

**Andrea Phillips: How to work together**

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Over the last year Dr Andrea Phillips has been working on a research project for *How to work together* on the ways in which art's organisational structures shape its politics. In this text she introduces the themes and concerns that emerged from a series of interviews with Polly Staple (director, Chisenhale Gallery), Emily Pethick (director, The Showroom) and Joe Scotland (director, Studio Voltaire). The interviews follow below.

## 1

Whilst the *How to work together* collaboration between Chisenhale Gallery, The Showroom and Studio Voltaire is in the process of realising a series of artists' commissions that will be the most visible aspect of its partnership over the three years for which it is funded, its title suggests a more managerial or social set of questions that implicate, not simply what comes into appearance, but how and through which process it does so. My interest is in how the pragmatic details of the organisational structures of these arts institutions shape the daily life of work, its ethos and economics; and whether new forms of working together, both within these organisations and in their collaboration, emerge that might inform a larger debate about the politics of artistic and curatorial production. How do people employed in arts institutions of this scale work together and how have these processes changed over the past decade, a period in which Chisenhale, The Showroom and Studio Voltaire, like many of their peer institutions, have had to modify their practice significantly to suit the changing demands of the financial and cultural networks in which they are embedded?

The very real tension between how organisations would like to work, both internally and in collaboration with sister local and international organisations, and the way they must work in order to sustain themselves financially and promotionally, is an increasing concern in the not-for-profit arts sector. Organisations find themselves caught between radically different modes of managerial practice and must increasingly mobilise very different—and increasingly competitive—communities of interest to survive. This has an impact on the working lives of the people that shape and sustain the organisations. New skills must be developed, new support structures and financial constellations are sought, all of which must sit alongside any ongoing ethos that the institution, through its programme, wants to propose.

Over the past year I have interviewed the directors of the *How to work together* organisations and spent time working with them on the edits that appear here. What is immediately revealed is that in each case, the directors have experienced and had to manage a huge organisational change, largely due to shifts in the climate of cultural funding in the UK in which a significant move from nominally public to private funding has been imposed by successive governments on Arts Council England and other funding bodies. Indeed, the *How to work together* project is funded by Catalyst, a government initiative made up of investment from Arts Council England, Heritage Lottery Fund and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, that has been set up to support cultural institutions in the development of new sources of sponsorship and patronage; as well as develop new commissions, the organisations have worked together to raise, through the promise of their collaboration, an impressive amount of such income.<sup>1</sup> But it is not only shifting funding structures that these organisations have managed. They are also 'quietly ambitious' (to quote Joe Scotland of Studio Voltaire). This ambition is complex however,

1. 'Catalyst is a £100 million culture sector wide private giving investment scheme aimed at helping cultural organisations diversify their income streams and access more funding from private sources. The scheme is made up of investment from Arts Council England, Heritage Lottery Fund and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).'  
[www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/apply-funding/funding-programmes/catalyst-arts/](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/apply-funding/funding-programmes/catalyst-arts/)

for it is not necessarily ambition for growth in terms of scale or turnover (the aspects of ambition we might identify with a small-scale business), but in terms of autonomy and the ability to be free to produce and promote cultural wealth.

The interviews are significant in that they demonstrate not simply the skill, care and commitment of Polly Staple, Emily Pethick and Joe Scotland, but also the degree to which each organisation has had to negotiate similar questions surrounding organisational change, diversification and growth. These questions are largely political: they concern the ways in which the organisations understand their values to shift as they develop conversations and commitments that are shaped not simply by curatorial choice but also by economic facilitation. Whilst the organisations vary in terms of the types of artists they support and the ways in which artworks they commission are displayed and distributed, my conversations with the directors suggest that they share key values and experiences. These include:

— A commitment to equality both in the ways the organisations are run and the way audiences are encouraged to experience the exhibitions and events that they produce: this includes being committed to fair pay and attempting not to exploit worker's labour, providing structured training to develop people's careers. This is often difficult, as all organisations have a small and close-knit staff, all of whom are used to various forms of self-exploitation within an artistic culture that is in many ways premised upon inequality, financial mystification and non-transparent judgments of taste;

— A growing expertise in the negotiation of entrepreneurialism: whilst all three directors expressed concern with the way that entrepreneurialism has become dominant both within the arts and more generally, they have also become adept at diversifying the bottom line, have all implemented successful patronage schemes (at different stages of development) and are all currently dealing with the managerial transformations and staffing implications that such demands bring. Each is committed to translating entrepreneurialism to serve values that are socially and artistically, as well as financially, beneficial. Each understands that their roles as value generators are important, especially for audiences' experiences and artists' careers, but also precarious and potentially exclusive;

— A desire not to grow for growth's sake: as leaders of small-scale partially publicly funded galleries, the directors of these organisations all express an aspiration not to grow much larger. They all worry about doing too much instead of doing too little, and each wants more time to invest in in-depth research on and with artists that they feel market pressure does not allow. Each organisation wants to invest more time and effort in their current expertise and to assert their specialisms rather than become more generalist providers. Each organisation values its autonomy and independence, not only seeing these as precious commodities, but also as factors that are unique to the scale and history of their organisation and worth fighting for in this regard;

— Artistic methodologies: it seems significant that all three current directors of these organisations trained as artists, many of the staff are practicing artists, and many of the values they impart emanate from the way artists

approach planning and problem solving. On the one hand this does produce the forms of self-exploitation mentioned above; on the other it produces an open and questioning culture in which there is no fear of experimentation and risk, and where new and often challenging ideas are embraced without having to be diluted.

## 2

In the transformation of organisational structure each director has made—which have involved employing more people, particularly in the roles of communication, education and development—Pethick and Scotland talk about moving from ‘horizontal’ employment structures, and Staple discusses the importance of discussing decisions with all the team, but at the same time taking on the burden of decision-making herself. All directors discuss, on the one hand, the advantages of putting new people in place to allow for a sharing of workloads and, on the other hand, a worry that certain formulations of equality as well as autonomy get lost in this hierarchisation. In terms of management, my guess is that this is a fairly normal set of concerns that occurs as all small organisations grow, whatever the business is.

