the fact that Joy is killed by the police which is why they haven't covered it – against the issue with the Mangrove Nine and the Bradford 12 is they're quite similar cases politically in a sense. The only reason that the Bradford 12 haven't been covered is because it happened in Bradford, which is in the North, where you have this whole class issue in the UK. Also it was young Asians doing it – (*overlapping chatting voices*) and in terms of depiction of Asians as a people in struggle, it's never been something which this country's actually been able to deal with. It's always the image of...(*voices get louder, joined by a blast of steam from coffee machine*) Should we stop for a moment?

Yeah, maybe wait for the coffee machine.

Yeah, I'll wait for the coffee. It won't be long.

Yes, but I totally agree with what you just said, you know, the tokenism you mentioned about –

Sorry, I'm not great at words. I make films. (*chuckles*)

No, no, no, no, no. Those are just fancy words, as you say, it's just political speak.

Well, you have to know the lingo to work in the area. I get it. But I think there is one point we need to pick up on, which is in terms of your generation that I think is really important. The point we are within society, not just in the UK, but all over the world, in terms of what can happen and what should happen.

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I think I would like (to ask) a more general question regarding collaboration with other people who also have common goals in Hackney. So, how do you think in your practice you have collaborated with other people that are also a part of helping improve Hackney?

Helping improve Hackney?

Like working towards the betterment of Hackney.

I think, as I said before, for us, Migrant Media is a collective. But the collective is very, very broad. We have political connection with many groups, and there are points historically where we've come together because there's been a certain issue – and then we focus on the issue. So, what film is really useful for, especially if you're working independently, you're free, you don't have the restriction of broadcast, you don't have compliance, is that you can do whatever you want to and work with whoever you want to. The alliances you make are political, personal, and artistic. All these things coalesce into being something that supports the movement. Because the movement is always there. You know, people are always in struggle, there's always resistance going on. What you do is that you try to embed yourself in it. At the same time, make sure that people can feel that they can have a voice through your work. And it's a long-term thing. We've been going now for over 30 years, 35 years or something like that, and we still work with people that we worked with 35 years ago. So, we have the historical legacy of working with people, of collaborating with people.

Then we have obviously the younger generation coming in. One thing that's really, really important that we've noticed recently is that there's an incredible amount of interest in these struggles. Your generation, I think, are more radical than any generation we've had in the past 15, 20 years. Why that happens, nobody knows. Nobody knew why the 60s happened. It happened because of the confluence of social movements and international political movements. I think what's happening now, if you look at #MeToo, the BLM Movement and environmentalism, young people are really fed up. You know, you have people who are on the streets of London protesting about Black Lives Matter. You have kids in schools in Bradford who are dancing on tables and chanting about Palestinians must be free from the river to the sea. I mean, these political slogans, which are part of the history of the liberation movement in Palestine, are in the hearts and souls of 14-year-old kids from Bangladesh. This is a good thing. So I think we do have a lot of hope, providing that there's a kind of connection made between the history of what happened before and where we are now. I think the Bradford 12 film is very much about that divide and how we cross that divide, because it's not about saying to people, 'look, this is what we did then and this is what you can do now'. It's about, 'this is what we did then, this was the strategy we used – be aware of it, and take it to do whatever you want to do'. I think there's a lot of debate about click politics and identity politics. That's gone by now and I think that's very divisive. It can go round and round. But certainly there's nothing more important than being in a room with people, listening to people, and feeling those sound waves and seeing those images. That's what drives you. That's what keeps you going. And that sharing, physical sharing, can't be replaced. Social media is great as an organising tool, but what are you organising for? What's your political aim? Debate doesn't really shift it.

AK

I think that's where the true collaboration does come in place, when it's put into practice. As you mentioned, the internet, social media can be a great place to organise, but true collaboration can happen when you're out on the field actually making things happen. I think that is really important.

And that takes time, that takes a lifetime. That's a lot for people to want to give up. What happens is that some people may start and then they'll turn to bourgeois individualism. They'll get a job, they'll be fine. It's kind of a sell-out really from my perspective. Actually, to be honest with you, this whole thing about individual politics, self-identity and pushing yourself forward, it's really empty and vacuous. Because what you get from working with people, from being part of struggles, from making a difference, is worth a million times more than anything you can get financially. It really feeds you and fills you. It fills your soul, it fills your heart. You can have all the money in the world, but if you don't have that, you have nothing. So what I would say to people is, of course people need to live, we understand that. But really, you have to think to yourself, what's the minimum I need for me to do the maximum of good work? I don't particularly feel you can do anything within the system. I'm not one of the people that thinks you can change the system from within. I think the system needs to be destroyed, not improved. Obviously people started talking about police abolition, defunding the police, refunding the community. That's fine as well, but at the end of the day, if you're going to abolish the police, why don't you abolish the courts as well? And if you're going to abolish the courts and the police, well then you may as well abolish the government. You can't just have the abolition of the police, you have to have the abolition of the army. You have to have a completely different way of living. So you need revolution. Now, some people may say, 'okay you're sitting alone and you're talking about revolution.' People have said that in France in the 18th century. People have said that in Nicaragua. People say that all over the place. People said it in Iran. They said it was impossible because of Bashar. There was revolution. We just have to keep pushing and pushing.

The word 'revolution' was also very frequently used in Hong Kong in the protests. I don't know, I don't think it's impossible in a way, as long as there are people who still believe that it would happen, it could happen.

I think to many that word itself can seem radical, which is why maybe it just holds them back and pushes them to really be a part of a revolution, so to speak.

But nobody creates revolution – it just happens. It happens, and it's about the social and political visions of the time. So we don't know what's going to happen anywhere in the world at any one time. But we do know this, is that even if you don't know about it, there are people in struggle all over the world. It's like, how do you make these connections? So these are very global points to be made, but really on the grassroots, how do you do it yourself? It's not about you going out and spouting revolution. It's about how you can work in a revolutionary way, in a collective way, with specific groups of people over a long period of time to make change. And making change has to be defined. For us, for example, language is important, words are important. Now, during the 90s we had a series of cases like Brian Douglas, where they went into inquest and the inquest verdict was 'unlawful killing'. When people were reading 'unlawful killing' or hearing it on the radio or TV, they assumed that, 'okay, the person's been unlawfully killed, something will happen'. But in fact, nothing happens. Therefore words and language are very important, how we use them and why we use them. Recently we have refused to use the phrase 'deaths in police custody' anymore – what we say now is 'police killings'. There's a big difference in using that language, because if you use the words 'police killings', you're actually defining what's happened, killing has happened, by the police. If you say 'death in custody', people immediately think, 'okay, the person died in custody, that's not a killing. They were in custody, which means perhaps they were doing something.' This (is) victimisation, blaming the victim, the same thing that Edward Said talks about in terms of Palestine about blaming the victim – you have this history we always refer to. So now we only use the words 'police killings', and it's very difficult for people to accept. I was asked to write a paper for a book about our work, and I said it was going to be about media collusion and police killings. And they refused. They said, 'you can't use the words "police killings" in the UK'. And that's coming from established publishers. So this resistance within liberal bourgeois areas is something that we have to constantly fight for, and fight for language as well.