Chisenhale Gallery, The Showroom and Studio Voltaire work on a regular basis, not simply with patrons, but with the galleries and collectors that buy and sell work; relying on the support of these individuals and businesses and, at the same time, creating economic as well as social and cultural value for them and their client-network. All three need to develop and sustain this patronage. All three directors are clear that their patrons are not simply essential to the day-to-day running of their organisation, but are also interesting and interested people whose role is more than simply to donate resources to allow them to continue as is. But this creates tensions too. As described in *Value, Measure, Sustainability: Ideas Towards the Future of the Small-Scale Visual Arts Sector*, a research paper by Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt, commissioned by the advocacy group Common Practice (of which all three institutions are founding members) the recognition of the contribution of small-scale art galleries to chains and infrastructures of financial investment on the basis of deferred reputational value creation sits uneasily with many arts workers. There is both a desire for recognition in these terms (as those higher up the feeding chain are seen to gain increased public and private funding from the initial artistic and labour investments of the small-scale sector), and a concern that the recognition of such a chain might well already have led to its financialisation (indeed, this is visible not least in the number of art investment products on the market that seek to monetise art as an alternative asset class).

Polly Staple says: ‘what I’m figuring out at the moment is, as our activities and staff develop and the organisation grows, does the existing operational structure and culture of sharing still work? So there’s a tension, and it’s a very big transition.’ All express a tension between the workload and the desire for autonomy that is, circuitously, satisfied by the centrality of their position. All, in this sense, play a role in a cultural meritocracy in order to sustain and promote their visions (all of which are lauded by peers, artists and audiences). In each interview we discussed the difficulty of sharing labour within the art world, which focuses so heavily on the importance of autonomous production. Each organisation has an established cultural capital. Each has clear values.

For Staple, the centrality of her engagement with artists—and the idea of this as a model in which nothing is dismissed or manipulated for the public—is where

she asserts the importance of Chisenhale as an artistic platform. For Pethick, the Communal Knowledge programme, which is a specific and long term collaborative project with neighbourhood organisations, produces an alternative and more porous, flexible and non-market orientated value. She says: 'we're independent, but at the same time we obviously have various dependencies. We depend on various sources of funding, but also on our network and communities, and all the relationships that we have built around us, including those with our supporters. Collaboration is another value, and related to this is non-hierarchical, horizontal knowledge, and non-bureaucratic relationships.'

For Scotland, the relation between the values of entrepreneurialism and what he calls 'social good' are not necessarily so contradictory as to cancel each other out. He enjoys using entrepreneurial skills, but also asserts the subjectivity of Studio Voltaire's programme in which his politics are embedded: 'I want to contribute to culture and make a difference, however small it might be. I believe in the inherent power that culture plays in shaping our everyday lives and understanding our existence. I'm certainly left-leaning—however much Third Way/New Labour I might be with all the entrepreneurial/engaging in commercial aspects—I'm in it for social good. And importantly I identify as queer and feminist—this comes out in the programming, which again relates to wanting to add something to our culture—providing a platform for women and homosexuals.'

### 3

These artistic spaces are in transition. They are all adept at creating and managing support structures that enable artists to make unique and open works that do not have to respond to the directives of any funder or audience, though they also understand the limits and conditions of such autonomy. They each have an increasing amount of power both within the UK gallery sector and beyond it, within the aesthetic and financial structures of international exhibitions and markets. They each want to keep being able to ask questions and provide unresolved spaces in which images and objects made by artists are encountered by publics; and they are currently successful in this. The question of how long this model is sustainable looms, however. The cultural capital that Chisenhale Gallery, The Showroom and Studio Voltaire have is insecure. Not in the sense that it might disappear (though this is of course possible), but rather that the attention that it brings to the business of artistic organisation is accompanied by demands of budget inflation, marketisation, spatial and cultural expansion and aesthetic domination.

It is for this reason that we need to understand such organisations within a broader ecology of social and representational accountability; not in order to measure their profit, but in order to understand the role they have in promoting alternative ways of imaging and thinking in a culture that relies more and more heavily on processes of fiscal accountability. But in order to do this we need to understand them as producing, perhaps ironically, the very opposite values that they might seem to promote on initial analysis: artistic and creative autonomy, independence and freedom. In order to survive, and in order for the workers within them and with whom they collaborate to stop being exploited by the wider cultural funding system on a quotidian basis, these institutions need to be properly funded from the public purse. They need to be dependent on the public. They need to be able to be—really—not for profit.

The concept of social wealth, often set in opposition to fiscal or economic wealth, implies a set of values that might be differently generative to more gener-

ally recognised ideas of profit. Whilst the arts have been understood broadly to be part of this non-economically reductive value generation for at least 150 years in the UK, the terms of this value have largely been understood to be socially and psychologically private. The concepts of individual autonomy and freedom of speech that are capitalised and legitimised by this privatisation—consistently and historically at work in the art world—are the benchmark that we all now largely accept. But art also has a long tradition of asserting itself as that which is non-productive, communally recognised, intellectually intriguing and pleasurably produced. The three directors interviewed here all suggest values that are embedded in various versions of such a heritage. These values are those of autonomy and freedom of speech and creative production as a public right rather than as a privatising process. The question is, how can our arts institutions help us define and defend such public values when all around them are models that have capitulated to social and psychic privatisation?

**Over the next few months I will be working on a manifesto for arts institutions with input from Chisenhale Gallery, The Showroom and Studio Voltaire.**

## How to work together: Interview with Polly Staple

Chisenhale Gallery was established by artists and has occupied the former veneer factory building on Chisenhale Road in Tower Hamlets since the early 1980s. The gallery is a registered charity and has received regular Arts Council funding since 1986. Polly Staple was appointed director in 2008.

Chisenhale Gallery has a current annual budget of £485,000 and employs four full-time and four part-time members of staff. The gallery produces up to five solo exhibitions with artists each year; as well as *Interim*, a series of performance-based projects taking place in between exhibitions, and *21st Century*, featuring performances, screenings, talks and research-led projects by emerging artists, writers and theorists. Chisenhale Gallery's education programme includes work with local schools, higher education and the *Propeller* youth forum. *Offsite* includes commissions, collaborations, residencies and touring programmes all taking place outside the gallery.

[www.chisenhale.org.uk](http://www.chisenhale.org.uk)

### Andrea

Tell me how you got here, where you came from, what kind of institutions you've worked in before, and why you came to Chisenhale Gallery?

### Polly

I have an art history degree from Sussex University and a fine art degree from Goldsmiths. When I was studying at Goldsmiths in the early 1990s, I don't remember us talking about 'curating' or 'curators'. I think I'm one of the last of a generation that didn't 'train' as a curator. After college I worked at Cabinet Gallery, taught at London art colleges and was co-editor of *Untitled* magazine. I was awarded the first curatorial bursary at Cubitt in 2001.

The establishment of a curatorial bursary at Cubitt was an interesting moment in itself, because Cubitt had a great reputation as an artist run space; it was the point at which they first received Arts Council funding and they moved from their Caledonian Road premises to Angel Islington. The artists established this bursary for a curator to run an 18-month programme, which has now been going for over 10 years. You don't get very much money, but you get a great platform.

I was continuing to edit *Untitled*, and I had been writing for *frieze* magazine. In my programme at Cubitt, alongside commissioning new works with emerging artists, I was organising a lot of performances, talks and events. Matthew Slotover and Amanda Sharp, the directors of *Frieze*, approached me with their idea to start an international contemporary art fair in 2002, and told me how they wanted to place artists' commissions and a discursive programme at the heart of the fair. It was an interesting cultural moment for London (Tate Modern had opened in 2000, international travel had become more accessible, the economy was buoyant, the market was in rapid development...) and *Frieze Projects & Talks*, the programme we produced, was an interesting vehicle for thinking through that particular dynamic.

### Andrea

What was your role at *Frieze*?

### Polly

I was director of *Frieze Projects*, responsible for curating the programme of artists' commissions—including the Artists' Cinema in association with LUX and Ian White—and *Frieze Talks*. I was also editor-at-large on the magazine, which meant I participated in weekly editorial meetings, for example, but I wasn't engaged in the

nuts and bolts of production. I sat in the office alongside the magazine editors rather than with the art fair team, which seemed an important distinction at the time.

I worked on four editions of the fair, 2003-06. After leaving, I went on a series of writers and curators' residencies and began working on independent exhibition and research projects. In Spring 2008 I had just embarked on curating the exhibition *Dispersion* for the ICA, London, when the Chisenhale job came up. It seemed like a challenging and major project to take on.

I'd never run an organisation before, and I'd never looked after a building. I suddenly found myself in charge of a small business, but it was very exciting. There was a whole rebooting exercise to do, from redesigning the organisation's identity and developing a new artistic programme, to diversifying income streams, including initiating a benefactors' scheme.

I had a fantastic chair of the board of trustees, Camilla Nicholls. We worked together on strengthening the organisation, including appointing new board members, which was key. We appointed people with specialist skills such as legal, financial, and communications, alongside curators with experience of working in larger arts institutions, and also artists. We now have a very impressive board of 12 trustees, chaired by Alice Rawsthorn. The trustees have always been supportive and continue to provide good governance for the organisation—all voluntarily I should add—and be great mentors for me.

**Andrea**

Had you worked with a board before?

**Polly**

Cubitt had a board, so I gained some experience there.

**Andrea**

What state was Chisenhale in when you started working with it?

**Polly**

We are a registered charity and, as an Arts Council England 'Regularly Funded Organisation' (now 'National Portfolio Organisation'), Chisenhale Gallery receives funding from the Arts Council, which we apply for on a three-year cycle. We use the Arts Council funding to cover core costs such as rent, overheads and some staff salaries, but that's it. It represents approximately one third of our annual turnover. We do not receive any Arts Council funding to produce the artistic programme, including the education and *Offsite* programmes. So there was, and still is, a lot of fundraising to do.

We've subsequently built up healthy reserves and we plan production and fundraising often 18-months to two years in advance of the public outcome of major commissions. We fundraise from a range of sources including trusts and foundations, national agencies and, increasingly, individual donors.

**Andrea**

What was the staffing structure like at that point, compared to now?

**Polly**

There were three permanent members of staff: the director, a deputy director and a part-time exhibitions organiser. There was also an education organiser employed a day a week, and freelance technicians. The deputy director and the

director were full-time, but I found this structure very top heavy when there were so few members of staff.

There was some funding ring-fenced for developing the website and so, from my appointment in July until September 2008, we basically worked on this and a new identity. It was very intense, but because I had no in-depth knowledge as yet of the day-to-day working of the institution, it meant that I was able to work with our designer, Frith Kerr, in a very open way. If I had been occupied with other things, we probably wouldn't have been as adventurous with some of the decisions we took with the new identity.

The staff structure has changed considerably since I started. We are now a core staff of seven with several key freelance supporting positions and freelance technicians. We don't run internships anymore. We stopped that last year. Our interns had become key assistants and it was ethically inappropriate to not pay them properly. Training new interns every three months was also not productive for them or the organisation, so we established a one-year traineeship programme with posts in Exhibitions & Events and Offsite & Education. Trainees are paid the London Living Wage.

**Andrea**

Tell me a bit more about your management strategy.

**Polly**

I like working at Chisenhale because I have autonomy and am self-directed; within these conditions I can flourish. It is important to me that all the staff are also given a level of autonomy, so they are able to work on their own but also feel that they are able to contribute ideas about the programme and the organisation as a whole.

You learn a lot through things not working. For example, you may think you're delivering a message but actually you're not being clear. It's about learning to communicate very clearly why it's important to work together towards a shared vision of what the organisation should be, and to ensure that vision does not get diluted.

**Andrea**

The staffing has grown since you've been here. On the one level your autonomy to act in the way that you think is right for the organisation, based on your vision—which ranges from which artists are shown in the gallery, through to what the website looks like, and how it's communicating—is maintained. But as the organisation grows, what happens as lines of communication presumably get more formalised and as more people have ideas?

**Polly**

We have a small open plan office, which is important to the dynamic of how we work, because everyone can hear what everyone else is saying. The bonus of an open plan office is that information can be shared quickly, and that any issues can immediately be discussed.

My ideal situation as a director is that you're responsive, that you're the person who's thinking strategically, having the key meetings; and that you have a small team of people who are responsible for clear departments, and they are able to lead on managing those. And, they bring ideas on how to shape those departments and the overall vision.

I don't think that we should grow any bigger. We don't want to move building or produce more projects. But the quality of the projects, the strength of our research and networks, and the general reputation of the organisation have grown

quite rapidly over the past five years and need to be maintained and developed. What that then means, for example, is that the ambition of the artists we work with and the detail of our productions is more intense. Partnerships with other institutions to produce projects are productive in terms of development for artists, sharing resources and project reach, but involve a lot of time-consuming negotiation. Or for example, we have increased audiences—which is a great achievement and a core aim—but we need to increase staff-time managing that. Social media, for example, is a growth area requiring consistent daily attention.

**Andrea**

How much time do you really get to work with an artist that you've commissioned?

**Polly**

Well it depends. Our remit is to commission new work and therefore we spend a lot of time discussing ideas with artists and guiding the project from inception to realisation. But also, especially with the younger artists, we talk to them about their careers and discuss their practice more generally. There is also a lot of time spent setting up partnerships with other organisations and dealing with production logistics.