KF

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AK

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SL

I agree – how this transition from the passive to active voice is already making a difference big enough to irritate certain people.

KF

And it should irritate them. It should do more than irritate them. It should scare them. They should be scared. And they *are* scared, because they're protecting what they've got. They're protecting the status quo, they're protecting their relationship. You have to define what the state is. We have the broadest definition of the state. It's not just the government and legal operators. It's newspapers, it's media.

But it's just all about giving people hope and letting them know that actually you can overcome your individual fear. Slavoj Žižek talks about fetishistic disavowal – you know what's going on, but you don't want to know that you know. People are constantly telling themselves, 'okay, somebody's died. Something could have gone wrong, perhaps the police used too much violence. But that person may have been doing this, that or the other.' So that whole blaming-the-victims is just a really big issue that we're always fighting against. You've asked earlier about what happens to us. We've had death threats, we've had guns to our head, our families threatened. We've been attacked as well. It's just endless. So there's that – which is direct violence, threats of violence – but then there's the suppression, there's the Whiteness thing. We just can't ever make a film for television again – we've been told that by BBC after we made *After the Storm*, which was around the Second Gulf War in 1991. We've been told that by Channel 4, by the BBC. So in those circumstances, why should we be polite? Why should we play the game?

SL

Exactly.

KF

Now what's happened is that since George Floyd, people have started talking about looking at this area of resistance. They're beginning to use our language for their own commercial gain. There'll be a series on Channel 4 or BBC about Black resistance in the 70s and 80s, but it'll be soft history. It won't be a history of organising, it'll be a history of what actually happened. The problem with that is – fine, I mean, of course there should be many voices and everybody should be able to do it – but if the power and the finance and the reach is given to people who try to peddle soft history, what does that do to future generations? How do they listen to the voice which is more radical? How do they access our work and other people's work? Because the go-to place will always be the BBC or those archives. So I think that's where the battle lines are at the moment for us. It's about trying to make sure that the voice of the families and the voice of the people in struggle is remembered because of obstinate memory. Also it's there and available as a weapon. Television is not a weapon in our hands, it's a weapon in somebody else's hands. But film, art and things that we do as individuals collectively as well, that's in our hands. We can control that and it can make a difference, it does make a difference. I'm getting a bit flowery now. But I believe it, we believe in it.

SL

Originally my next question would be about how you would compare your form of documentary against others and matter-of-fact news reporting, but I think you already described it very well. There is embodied research, durational learning about families and talking to people. There is this deep listening that you have with the victim families, but at the same time enacting this labour of listening to the viewers so we have to 'tune into' this frequency to understand.

It's about deep listening but it's also about deep action. To listen is not enough. What do you do when you hear that? What does that do to you? How does that move you? What can you do? And when we have our screenings people always say, but what can we do? There is always something for them to do. We always say this is happening and that's happening. So now we are organising The People's Tribunal on Police Killings for next May. We are taking 20 cases of people that have been killed by the police where no action has been taken against them, and we are reinvestigating them for murder, manslaughter. We are going to present those 20 cases – which is just 1% of the 2000 cases that have happened – to an international panel from Palestine, from America, from Africa, from outside the UK. This international panel will then give a judgement and then we'll be taking collective action. This is a political initiative that's happening at the same time as the filmmaking. So there is always things to do. And who knows what will happen. Maybe it will make a difference, maybe it won't. But you have to be part of the process of making that, of resistance. Resistance is always about attack for us. We are quite militant in that way. We refuse to negotiate with the police, we refuse to negotiate with broadcasters. Which is probably why they won't work with us. We would blame them.

I guess resistance doesn't always have to go to a certain result – of course we are hopeful that it will, but sometimes it's an interruption.

Resistance happens everywhere all the time. The question is how those areas of resistance connect, how that is going to build into a movement, and how that movement gains popular support. Because the people are the most powerful force for change. Nothing else is. So that's why we believe in people, and that's why our films are free. That's why we don't charge people. We give our work to the people because it's come from the people. So who are we to control it, refine it and benefit from it financially?

I suppose on the financial side of things, you wouldn't be able to get any grants or fundings?

Oh we get grants and support from here and there. That's always been fine. There are lots of individuals and organisations who are actually quite progressive. They see what we are doing and they value it, which is fine. But you know, we can make a film for 20,000 that somebody else would spend 200,000 on. We do it because we don't get paid. We do it for love and people give. That's what makes it so strong – because it comes from people's hearts. It comes from a political position rather than a financial or commercial one. We're not interested in prizes. We're not interested in awards...because it means nothing. It means absolutely nothing. If we can make change in people and that's left behind, that's much more important than a trophy.

Keeping that in mind, I think it would be important to engage and mobilise the communities that these films are made for. My question would be, are there any specific techniques that you probably employ in order to capture people's attention or evoke these emotions in people?

Within the filmmaking process?

Yeah. In the process itself.

We always attack.

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Sorry?

Attack. Be as radical as you can. Show humility. You have to be completely and utterly uncompromising artistically, politically and practically. We've been told that we have to cut off... We made a film for BBC *After the Storm*. We were told from the BBC that we shouldn't have a certain line in there. Because somebody in the film said that... You know the story?