**Andrea**

But somebody else could do that?

**Polly**

There's always a natural point, for example with an exhibition commission, where day-to-day production management is handed over to our exhibitions organiser. But I continue to have direct conversations with the artist about how the work is developing, the ideas, and working with them on the installation.

**Andrea**

I think that's quite unusual.

**Polly**

Maybe it is. But I think it is the nature of small-scale organisations like Chisenhale, and the fact that we produce new work, which requires close relationships with the artists. I understand that the artists we work with appreciate that.

I am concerned that, in our current situation, fundraising much more intensely to keep things afloat can take you away from that deeper engagement with artists and the discourses that support their work. Sometimes there just isn't the time to research artists' work more generally, and then decision-making becomes much more intuitive. The fantasy is always that you would have more research time than you actually do.

**Andrea**

Which other organisations do you admire?

**Polly**

I spent a formative period of my working life with Matthew Slotover and Amanda Sharp at Frieze, and I admire what they've created and the way that they do things. I also have great respect for the *frieze* editorial team.

When I worked at Cabinet Gallery, I spent most of my time talking to Martin McGeown and reading books, and that was a great education in itself. Cabinet are the polar opposite of Frieze really. Cabinet are good at plotting their own idiosyncratic path in relation to popular consensus. They are good at refusal.

I admire what Marta Kuzma did with the Office for Contemporary Art in Oslo, because Marta and her colleagues achieved a programme that was discursive and formally unexpected, involving a diverse range of people. I went on a residency at OCA in between Frieze and Chisenhale and it was a very productive time for me.

I visited the Museum of Contemporary Art, Barcelona (MACBA) recently, and I was impressed with how a museum could feel exciting, accessible and intellectually precise. I was very interested in how MACBA presented their collection with a focus on criticality, diversity and the archive, distinct from a more traditional Anglo-American canonical museum model.

I'm always very interested in the German Kunstverein model. Perhaps that 19th century civic patronage is potentially a good model we could learn from in the UK. I think about that a lot with Chisenhale, given we are located in the heart of a residential community.

I'm also interested in a small institution in Malmö, Sweden, called Signal; they have a very eclectic programme, which they've been running for years now. There are also a few commercial galleries that I admire for their business nous and commitment to their artists, like Sadie Coles HQ, The Modern Institute or Gavin Brown's enterprise. Sometimes I have more affinity with commercial gallerists, in terms of their relationships with artists, than some publicly funded art institutions that often appear more focused on building relationships with audiences.

**Andrea**

If you could expand on that a bit? What else is it about the commercial gallery model?

**Polly**

There is a reason I choose to work for a public gallery, and that I don't work for or run a commercial gallery. It comes down to my own understanding of public art institutions and an interest in public space, and by extension my interest in the idea of 'public good', which Anna Minton explores in her *How to work together* Think tank piece. My first understanding of what art could do or be came from visiting public institutions and so I have an affinity with them. However, there is a lot of pressure to prioritise engaging new audiences, and this can take you away from the business of building meaningful relationships with art and artists, and committed audiences. The question is, do you start from the point of putting on a show to deliver to broad audiences, or do you start from the point of working with those you see as the most interesting and challenging artists?

**Andrea**

One could say that the commercial model doesn't need audiences; they need buyers. What freedoms do they have that you don't?

**Polly**

A specialism. Some commercial galleries are specialising in supporting a very particular kind of artist. And that commitment is similar to the way I argue about the work that we do at the Chisenhale: we're interested in the work we present and the artists we work with, so we want to show that work to as many people as pos-

sible. But the work is of a fairly specialist nature, purposefully exploring new forms, testing boundaries and questions of meaning. The form is not necessarily instantly recognisable, precisely because it's new and not yet established. Once it has been done many times, and by other people, then it becomes recognisable to a broader audience. I'm making a case for the fact that we do something that a general audience wouldn't necessarily always recognise as art, or certainly be comfortable with.

**Andrea**

It seems to me that you're saying that you produce value in its own right rather than having to dress it up, and that is what a commercial gallery does. Although of course a commercial gallery produces all sorts of other values—economic, investment-based etc.—but there seems to be a form of autonomy.

**Polly**

We trade as well on investment value and reputation, as has been articulated by the group of Common Practice arts organisations.<sup>1</sup> It is vitally important that this value is recognised as artists move from Chisenhale to other institutions.

**Andrea**

I'm just wondering about how one articulates that in terms of making the organisation something that doesn't need to go through hoops in order to answer to other agendas.

**Polly**

In London particularly, because there is strong activity in similar organisations at our level and because of certain advocacy achievements by Common Practice, there has been a real recognition that we operate in a very particular and valuable way, and that's important.

**Andrea**

And that is essentially about prioritising artistic production.

**Polly**

Yes. We have an open and direct discussion with artists about their work, intellectual engagement and how we bring it to audiences. I pay a lot of attention to what the voice of the institution is, and how it can speak clearly and intelligently to a diverse audience.

This ranges from an informed art world audience in London, the UK and internationally—including those who may not actually visit the space but know us through our online activity—everyone from artists to students, curators, writers, academics, gallerists, collectors etc. Their commitment and interest varies, but their point of engagement is usually very precise. And then we have a more general interest audience—and here I would include the *Guardian Guide* or *Time Out* reader—people who would like to find something interesting to see on a Saturday. We also have our local audience, the people who live on our street, for example, who are committed to their 'neighbourhood gallery'.

The question is, how much you may need to speak a particular language to different audiences; and how much that audience needs to know that what they're coming to see operates within a very particular language itself?

1. Common Practice, London, founded in 2009, is an advocacy group working for the recognition and fostering of the small-scale contemporary visual arts sector in London. The group aims to promote the value of the sector and its activities, act as a knowledge base and resource for members and affiliated organisations, and develop a dialogue with other visual art organisations on a local, national and international level. The group's founding members are Afterall, Chisenhale Gallery, Electra, Gasworks, LUX, Matt's Gallery, Mute Publishing, The Showroom, and Studio Voltaire – together representing a diverse range of activities including commissioning, production, publishing, research, exhibitions, residencies and artists' studios.

Common Practice has commissioned two research papers *Value, Measure, Sustainability: Ideas Towards the Future of the Small-Scale Visual Arts Sector*, by Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt in 2013 and *Size Matters: Notes towards a Better Understanding of the Value, Operation and Potential of Small Visual Arts*, by Sarah Thelwall in 2011. [www.commonpractice.org.uk](http://www.commonpractice.org.uk)

**Andrea**

What you're saying is that this language—let's describe it as a kind of aesthetic language of artistic production—has a very particular audience. And that is a value for you isn't it?