No, but I would imagine that they would always –

So somebody we interviewed in the film, Ghada Karmi, who's Palestinian, was talking about the war in Iraq and she said 200,000 people died in Iraq and nobody cared about it. And this is before social media. In fact, the newspapers, the Guardian, the BBC, the whole of the press in the UK was saying 10,000 people had been killed. So there was a big disparity between what the mainstream press was saying – and the mainstream press is what politicians say which means that's what people believe – and what she was saying. Of course, we checked out to see where she got the figure from. When we put in the form and delivered the film to the BBC, they called us up and say, 'there's this figure. Where's it come from?' Academics would actually raise the complaint with the BBC when there was a screening before the film was broadcast, and they said, 'oh, we need to check this out'. What they didn't know is that we had actually done our research and the figure of 200,000 actually came from the Pentagon in the United States because they had their own reason for actually quantifying the number of deaths. When the BBC heard that, we said, well, we're not going to take it out because that's the figure. 200,000 people died. We were told by the BBC then – this is 1992 – we're going to show your film because you've given us the journalistic evidence, but you will never, ever make a film for the BBC again. When we made *Justice Denied* for Channel 4, there was a huge upstage and Channel 4 said, if you want to make a film for us again, you do something about decorating in an Arab Middle Eastern style or cooking certain food, which is lifestyle thing. Our response to that was to make *Injustice*, a film which nobody wanted to make, nobody wanted to see, but still it got made. So you always have to never give up.

Push back. Stand your ground.

Yeah, stand your ground, but obviously stand your ground with people, not on your own. And you'll get that support. Setting up collectives, I think, is a brilliant way to go forward within the arts and politics movement. It's the only way forward, you know.

Can you tell us a little bit about the structure of Migrant Media, like how your collective works?

We have no structure. It's a collective.

More like the team. The people.

The people. There's lots of us. It grows, it contracts. You know, like I said, the families involved in these films are part of Migrant Media. We don't separate between ourselves and participants and to a certain extent, you know, other people in the community. It's completely open. If anyone wants to be part of Migrant Media, they just start working with us and that's it. But we don't offer jobs. We don't offer career paths. We offer, like, hope.

Hackney Community Defence Association was set up in the 1980s. One of the cases that prompted its formation was the death of Colin Roach in Stoke Newington Police Station. And at the moment we're working on an archive project. Hackney Community Defence Association was about the community actually taking on the police and taking legal action against police officers. Several people who'd been framed by the police or involved in miscarriages of justice successfully sued the police and won. So this is a really important lesson in how a community can organise; But again, nobody knows about it. Even people in Hackney don't know about it. So what we're trying to do and working with other people like the people who set up HCDEA and to a certain extent people now in art and academia is to make these stories more available in audio and visual form so people can get enrichment from it.

Yeah, definitely. To make information available to people.

I think accessibility is so important.

Cool. Great. I'm glad you guys are doing this. It's a great project.

Thank you so much for your time. I guess our next step would be to edit and then we would share with you a consent form.

Yeah, well send me the consent form because I'm actually going to Palestine in a couple of weeks' time.

Okay.

So you better send it to me in case I come back in a coffin. (chuckles)

Oh no.

That happens. It's okay. I'm ready.

Stay hopeful. Stay hopeful.

Yeah, I am hopeful, but I'm also realistic.

You're truly a part of the revolution where it's like, if this is what it entails, then I'm all for it.

Yeah, it is what it is.

KF



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EQUAL RIGHTS

In Conversation With

Eliel Jones (EJ)

3

Interviewers: Sophia Lam (SL), Aishwarya Korwar (AK)

23rd June 12:30 - 13: 30 (GMT+8)

Online - Microsoft Teams Meeting Room



Outside the Dalston Tube Station (2023),
photo by Haoyue Chen

I guess I'll just start with my questions.

I think this one now I've just before we get started. It's just what you said.

Yeah.

I think what would be really from from the perspective of my work or the things that I could speak to, I mean, I know that you were particularly interested in me thinking about Lesbians and Gays Support the Migrants which can definitely talk to, but then also um, a lot of the work that I've done on this on activism has always, not always but like there's an intersection with curatorial practise that I think it's what kind of um, I've been exploring most recently through the Biennial also I guess this kind of both. Speaking more generally to activism and activism work it outside of the art world which is predominantly where I've been doing it in the context of LGSM, but then also the context of doing it within a curatorial project. So maybe those two things. And I think you mentioned home making as a general question which actually could, like generative for us to talk about and relationship to different things by. Anyhow, I'm going to let you with your question.

Yeah. No, that's a really good point. The intersectionality between, you know, LGSM and also your work within curatorial practise because I guess going back to Hackney, it has a very long, radical queer history with, like, Stoke Newington being kind of called the Mecca of lesbian spaces and also the Lenthall Road Workshop. So there has been a lot of support system, I guess, at some time support system and also kind of empowerment for the queer community at the time, and so I guess, how about you start off by introducing the Lesbians and Gays support the Migrants group, their role in it and also what forms of activism it takes?

Sure, Lesbian and Gays Support the Migrants is an activist group that was founded in 2015. Um and is a queer activist group who, through fundraising and direct action, stand in solidarity with all migrants and refugees. It was a group that was very inspired by actually a previous group that was founded in the 1980s called Lesbian and Gays Support the Miners. Um and I guess it builds on this kind of proud history of of queer solidarity in this case to kind of say no one can ever be illegal. I guess if you were to summarise to sort of political. Um, intentions of the political mission. That's very much the core at the centre of what LGSM is trying to advocate for that has taken many different forms of shapes since 2015. I mean, I only got involved myself I think it was 2018 that I started attending meetings. I mean as a volunteer group, so we all um, contribute our time according to the capacity and also according to sort of like the things that are needed in the group at any particular point. So there's moments where I've been incredibly involved and very present at every single meeting and have, you know, led on particular campaigns or projects and in other moments when you sort of like take a step back and sort of like let other people do things or or sort of take sort of like different roles that require less if you're tying depending on what you know that's how particularly volunteer activist groups operate. It's so dependent on the on the force that makes it possible and the ability for these people to do to do that work. Um, but LGSM over the years has done a lot. I mean, it's in. It's been a really incredible um group in terms of both, I guess, advocating for the rights of um migrant communities in the UK and refugees and asylum seekers, but then also organising direct actions and also fundraisers with the aim of inflicting real change in the livelihoods of migrant communities and at times, of course, that's it's very difficult to quantify because the issues are so large and the hostility is so present and has been for such a long time. But then of course even looking back at how at the time the LGSM form in 2015, you know the situation was already really bad then.

SL

EJ

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EJ

We are in 2023 in this situation and it is actually worse than it was. So if you think about I guess what does progress look like and what does change look like in the context of activist work well?