**Polly**

Well you do need, and want, to engage people and create debate around the work, but the challenge is, how do you do that in an interesting way that speaks directly to audiences and doesn't compromise the artists' vision and the project itself. For example, we invite specialists to give their perspectives on the projects and shows we produce to create a context and framework for debate around the artists' work.

We are a charity and we have an educational remit, but that educational remit is about informing people about contemporary art, and supporting new forms of contemporary art—supporting artists who may not be given opportunities elsewhere. We take great care to look at a broad representation of artists, of art forms and a diverse range of voices and nationalities, based on strong curatorial vision.

**Andrea**

You've spoken previously about Chisenhale being 'an exhibition hall, a production agency, a research centre and a community hub' could you expand on what you mean by being a community hub.

**Polly**

Chisenhale Gallery grew out of an artists' cooperative model. The building the gallery is in was initially taken over by a group of artists. They had had studios in Butler's Wharf, and came over here at the end of the 1970s but the building, which was an old veneer factory, was basically derelict and they fixed it up, created studios, an exhibition space and a dance studio. Originally the artists who had studios here ran the gallery and put on shows, sometimes of their own work, and that was the community. Of course there has been a large amount of regeneration in this area, but a lot of the artists still live on the streets near here and founder members are still core studio holders.

The question for the gallery is, how does it continue to best serve an ever-expanding community of local and international artists, produce excellent art and engage new audiences.

**Andrea**

So whether to be more of a public good generator across a broader spectrum of people, or to lead by excellent example?

**Polly**

I see the words *investment* and *talent development* used more and more frequently to describe our activities. This appeals to the Arts Council as much as to individual benefactors or a wider discussion about 'the creative economy'.

**Andrea**

Perhaps this concept of investment shifts the way we understand a public model of the gallery. Investment is complex and multidirectional. The gallery is now part of a network, which includes a number of different actors: there are commercial collectors, there are patrons, there are dealers, and everybody is working together to support the artists. But many people get left out.

## **Polly**

I suppose there is the concern that we must continue to make a programme that the people who support us are interested in, whether that's the Arts Council or individual patrons or our general audience. But those interests can be really surprising. There are patrons who like to support difficult work that receives little attention from the market or broad audiences. A lot of our supporters are very serious patrons who understand how Chisenhale fits into a bigger picture. When that art ecology, or that chain of understanding and value, works, it feels quite solid, it doesn't feel fragile. What feels fragile is that the same handful of people are now being asked by all the institutions to provide financial support. I think the real point of concern is, where are the new patrons and funders? And how do you get these people engaged in supporting your activities? And further, how do you educate a whole new group of people interested in contemporary art—beyond the traditional collector-patron axis—that supporting your local gallery is important? How do you retain an idea of public investment?

## How to work together: Interview with Emily Pethick

The Showroom occupied its original site in Bethnal Green for over twenty years before reopening in a new space on Penfold Street, close to Church Street Market and Edgware Road in 2009. Emily Pethick was appointed director of The Showroom in 2008.

Through the 1990s and 2000s, the gallery developed a strong focus on commissioning artists to make their first solo shows in London. Since Pethick's appointment, the programme has emphasised emerging practices and ideas, collaborative approaches, and projects situated in the public realm that build relationships with the gallery's new neighbourhood.

The Showroom has an annual budget of approximately £330,000 and employs five part-time staff members. The organisation produces between four and five exhibitions per year, as well as regular events and *Communal Knowledge*, a programme of collaborative projects with local and international artists.

[www.theshowroom.org](http://www.theshowroom.org)

### Andrea

Let's start with the organisational structure of The Showroom and how you have changed it since being appointed as Director. Why did you move from the East End of London to the Edgware Road area?

### Emily

I was appointed in 2008, and moved over from the Netherlands where I'd been Director of Casco for three years, but I'm originally from London. When I started, there had already been a decision made by The Showroom's board to move because the former building was very run down. The Showroom had been one of the first of the independent East End spaces, but in 2008 the area suddenly felt very saturated, and there was less of a strong need for us to be there, especially with two similar organisations close by (Matt's Gallery and Chisenhale Gallery) plus a whole range of commercial galleries and project spaces.

### Andrea

At the point when you joined The Showroom didn't have an agenda that revolved around the socio-political imperatives of its local community.

### Emily

In the former space there was no regular contact and no long-term relationships established with people living in the surrounding neighbourhood. While it was embedded within the art community, it felt a little disconnected from its other surroundings. The opportunity to relocate to Church Street came through a neighbourhood forum, so it was initiated through a desire from those living and working in the area to have a contemporary art space.

Some key local players at that meeting included Nicholas Logsdail (who put forward the idea of The Showroom relocating), Sir Terry Farrell (our landlord) and the Church Street Neighbourhood Management (CSNM), who convened the meeting.<sup>1</sup> Through these links, we very quickly gained access to knowledge about the Church Street neighbourhood and inroads into it. For example Farrells had compiled a detailed spatial analysis commissioned by CSNM, which was very useful in terms of understanding the area. We did all this groundwork very speculatively, as it took over a year to secure the actual lease.

1. A micro regeneration initiative by Paddington Development Trust.

Church Street is one of the most deprived wards in the country, yet is surrounded by some very wealthy areas, which it is fairly disconnected from because of some major transport routes: the Westway, the Regent's Canal, and train lines from Paddington and Marylebone. Farrells saw this fragmentation as part of the reason why the area is so economically stagnant.

The CSNM were very helpful in introducing us to the area, in particular their former community engagement officer, John MacDonald—known as the 'walker talker' of Church Street, who is now employed by City West Homes—was very active in helping us to build a local network. He continues to regularly bring to The Showroom people who he thinks productive relationships could be forged with, and he also takes artists and other visitors on walks around the neighbourhood to help them understand its makeup and meet key local organisations and players. It has been an incredible opportunity for people we are working with to have this level of insight into the locality.

**Andrea**

What was the staffing structure at this point?

**Emily**

When I began there were two full-time posts: director and administrator. Over the last five years this has developed in tandem with the organisation. We currently have a three-day gallery manager and four staff who work four days per week, and we have just initiated a new deputy director post, which began in January 2014.

**Andrea**

So on the one hand you have developed The Showroom as a network, and established quite deep relationships with local community groups over a short period of time. But on the other hand, you have invested equally deeply in a very clear managerial structure, with a board of directors, now with a development committee. How do those two things work together? Are they receptive to each other?

**Emily**

The structure of the organisation grew out of the necessity to make it sustainable, and for us to continue to deliver our core mission of producing artwork, as well as to become more locally relevant.

With the move to Penfold Street we doubled in scale, and the overheads rose around six times. This is because the previous space was part of Acme Studios with a subsidised non-commercial rent. The space was half the size of our current one and had low overheads, as there was no running water, a toilet shared with the studios, and no heating. The rent here is nearly four times as high, and we have to pay for increased electricity usage, business rates, heating, and water. To begin with we had to run this on the same level of Arts Council England funding as the former building, so had to grow our income very quickly. Just before we secured the lease the credit crisis took place, which made us extremely nervous about taking it on. However, we felt that this was what made sense in order to keep The Showroom alive and relevant; and more than just relevant to the art world.

We developed our staff structure by first fundraising for a staff member who could develop our local presence, and through this appointed a participatory projects coordinator to run a new programme specifically oriented towards local interaction, which we named Communal Knowledge. This began as a three-day

post and recently went up to four days, with a changed job title, collaborative projects curator, to give credit to the current post holder, Louise Shelley, and how she has developed the programme.

We also started to diversify The Showroom's income, taking us from around 60% dependency on Arts Council to around 40%. We enabled this through developing multiple sources of income, namely from the trusts and foundations supporting Communal Knowledge (such as Paul Hamlyn Foundation and John Lyon's Charity), a grant from the European Union, venue hire, and a Supporters Scheme. The latter two increasingly brought in additional income, but this necessitated having someone to manage these areas, thus a development role was created, which we later joined with communications. Increased income always has a knock on effect of increased labour, as it's usually attached to more activity.

Communal Knowledge (CK) is a separate programme that has a specific focus on the neighbourhood, but feeds into other areas of the gallery and events programme in different ways that enrich and strengthen it. Through it, we make three artist commissions each year, and we foreground one or two of these in the gallery programme, usually in the summer. We create feedback between the knowledge and relationships that are generated through CK and other areas of the programme, so it feeds through the organisation as a whole. Artists who are commissioned outside of the programme are often very interested in the area and, as I mentioned previously, we often send artists on a neighbourhood walk when they first visit, to get a sense of our local context.

We make around four or five exhibitions per year, and annually one out of these slots is dedicated to CK. This approach to cross-fertilising areas of the programme helps to make it more sustainable and opens up the range of potential funding sources. We are also part of a strong network of European institutions (such as Casco, Utrecht and Tensta Konsthall, Stockholm) through which we exchange knowledge, relationships and productions and have gained funding from the European Union's Culture programme and European Cultural Foundation.

### **Andrea**

You are currently changing the staffing structure of The Showroom.

### **Emily**

It became clear that we needed to bring in another staff member who could act on a more senior level in relation to some of the development work. A lot of what we're doing is enabled through building relationships with supporters and collaborators on many levels, and I'm the one who is responsible for a lot of these, so this, combined with the programming and my overall responsibility for managing the organisation, is a lot on one plate.

I have tried to run the organisations that I have directed as unhierarchically as possible. When you're working very closely together in a small team the work is very collaborative, and the staff members really support each other. There are also moments where you may have to step out and look at the bigger picture and do things in a strategic or objective way, sometimes with the involvement of the board. This does not happen often, but when it does it can have the effect of suddenly pulling out a hierarchy, which can create a sense of unease. So this can be the problem with working with this approach.

A director's position is located between the board and the staff, so one is often having to take account of the embedded perspective of the team, which I am a part of, and the more objective viewpoint of the board, who are not close the

day-to-day issues, but can be very helpful on a strategic level, thinking outside of the box. Sometimes it can be hard to negotiate between these; I've learned that it's best to act with as much transparency as possible.

### **Andrea**

How do you work with your board?

### **Emily**

There are a number of board members who have been serving for many years and are really at the heart of the organisation. The board is organised in groupings that specialise and consult in different areas, such as finance, communications, strategy, development etc., and also play a mentorship role. Over the last years we've strategically developed the board to bring in new members and to widen our skill-set; for example we brought in someone from a management consultancy background, and we've brought in more people with knowledge of development. In 2010 we formed a development committee, who have been incredibly active and have brought a lot of new support to the organisation, and have really helped us to develop on all fronts. Given how essential they had become, we brought two of the members onto the board.

When I was appointed, the mission for The Showroom was centered on commissioning new work from artists whose practice is ready to make the transition from grassroots innovation to a more established context. I initially proposed to the board that we slightly shifted this towards a focus on 'emerging practices and ideas,' rather than 'emerging artists,' so that we could broaden the remit and work with artists whose practices make sense within the programme, who might not necessarily be at the beginning of their careers. For example Ricardo Basbaum is not an *emerging* artist, but he is working with methods and ideas that make sense to pursue within our Communal Knowledge programme. Sometimes, particularly in the CK programme, it's about learning from an artist through working with them, and with these projects it can also be about bringing them into contact with younger artists. We rewrote our mission again recently, and we also wrote a list of values, which is not public, but is more for internal use.

### **Andrea**

What other organisations do you admire?

### **Emily**

We relate to the organisations in our various networks, such as Common Practice and Cluster,<sup>2</sup> as our closest peers. I'm also interested in some of the smaller more specialised organisations that work around specific research, such as Bulegoa z/b in Bilbao, which is an office run by four women (including a curator, critic and choreographer), the women's film distributor Cinenova, The Otolith Collective (the curatorial arm of The Otolith Group), 16 Beaver in New York, Sarai in Delhi, and Mayday Rooms, a new organisation that has been formed as a meeting place and supportive infrastructure for radical histories and communities, particularly those under threat. A number of these organisations have commitments to specific research and politics, and bring people together around these in quite a sustained and intensive way.

The Showroom is able to perform this role to a certain extent; there are ongoing themes that keep resurfacing in the programme and specific kinds of practices and ideas that we have a commitment towards. We have also realised a number

2. Cluster is a network of eight visual arts organisations that are each located in residential areas on the peripheries of major cities, all within Europe (with the exception of Holon). Each of these organisations are actively involved in their local contexts, fostering their embeddedness within their surroundings. The members of Cluster are: CAC Brétigny, Brétigny s/Orge, France; CA2M Centro Dos De Mayo, Madrid, Spain; Casco, office for art design and theory, Utrecht, The Netherlands; Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, Aubervilliers, France; Tensta Konsthall, Stockholm, Sweden; The Israeli Center for Digital Art, Holon, Israel; The Showroom, London, UK; Zavorod P.A.R.A.S.I.T.E., Ljubljana, Slovenia.

of very long term projects that enable a deeper level of engagement with specific research, which have been led by artists or specific researchers, or in collaboration with other groups or organisations, such as the work we did with Petra Bauer and Cinenova.