Obviously the situation has only gotten worse that doesn't mean that they're having mean things that have been done that have been really good. Um, for instance, LGSM did this was before my time and really amazing sort of actions to pressure airlines into cutting ties with the Home Office the Home Office had contracted commercial airlines to carry out deportations. Um so British Airways, Virgin Atlantic and lots of you know brands of you know corporates that we utilise to travel and that we kind of contribute to where profiteering essentially from the border industrial complex, so you know LGSM did a really amazing campaign where it sort of took British Airways up on it's sort of like diversity statements and its diversity policy. You know it around this time, they were doing a lot of marketing around how British Airways were, so like queer friendly and how they were kind of sponsoring pride, I think. And they were doing all of these things to kind of like, really queer-wash, I guess some of their image.

And LGSM targeted them from that angle is like like how can you be in solidarity with LGBTQI+ people if you're like, deporting migrants, not only because there will obviously be reasons that people migrate seeking asylum due to you know, them being LGBTQIA+ obviously that was one angle that we were kind of like pointing out to. It's like, you know, you're supporting queer people, but then you might be deporting a queer person in some way that there may be you know, they are threatened and their livelihood might be threatened, but then because LGSM is very importantly not just about queer migrants, it's it's very, very specifically about all migrant communities and not creating a distinction between, you know, the support of LGBTQ communities or other communities, cause that was another reason why we formed as a group. Um at the time in a similar way to how this story about British Airways was happening. The government was really trying to push for a sort of like homo nationalist agenda, which basically was trying to pit LGBTQ+ communities against migrant communities as an argument against these kind of people seeking asylum or refugee in the UK. You know, there's sort of idea of, like, why would you want to have these communities come here? And then when they threaten these so-called liberal values that you're so, you know, hardly fought for um, and you know, coming from the Conservative government, who has, you know, refused every single piece of policy ever to make the lives of LGBTQI+ people. That statement was super rich but also besides that um, there was a very strong desire to kind of counter this. This presumed hostility that the government was assuming of migrant communities towards queer communities, when in fact what we saw and what we experience is actually a lot of solidarity amongst these communities.

Um, so with British Airways what happened was that we did this campaigns very public campaigns sort of shaming British Airways for their association with the Home Office and for the deportations. And this included sort of like performative events.² It included like a social media campaign. It included ad hacks and the tube. It also included this kind of like 100 letters campaign.

Um, which, you know, involved asking kind of like 100 personalities like actors or kind of people that were kind of more well known to to write a letter to British Airways, kind of like also asking them to please um, you know, change the contract and eventually they did. They dropped their contract with the Home Office, which is an incredible sort of achievement out of um, an activist campaign and then LGSM did the same with Virgin Atlantic. And then it did it again for two weeks and then more recently the Home Office was kind of like arranging these contracts of much smaller airlines.

You know, airlines that don't have the kind of like commercial profile that like British Airways approaching Atlantic too so the actions that we've attempted to do with those kind of airlines have been quite different because it isn't so much about sort of like diminishing their image as it is about maybe disrupting their work or disrupting their ability to carry out these deportations by inundating their life phone lines or by trying to sort of like physically stop these kind of deportations, which obviously has become more and more difficult because also the law has changed and now the police, crime and sentencing bill, which was brought forward by um, well originally Priti Patel and now Suella Braverman and um criminalises um a lot of this activity in a way that you know, they didn't even five, six seven years ago. So what is possible at the level of activist action?

Um, without risking possible um, criminalization has changed a lot, and that has also in some ways hasn't necessarily changed what we see as being our work or what needs to be done but it does change who's able to do that work, who has the privilege to put themselves in a position where they could commit a crime and not face consequences other than those of perhaps being incarcerated or being or being given a fine or having to go through court system, which of course are huge consequences. But to somebody who has legal status in the UK or is a citizen those consequences are largely different to somebody who has even no papers or who's migrants status is so dependent on also the on the state. So um one other activity that's really important to LGSM as well is fundraising is actually and that's one thing that I've been mostly active on. Um, as a curator who has a lot of experience in fundraising trying to bring these kind of skills in a different context.

Um, so LGSM has always fundraised money originally before the pandemic, they were kind of more traditional ways of fundraising like they were bucket shakes. So we'd go to the streets of Soho mostly and ask queer and other people, but mostly like queers with money hopefully to give their coin for different migrant courses. But obviously with the pandemic and not being able to be outside out to meet with people, we started to think creatively about what would um fundraising looked like in the context of the different needs that we're coming forward through the pandemic from migrant communities, which were huge. So we began with sort of like go fund me campaigns, which obviously is the main thing that you can do quite basic. But then we also trialled, for instance, we did a really successful limited editions print fundraiser where we asked 15 artists to donate works, which we then produce prints from. And we sold hundreds and hundreds of prints well across the UK and Europe, and we actually made yeah, like a tonne of money for this organisation in Greece providing emergency shelter for for migrants so, he work of elitism is always borrow. It always change um, I've been less involved in the last few months after being really involved, particularly in the context of the biennial project that I was doing. Um, but it's it's always in a way, adapting to the different needs that exist and how to best serve the interests of migrant communities, asylum seekers and refugees, which by necessity requires this kind of flexibility, adaptability and also responsiveness to kind of the the changing, both political and social context, but also the very material context of people's just needs.

Yeah. So I guess following up on what you just said about, you know, current hostile policies of oppressions against, you know, marginalised groups like migrants and the trans community. What do you see to be the, I don't know, the next important advancement in terms of policies, in terms of social change for, you know, real change, real improvement to happen for these, the living conditions of these marginalised groups.

EJ

SL



Oh my God, that's a huge question. Not sure.

I mean, I think before, we couldn't even think about um these kind of like more progressive policies in my opinion, what needs to happen first is the abolishment of the hostile policies, the abolishment of legislation that has now officially for more than a decade because the hostile environment policy for instance, came into legislation in 2012, even though elements of it existed. You know much earlier than that.

Um, you know, these are things that are having tangible effects on people's lives. You know, the hostile environment policy prevents refugees and asylum seekers from accessing public services, which includes, you know, housing or benefits or, you know, like health services. It prevents them from working. It prevents them from entering formal education.

Um, it basically limits what these people are able to do to an extent that it makes their living in this country incredibly hostile, incredibly impossible. So of course, like we could think about, what would the counter to that be? What would like a welcoming, generous um, life affirming, supportive policy look like uh, and there's a lot of things that can be thought about in that context, starting from just like, you know, basic humanity of providing housing and shelter, providing, you know, public services, providing psychological, emotional, physical support and whatever way is needed. And there are many ways in which grassroots and, you know, charity organisations are providing these kind of services and support to migrant communities when the state isn't. Um, but what I would say is really need it right now I'm what I feel a lot of activist groups and grassroots organisations are asking for is the abolishment of these policies that, you know, actively seek to create hostility and actively seek to make life incredibly hard. So namely the hostile environment, currency, but also more recently, the police crime in sentencing Bill. The nationality and borders bill, you know the nationality and Borders Bill basically like anybody who wasn't like born even if you're born in the UK if you're parents are not we're not, you know historically British we don't have a British you know I guess naturalisation in the way that they call it. Um you, even if you're British and you have a British passport, you risk losing your passport. You could your your nationality, could be stripped from you if you, for instance, commit a crime, or if you if you do things at the Home Office, deems as being kind of worthy of losing your nationality and white British person who had you know who commits a crime does not have a risk of losing their British, you know, nationality. So there is obviously a racist, a xenophobic set of ideals that are pushing forward these these policies and these agendas um to to again make the UK an incredibly hostile plays for anybody who is in, you know, white British. Um, so before we can even imagine you know, utopian thinking is incredibly generative and important and urgent for us to be able to do the work that is needed now, right? Cause if we can't imagine of something being, you know, completely better than what it is now. If we can't imagine the things that we desire that we need, that we want, then how can we even survive the context of fighting now for things that seem completely impossible but the first step is really the abolishment of these things that exist and that are making the lives of many marginalised communities, incredibly impossible and of course, part of that abolition is position which many people would call a utopian position. I would call like a position of action now, like the call for an abolishment of prisons. The call for one of abolishment to the police, to criminalization, to the incarceration of migraines like all of these things are very much things that I'm calling for now, even if they're perhaps to some extent things that hopefully will happen in the future. Um, so yeah, just tangible things in the process of making that a reality is the the only way that we can actually sort of like perhaps put our weight behind it. Um, but it's very important that we we vocalise and that we sort of like very much call for the for these things to happen.

Um, even if people would kind of say this is utopian thinking of this is impossible. And was also very directly calling on you know, for instance, case time are the leader of the Labour Party, who will very likely become Prime Minister in the next general election. When they are asked about some of these policies, like the crime and police sentencing bill, or the nationality and borders bill that they and then not interested in reversing that policy when they come into power. Now that to me is a huge problem. Like if you have like a labour supposedly progressive government who in theory has opposed these legislations before they've come into power to some extent because would probably argue in favour of some of the police powers because he while he doesn't believe in disruption in relationship to protests and he doesn't want, you know, he thinks it's too perhaps um controversial in regards to like I guess a general population when you think about for instance all of the um climate protests that happen, um, and the disruptions that they tried to kind of effect as a means of, like creating a message and creating a movement. I see him down as very much against it because he thinks that there is little public support, the public interest in these actions happening. You know, of course they are disrupting. Of course people might get angry and they might and um, they might express um, you know. Even an unease or desire for these things not to happen, which is completely understandable, but the the whole purpose of protest and disruption is to create these spaces and moments of friction. These situations in which you are forced to stop you are forced to not be able to go around your day. You're forced to talk about it and to perhaps be angry or upset.

But what I what we talked about in activist circles is how do we shift the anger from those who are protesting to to anger at the situations of the things that were protesting against. And it's really sad to see, you know, like the Labour Party and someone they basically, like, you know, essentially embracing conservative policy and not only embracing it, but sort of actively seeking to implement it when they come into power. So it's quite a dyer moment I'd say in the context of UK politics, where there really isn't a radical left presence anymore within the political landscape at Parliament at least you know, of course there are radical left movements and left movements active within politics, both in and out of politics with capital P uh, but at a sort of like mainstream context. Even with a Labour government soon coming into power, we are going to be phased with loads of challenges at the level of how to really ask for I wouldn't even call them radical. They're not radical, you know, to ask what the rights of migrants to ask for the rights of, you know, queer communities, trans communities, those things are not radical. They're basic human rights. So I think that's another important thing is not necessarily to to shift the conversation around these things being in any way sort of like a too big of an ask. They're not too big of an ask. They're just. People's livelihoods and those things should never be negotiable or on the table, so it's gonna be interesting to see how how we we shift the narrative when there is a government that no longer you know, it's automatically perceived as being hostile or conservative, but that will defacto also in many ways be that. Um so yeah.



SL

EJ

So kind of responding to your point about utopian thinking and also connecting it to your curatorial and creative practise. I remember you were talked about love and friendship community building as kind of this methodology of solidarity, of creating a space or safe space or home making using different ways like Internet correspondences and kind of these hostings of gatherings. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about it and how you see that as a way to empower queer solidarity.

Hmm. Yeah, for quite a while I guess. I've been thinking about my practise um as hosting as a queer and curatorial framework um and what I mean by that is that it has always essentially been like the creating of situations of environments of exhibitions of relations of affects that have at the root of them a desire to build and nurture community um. Hosting was interesting to me because there's kind of like a duality of meaning attached to it, or there's kind of like a lot of sort of like history attached to the practise of hosting both. Of course, if you think about it in a transcultural transnational way in relationships good to practise as of half of hospitality and a welcoming and home making, but then also in a queer context, I was interested in on the one hand, it's association to like practises of cruising or practises of, I guess seeking sexual pleasure with others and these kind of like very fleeting but still very intimate one off ways. And what types of speciality and what types of like world building and community practice happened in those experiences and those moments. whether those things happen in park, whether they happen in a cinema or whether they happen in a spa and what were the sort of like the codes, the rules, the, the techniques of hosting that emerged from those histories of seeking sexual pleasure, which can go beyond sexual pleasure and can go into questions of friendship, questions of solidarity, questions of interdependence um that I was very kind of interested in tapping into and then expanding into a much broader set of sort of of questions. Um, But then also hosting in relationship to this question of home making and and how it relates to queer communities very specifically, but also your migrant communities, feminist communities, which is this idea that for different reasons, um, a lot of our communities have had to find ways of making homes um oftentimes outside of our so-called original home right, either our family home, or our countries, even and sometimes this has been by choice, sometimes it's been by necessity.