However, in comparison to some of these smaller, more specialised organisations, some of which are not publicly funded, the fact that we are to a larger extent publicly funded means we have a mandate to serve a broader public. This is something I like, as it means you have to open the work up to different constituencies. This often requires working on different levels and finding ways to vary the intensity and pitch of the programme. For example some of our work is more suitable to smaller, more intensive and specialised groups, which is useful for forming new thinking and ideas; and then we find the right moments to broaden this out to a wider public. Or vice versa, some projects start very open and then we build in moments to reflect upon them in smaller groups, and then open out again.

When we worked with Cinenova, I became aware of how they have a very self-reflexive way of engraining politics within their work, particularly in terms of what it means to be a women-only organisation, to serve a community of filmmakers, and an awareness of their limitations, such as in basing their organisation on voluntary work. Often organisations have a fortress-like nature where they hide their precarity, so I liked the way in which, when it came to our exhibition, Cinenova wore its vulnerabilities on the surface, opening up problems and socialising them, which became a role of the exhibition.

Mayday Rooms are also engraining their politics within their organisational work by structuring their organisation with a hierarchy that is as flat as possible; for example everyone is paid on the same hourly rate. I am curious about how they will manage this without compromising it, whilst working on a limited budget.

Many of these organisations have a specific relevance, maybe even for a period of time, with people coming together over a particular kind of urgency or need. More broadly, there can be a tendency to sustain organisations beyond their lifespan, they can become tired and uninspired, and you start to forget the reason why they existed in the first place.

**Andrea**

I noticed that The Showroom has a set of values embedded in the business plan.

**Emily**

It's something that we introduced when we were reworking the business plan. I felt like we needed to look more closely at what we're doing in the programme and across the organisation more broadly and draw the values out of that in order to make sure that they're embedded structurally. The values are both drawn from what we're doing, but at the same time, they're about where we want to be.

**Andrea**

Which is the most important?

**Emily**

Independence is first on the list, i.e. The Showroom being an independent space.

**Andrea**

What about sponsorship gained through the development committee?

### **Emily**

We're independent, but at the same time we obviously have various dependencies. We depend on various sources of funding, but also on our network and communities, and all the relationships that we have built around us, including those with our supporters. Collaboration is another value, and related to this is non-hierarchical, horizontal knowledge, and non-bureaucratic relationships. This goes back to us trying to find a way of working that is as non-hierarchical as possible, in terms of how we collaborate and relate to others, as well as internally.

Horizontality is also to do with the way in which we treat knowledge and relationships. What I really liked about Ricardo Basbaum's project *re-projecting (london)* was that every contribution to the project had equal status, be that the input from Chris Dercon, director of Tate Modern, in a discussion, or that from Justice for Domestic Workers union, Seymour Arts (a collective of homeless/ex-homeless artists), women from the Marylebone Project (a local women's refuge) and the various other artists involved. There was no prioritisation of one contribution or form of knowledge over another. The project brought these into contact without forcing a singular over-arching meaning or relation.<sup>3</sup> This is similar to how we think of all of the relationships that have been forged, both within our neighbourhood, as well as with artists, collaborators and funders; they are of equal importance and are what make our organisation what it is.

Non-bureaucratic is another value on the list, which is tough to achieve when constantly subjected to the demands of funders such as the European Union, but it is important to be conscious of this as a principle in the way that we organise our work and work with others.

### **Andrea**

Specifically on the point of pay, for instance, if you could find the structure whereby people were paid equally, would your board support you?

### **Emily**

It would be difficult to introduce that system now with an evolved staff structure, however, there is definitely recognition amongst the board that the staff are underpaid, and we often benchmark salaries against other similar organisations, which show the same. It's not an easy problem to solve in a time of dwindling resources. It's clear that the arts sector largely operates on an economy of enthusiasm and investedness, and that many organisations survive through having a workforce that are highly committed to what they're doing. The staff at The Showroom are quite careful about this, they note down their extra hours and take them off as TOIL, but it's difficult to really operate such a system in such a clear cut way when there is so much to do, especially in my position where the job does not have clear boundaries. At the end of the day, I'm invested in doing a good job, but as with many of my colleagues in similar positions who do more than they are paid for, this can sometimes border on self-exploitation.

### **Andrea**

So you get paid in cultural capital.

### **Emily**

If you do a good job it pays off in the end, not just in terms of financial reward, but also the flexibility works both ways. However, it's also sometimes like in the film *Showgirls*: "There's always someone younger and hungrier coming down the stairs after you"!

3. *re-projecting (london)*, was a new commission by Brazilian artist Ricardo Basbaum. During the month of July 2013 Basbaum was based at The Showroom for a programme of nine new projects organised in collaboration with Louise Shelley, who leads The Showroom's Communal Knowledge programme. Each project connected to one of nine locations that were determined through the application of an abstract shape onto the map of the Church Street area. See: [www.theshowroom.org/participation.html?id=1679,1681](http://www.theshowroom.org/participation.html?id=1679,1681)

**Andrea**

It's complex, because on the one hand, you're doing that for The Showroom, but on the other hand, The Showroom is you.

**Emily**

You're doing all this work for the organisation, but people can start to see the organisation as you, which is related to leading a more authored programme, and developing a distinct organisational position, as oppose to the way in which larger institutions often have more neutral institutional faces. I get the feeling that in the larger institutions people prefer the latter approach, however, the museums that I look up to all have charismatic leaders, such as Reina Sofia and van Abbemuseum, where there is a clear institutional position that is authored.

I think that's an interesting part of looking at the histories of organisations, such as The Showroom. Each director has brought something distinctive that builds upon what the last one has done. I like the way that Binna Choi has approached this at Casco; she often emphasises the work of the former directors, Lisette Smits and I, as embedded within an organisational trajectory, as three waves of distinctive programming by female directors that have built on each other's work.

With both The Showroom and Casco, and others in our Cluster network, such as Tensta Konsthall and CAC Brétigny, you can see the way that these spaces operate as organisational projects that are in development and being shaped by their directors and staff; but also in very collaborative ways, such as through artists projects and through the involvement of specific communities and groups.<sup>5</sup> That's why it is interesting to think about organisational politics and to have you doing this research, because the programme, the people and the organisation are not separate. We're trying to build an approach where the front end and the back end are integrated. It's difficult to separate the shape of the programme from the organisation that supports it.