Um and I was interesting in what happens in that act of of home making and and the various histories and legacies of home making that have been brought forward by these communities and which build very centrally from practises of friendship, of love, of collaboration, have chosen family right in ways that force a different way of building um, our understandings of belonging, our understandings of self, our understandings of what constitutes like king, or what constitutes like political affinity versus like biological affinity. So all of these things were kind of like very, very central throughout my life and my thinking and have, I guess, become an essential part of my work both and very importantly, not just, I guess thematically or conceptually but also very specifically as a methodology like what does it mean to host as a very basic premise, but then also what does it mean to work through friendship, love, and collaboration as methods of queer life and practise as things that we do, and as things that we enact to at times, um, survive the context of working in institutional resist. Certain things that happen in institutions, or simply to make projects and work that would not be possible otherwise without those tools or those techniques and those kind of proximities and affects and adjacencies. So most recently this, it has always had a political desire and undertone. Um, you know, I've done projects that have dealt with um, the risks faced by LGBTQI communities in certain contexts where their rights are being sort of put into question or even rights of woman and their right, you know, to choose in relationship to like things like abortion, um and you know the rights of one's own body, and most recently also in support of like trans communities and a lot of the things that are happening and in the UK and also other parts of the world, sadly, where again the autonomy over one's own body and one's own being is completely sort of put to threat.

Um, but most recently I guess in the context of the of the Brent biennial. I was really interested in thinking about um, how to bring like these questions, which are essentially both curatorial questions, but then also organising questions into a project. How could an exhibition or in this case, a biennial serve um, both a group of artists and a group of audiences, but then also a particular course or particular movement. So the Brent Biennial, which is titled in the House of My Love, very directly sought to essentially almost become a bit of an advocacy campaign of sorts, while still kind of also being a contemporary art exhibition with commissioning and support of artisan communities in various different ways where we took as a point of departure this the act of home making, as a history and as a present technique of for systems and survival to experiences of hostile environments, and when we, when we were thinking about hostile environments, of course we were very much referencing the hostile environment policy and kind of reflecting on what it has meant to have lived with that policy for 10 years, particularly in a place like Brent, you know which is the third most diverse Borough in London and also the local authority with most first generation migrants in the country but also what are the kind of intersecting experiences with the hostile environment? You know, like you know how the hostility that experienced through racism, through homophobia, through xenophobia, through climate catastrophe, political austerity, ableism, and inviting artists and communities to produce work and to be in dialogue and conversation about the ways in which we have both historically and present found ways to combat and to fight these hostilities through gestures of making home and again here, home wasn't just like a physical brick and mortar, sort of like house, of course, that was part of it too, but it was about these kind of immaterial, effective, political, social ways in which we have in various ways made home. In ways that also really go against these sort of like patriarchal family oriented or biological oriented ways of defining home or family.

Um, and it was really amazing about, I guess this process which for me, you know, for a long time I've been, you know, since 2018 I have been directly involved with LGSM and prior to that with other groups or other movements so my organising work was happening, but very separately to the art world. You know, very separately to my curatorial practise. Um undoubtedly influenced my curatorial practise a lot and came into it in some way or another, but but the art world has always been a bit nervous about, you know, I think the artwork has always interested in talking about these things and in theory, sort of bringing these questions into an exhibition or public programme, but very rarely will we sort of think about action or very rarely will we think about direct change through the things that we're doing and this exhibition in Brent, the Brent Biennial was the first time where I really clearly wanted to kind of think about this both the biennial as an infrastructure that can, you know, create this like opportunity for support of different communities in this context, not just migrant communities, but also thinking about the autistic community, right? And thinking about what are the hostilities that artists have faced in the context of Brent?

You know, at the level of practise, but also at the level of at the level of their livelihoods, and how could the biennial be an opportunity to serve them or the opportunity to kind of provide things that have not been possible previously or to young people, you know, like what kind of hostilities have young people face? What kind of things can we provide to to change that or to make that better and prove it. And then also with a series of community commissions were specifically also inviting groups of people who have been doing this work of countering hostility for a very long time and using the biennial as a means or as a way of not just celebrating the work and sort of like advocating for the things that they are doing, but also amplify it right and and provide resources and time and support um to engage with the context of working with an artist and it's kind of very open-ended way that might serve them on the work of the artist and also the courses in the communities that they say the serve and fight for. So I guess it's it's yeah, sorry I've gotten lots of different tangents but it takes it's taking many different forms over time. Basically it's what I wanted to say and yeah, I'm excited to see how that will evolve in the next wave that will happen.

SL

Hmm.

I'm so I have one more question before handing it over to Aishwarya, it's about archiving of Queer History as there is kind of this absence of the queer community and the queer history in official records or official archives, how would you suggest filling that gap? Or how would you suggest that the public can also get involved in documenting Queer History or the presence basically?

EJ

It's a tricky question because I actually would say that there are quite a lot of queer archives, but they're very specific, they're specifically located and they know they are not always representative of the full picture of queer life, which was happening in a particular time, right. Like, if you think about Bishopsgate, for instance, they have an incredible archive of queer history, um are very good and representative archive of lots of different communities, but one really important question that I always think about when thinking about queer archives is and actually it doesn't just apply to queer archives it applies to archive of any kind of marginalised community, is who has the privilege to be archived, who has the privilege to produce material that would be then archivable.

Um, who produced things that were refused at the time and therefore disappeared and therefore no longer exist. Um, I think Saidiya Hartman, for instance, um, her book *Wayward Lives*, particularly thinks about this in relationship to black life, it's like, how do we archive the things that we know have existed, the things that kind of lives and and histories of resistance and survival that we know where alive and kicking um, but that because of the nature of the of the challenges of the lives that they led, the things that the access to things that they had or the the ability for them to even be deemed as having existed, they have sort of been erased or forgotten or they could no or they cannot be found in the archive. So I guess a lot of the times I think I mean the idea talks about this in relation to imagination right, like how do we imagine? How do we invoke these kind of lives when there are no documents or whether when there are no photographs or whether or when these documents or these photographs of these histories or these stories are so kind of like minimal, like that they kind of provides just points of entry or like very sort of like subtle sort of like threads through which to begin to unearth these histories. Um there are ways. I mean, in the context of the Brent Biennial, for instance, we work with this artist called Ed Webb-Ingall or who produced a Community Commission in collaboration with this LGBTQI+ youth group called Mosaic, which was founded in Brent in the 1990s, originally as a support group for men who have been diagnosed with HIV but then moved on to become a much larger group of, I guess affinities between different queer people and it and eventually became a youth group. It's now one of only two, you know, LGBTQI+ service providers for young people in London, which is insane considering how London is and how many queer youth there is in the city. Um, when we started working with Mosaic, one thing that they said to talk to us about and that became really, really important is that they they were very interested in their history. They were very interested in thinking about, you know, how they began as a group. The fact that they had originally been founded in Brent, but then because of austerity cuts and then losing funding, they had to move out of Brent and go to Camden and and sort of like, what does this look like? What does this mean for the group and how could they think about it sort of like in the future. So when Ed and I started thinking about this, one of the first things that we did, we went to visit the library in Brent's, the library at Wilson Green, which houses the archives for Brent, hoping to find information about Mosaic as a really important organisation that had been in the borough and had been born out of the borough and we didn't really find very much. I mean we found an image of the founder, Neil Young.

Um, but that was it. There was absolutely nothing else. So then we started looking more broadly. Like what are the kind of LGBTQI+ holdings of Brent, you know? And again, there was literally nothing there was there was a couple of newspaper clippings of teachers, who had been found out to be gay during Section 28, where it was not possible to talk actively about you know, being LGBTQIA+ with students. And there was a couple of scandals that would would would deemed as being worthy enough of being archived. And and there was quite a bit of things in relationship to an HIV and AIDS.

Uh, and I guess more like news reporting of different sort of things that were happening in Brent around um, both support of communities that were struggling with HIV and AIDS. But then also I guess just the the council's perspective on it as a health crisis. And all of this also was in a little small, tiny sort of like folder categorised under other with I think like really random categories. It was like LGBTQIA+ communities Hungarian communities and then something else. It was really like completely random, right? That somebody had just put this in a folder because, you know, there was only a couple of things they didn't had nothing to do with each other, but they just sort of like got pushed together. And I think this is something that happens very often, particularly in archives that are smaller or that are sort of more localised like, you know, in borough you know, for instance, in Hackney, you know, I'm not sure what the archives in Hackney look like, but I imagine that they probably will also be quite a few gaps to some extent because um, you know these stories at the time weren't necessarily deemed important enough. All these lives weren't necessarily, um, deemed worthy enough of being archived, and the archives that have a lot of content now it's because they've been doing a lot of work on repairing that sort of like, you know, lack of archive of our work, but also we're doing that for much longer and much earlier in the context of the work with Ed and Mosaic, um, what became the project eventually was two parts. On the one hand, it was building this archive that didn't exist for Mosaic, so meeting and talking to previous members of the group meeting with current members of Mosaic and imagining what this archive could look like and what kind of things we could include in it, we luckily connected with Neil Young, the founder who was super instrumental in also giving us documents and images and things that he had kept. But that didn't even exist in Mosaic's own archives. So now that exists, and it's at the library we we kind of it was, it was part of the project to gift that archive to the library at Willesden green. And then Ed also then produced a radio play. A radio play that was part fiction part sort of, documentary where he staged what he imagined to be the first few meetings of Mosaic um based on conversations that he had with members and with Neil and interjected this kind of like scripted element with um commentary from the current members of Mosaic, imagining what it would have been like to have gone to Mosaic in the 1990s versus going to Mosaic today as a young teen in 2023. So there's a way of thinking about the archive in this kind of like, not just creative and contemporary way, not because that's an artwork and it's a way of kind of like producing an interesting you know, an interesting audio work, but also a way of producing an archive and a record of an archive, right? Like an archive. This speculative that is sort of like imagined to some extent. But that is rooted in things that do to them not being archived would have perhaps considered not possible to be archival, but now there's kind of like something that allows you entry point into thinking about this history or thinking about this community or this group of people. So I think it's really important that in relationship to queer archives, so or archives of the kind of communities that have been most marginalised. That when there are gaps and if it's not possible to fill them to to really I think contemporary art artists, creative methods, activist methods, political methods are really important and kind of like thinking about what, what are the kind of things that we can do to not just sort of accept that that doesn't exist and that therefore um, because if something is deemed as not having existed, then how could what? How can one find one? Is perhaps looking for?



EU

Or how can one you know if somebody goes to the context of an archive looking for, you know, either personally or professionally, for history, and they don't find it, that can be a problem, but if they find something you know, like even like a creative story or sort of, you know, images, something that alludes to, you know, the experience of a time, the history of a time, I think it's a really beautiful and generative way of thinking about those about those gaps. And what we might do with Brent.

AK

You know, you did answer quite a lot of questions by speaking about your practise in the past and you know with what you're going to do ahead. But I think I kind of just like, you know, close it off.

What do you think? How would you address, like intersectionality and, you know, ensure that your activism work or your curatorial work includes and is more inclusive and representative of diverse communities? Especially when we do think of BIPOC queer communities maybe in context of Hackney or in the broader scale even.

EU

It's a really good question. I mean, intersectionality is like the 101 of doing activist work. Like, you cannot do activism and not understand that to be in solidarity means that obviously the way that you might be in solidarity with different groups might change, right?

Cause solidarity is an action. It's not theory. So that solidarity is doing.

So if you're gonna be doing obviously there's gonna be so much so much that you're gonna be able to do in the context of activists work, right? So you might choose a particular group or particular cause or particular situation to to focus your energy and your time on. But that doesn't mean that work cannot be an intersection with other communities. Right? Like when you for instance, in the context of LGSM, the focus is on migrant communities, but migrant communities already intersect with LGBTQI+ experience, it intersects with like the experience of Black and Brown lives, POC lives. It intersects with questions of class intersects with questions of gender like it's so such a multifaceted approach to thinking about support and care and solidarity in a way that also requires for conversations with other activist groups and for coalitions with other activist groups and solidarities with other activist groups and other movements, right? So like it's, you know, even if I'm if I can't be an activist group in another context, I will show up to other protests. You know, I will, I will put my body in the context of situations or environments um that I needed and important.

Intersectionality is really the the key. I mean, you cannot do political work without understanding the ways in which all of these struggles are interconnected. They're in and off each other, and there's no liberation until we all have liberation, you know that when we're not free until we're all free.

That is really the ultimate political project that I feel we should all be uh, sort of like standing behind irrespective of what communities we particularly focus on supporting or respective of what movements we become a part of. It was something else that you said that I was going to respond to. Ohh yes, diversity. I mean in relationship to in relationship to this question of of diversity and inclusion I mean one thing that I talk a lot about is we need to be quite um, particularly in the context of the arts, I think we need to be quite careful with these kind of push or these statements, you know, like for instance like art for everybody. You know, it's like what does art for everybody actually mean, like, who is this everybody like to whom are you speaking to, whom are you responding to or serving or wanting to begin a conversation with right? I think it's become a very easy way of, I guess, alluding to diversity or alluding to inclusion.

Whilst getting away with doing the actual work of diversity or inclusion, which is by definition, it it requires for really you know, for specificity it requires for like knowing a tone of voice it requires for knowing like a community of people. It requires for relationships particularly, right? Like if you're thinking about your work being partly about creating these moments of friendship or these moments of solidarity or even these moments of of love in a very broad sense, that takes work. It takes time. It takes generosity. Um, in a way that you really need to kind of like um, you really need to kind of pay attention to and you need to sort of like to decide in what way you're going to do that and with who.

So I always say that whatever project that I do or whatever and whatever context I work, of course everybody's welcomed. Of course everybody's invited. Of course there will be space here for for whoever wants to calm and engage and see and enjoy and be part of to do that. But there will also be a very particular and conscious effort of who is the community that we're speaking to, like who is the community that we're outreaching here, who are really the key people that we're having this conversation with and why? And how can we best serve them whilst still being incredibly open and generous to whoever else wants to be part of this conversation. Right? I think I spoke about this in relationship to queer correspondence for instance, previously where it was a project that was very much orientated towards you know, providing something, some sort of solace and connection and and relation to queer people in the context of a time where we had very little possibility of connection and intimacy with each other because of distance. But that wasn't by any means, only a project that was then available to queer people. It was it was available to anybody who in solidarity and I think that's something that's very queer in that sense, opens up this invitation for others to think about, you know, these questions and to think about um, these different life experiences, which were obviously coming, you know, in that moment we were all experiencing distance. We were always experiencing isolation and they were particularities to how certain communities experienced that distance and that isolation for different reasons, you know, and it was important to be specific about that. You know, it's important to recognise how is the pandemic, you know, not a great leveller like Rishi Sunak was referring to it like we're all the same under the pandemic, we all have the same experience of conditions. Well, that wasn't right. You know? You only have to look at the much higher rates of death affected, mostly POC communities, to understand that it was not the same for everybody. So I think it's really important that whenever we're speaking, whenever we're doing work that we truly understand, to whom are we doing this for? Who is this kind of primary audience, if you like.

Ohh, with whom we're we're creating this this kind of work while still again in, in the spirit of intersectionality and the spirit of solidarity and the spirit in the spirit of we're not free until we're all free. By extension, engages everybody else and and welcomes everybody else too.



HACKNEY FIELD RECORDINGS



1- Bishopsgate Archive

2- Post Office
(Streets Around Peer's Neighbourhood)



3- The Markets
(Ridley Road Market, Hackney Flea Market)



Bishopsgate Archive

A soft patter of rain beats on the window sill, drowned out by the quiet, steady rumbling of a fan in the Bishopsgate Institute's Special Collections and Archives room.

It was a hot, humid day at the beginning of hay fever season – please excuse our sniffling.

You will hear varying forces of sonic friction, as we untie the cotton strings, remove papers from their folders and spread them out on the wooden table in front of us: meeting minutes, posters for community gatherings, stapled inspection reports of housing estates, handwritten correspondences, newspaper cuttings, and many many more. Fingers rubbing on the turning pages, crackly and parched. *Rustle. Rustle.*

Stacks of documents scratch and hit the table from different angles. They brush against each other and slide across the table as we share our findings with one another. *Rustle.*

Our low murmurs and fragmented conversations from the archivists shape the space of self-registration, disturbed occasionally by notifications from a desktop computer nearby – ding – when a dialogue box pops up.

Light footsteps as soles gently scrape the tiled floor. The recorder hits the table with loud, blunt thudding echoes as we move it around, the sound of prying into past lives of those we did not know.

Outside the Bishopsgate Institute (2023), photo by Haoyue Chen



Streets Around Peer's Neighbourhood

Post Office

Post Office & Peer, (2023),
photo by Haoyue Chen



Just outside Peer, a high-pitched piano chime resounds from the Oxbridge International Summer School across the road. The lively tune sounds like something from an ice-cream van or theme park. The time is almost 5pm, and children have just been released from schools.

Cars whoosh by sporadically, among trudging footsteps on textured pavements and broken chatters in the Khadijah's Garden. The chime repeats itself twice, before abruptly stopping during its third iteration.

As we sit down on the bench outside St John the Baptist Church on Pitfield Street, you will hear children playing, shrieks of laughter piercing through busy, shuffling footsteps on the crunchy gravel. There are metal flapping sounds of a moving vehicle and the dirty, hoarse engine of motorcycles. The soundwaves of the siren contract and stretch as the moving ambulance passes by, distorting its pitch and your sense of distance.

Women's voices overlap with the children's shouting voices on the rotating roundabout. A dog cheerfully barks, and birds faintly coo beneath rushing wind.

The Markets

Ridley Road Market, Hackney Flea Market

It begins with a chaos of chatter, people brushing past each other and upbeat music, underlined by the clicking sound of bicycle wheels. You will hear vendors greeting customers – *'Hi, how are you?'* – and approaching conversations in another language.

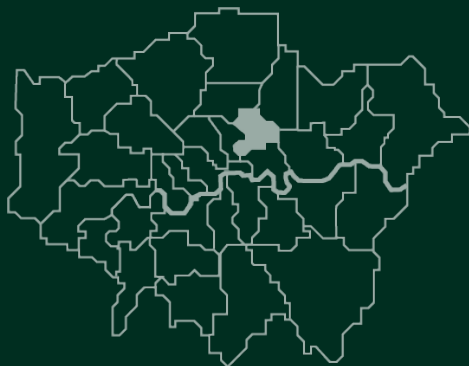
Interpolated into the Ridley Road Market's hustle and bustle is Donna Travis shouting, *'I'll come and talk to you! Bye, Dickson!'*

In the Hackney Flea Market, carnival music blasts from the shuddering diaphragms of loudspeakers – a cheery concoction of drums, trumpet, and a woman singing. Imagine moving in a crowd and overhearing snippets of different exchanges, some mumblings so close you could feel their breath on you.

The music gradually fades into a slow ballad. It sounds like a sunny Saturday morning.

Hackney Flea Market(2023),
photo by Birong Wang





Borough - Hackney

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to

Interviewees:

Veronica Deutsch, Ken Fero, Danny Hayward, Lizzie Homersham, Eliel Jones, Donna Travis

Organisations:

Peer, Bishopsgate Institute, Future Hackney, London Renters Union, Hackney Archive

A hand-drawn sketch of a landscape. In the foreground, there's a road or path leading towards a building with a chimney. The background features a hillside with various trees and a body of water. The drawing is done in a simple, sketchy style with black lines on a white background.

**we are a group
of people
composed of
who we are**