**Andrea**

Do you see these values shared with those other organisations that you have mentioned in your network?

**Emily**

With the Cluster network we have discussed a number of values and ways of working that we share. Many of us are working with very long-term trajectories, producing work that is slow with a commitment to following a process and seeing it through, which could be an artist's process, or ongoing research. Many of us are working fairly intuitively in terms of timescales, looking for where the potential lies, and seeing where that takes you. We often build relationships and dialogues with artists that can continue beyond the timeframe of an exhibition or particular project, and artists also connect with one another through the spaces. So in this sense, a community starts to build around the spaces, particularly amongst the artists themselves. There's a receptiveness to change, which is about listening, following, observing, and then figuring out where to go next, and you can see that very much in the work we do with the neighbourhood.

One of the differences in how we work as organisations, in comparison to more traditional institutional approaches, is that there's more of a long-term commitment towards and investment in certain kinds of practices, ideas and relationships, rather than just bringing things in, showing them and moving on.

**Andrea**

So these are not product-oriented values.

**Emily**

I think one of the challenges with this way of working is that it's sometimes difficult to see what we do. It's very open-ended, sometimes there's no end product or point of resolution.

**Andrea**

How do you negotiate that?

**Emily**

We have managed to build a strong following for the programme and a fairly clear understanding of what we do. The programme is very ideas-driven and often takes a critical approach, but we always try to make this accessible on many levels. The work can have politics, intellectual ideas and theories embedded within it, but our approach often combines forms of action and critical thinking, with a kind of playfulness, friendliness and warmth. For example, we often involve diverse kinds of collaboration in projects to really open up the scope of the work.

**Andrea**

How do you see your role at The Showroom?

**Emily**

I'm quite conscious that what I do more broadly is a form of organisation-building. As I mentioned before, one could see the organisation as a kind of project, in the sense that it is continually in development and in process. It is an enabler. We really try and allow artists *time*, for example, some of the projects have had two or three-year lead-ins. This is something that has remained a core focus of The Showroom since the early days, the principle of giving time and space to artists. This is difficult to sustain, and sometimes you feel like a buffer zone, absorbing a lot of pressures to protect this free space. However, we rarely have to compromise projects, and certainly never in relation to content.

**Andrea**

Can you say more about the buffer zone? You're facing the funders in one way and at the same time you're protecting artists, collaborators, your curatorial or ideological ethos. Is there sometimes misunderstanding between the two sides of the operation?

**Emily**

Again it's about communication. I sometimes feel like I'm constantly switching registers and moving between different stakeholders; it's a multitasking role, which I think many people in my position are doing. There are also moments when I've been awash with fundraising and not had any chance to look at what's going on in the actual space.

**Andrea**

Another of your values is running a feminist organisation.

**Emily**

Yes, I do relate what we do to a feminist way of working. Not only do we programme a lot of women artists, work with a number of women's groups and actively raise women's issues through the programme but, on a more philosophical level we embody feminist values—and this relates to other values that I mentioned previously such as trying to work in as open a way as possible without strong divisions or hierarchies, through horizontality and collaborative work, blurring authorship, challenging stable structures and categories of knowledge and standardised norms and values.

**Andrea**

What about your audience?

**Emily**

When we moved, it took a while to reestablish our audience, but it is continually growing. In particular we get a strong turnout for events, which is where you get to know and find a dynamic with the audience. When you're running a space it's important to have a pulse running through it, so we're not passively sitting there waiting for people to come, but that there's an active relationship. We tend to attract an audience of people who want to engage, who have come because they want to be involved, and we often end up furthering relationships with regular audience members who identify with the programme and begin to propose other projects or events, which we are sometimes able to take up. In this sense some visitors become part of an active community around the space and feel like they have a stake in it. Even if there are only a few people having a discussion, it's being recorded and something is being produced. No one seems to measure the quality of an audience, in terms of depth of engagement, just the quantity.

**Andrea**

Another of your values is 'being of relevance'.

**Emily**

The term 'relevance' came out of a discussion between the staff and the board on The Showroom's distinctive qualities, and it relates to what I just described, in the sense of the organisation having a pulse and people feeding into that. Often you have to go back to the question of what is needed to make sure you are serving a clear purpose. There's a danger that spaces lose their relevance, and begin sustaining themselves just because they are there and have the funding and are just churning out culture without questioning it.

**Andrea**

Do you feel that The Showroom has autonomy?

**Emily**

We do in the sense that we are not answerable to any one singular authority or source of funding. When working with a small team it's important to get their input and make decisions together. The same with the board, they're often a good, objective soundboard for things, and bring different perspectives. Our work is highly collaborative, most of our work is realised through partnerships, which reduces autonomy, however, this also makes what we do more interesting, bringing in outside knowledge and ideas, and ways of doing things. The negotiations that

these collaborations often entail often work to challenge one's thinking and ways of doing things.

**Andrea**

I admire such a collaborative position in the context of so much cultural competition.

**Emily**

Well we still have to compete, particularly over dwindling pots of funding, which entails working in a very strategic way at times. Autonomy in terms of financial independence is not as big an issue to us as it used to be as we've been careful to diversify our funding—including from trusts and foundations, project funding, hires, private supporters, and European Union funding. This has put us in a good position in that we're not overly reliant on one source, besides our Arts Council England funding. If one of those sources goes, we'd still be in trouble and would have to find other sources to replace it, so we need to keep them all buoyant. However, we've created a situation where we don't currently have to make a lot of compromises in terms of the programme, and we've grown the structure to support this.

**Andrea**

What would you change, if you could?

**Emily**

On a structural level, I wouldn't change the scale or the location, but there is always the issue of funding and becoming more sustainable. If we could have a programme budget, it would relieve quite a lot of strains. It's not about having a huge budget, but I think something that allows you to have a basis to start projects. I felt that we had a lot more freedom at Casco in the Netherlands, where we had a much larger percentage of core funding from public sources. We could start projects there that were more speculative and risk-taking, that could then build momentum from having a starting block; so an artist's fee, and certain basic things were in place at the beginning of a project. Whereas at the moment here, we are usually just starting from nothing. This does affect what you can make happen; a core budget of around £5,000 per show would give us the confidence to do some more risky projects that I don't think we could do now.

With Ricardo Basbaum we talked a lot about the difference between the terms 'institution' and 'organisation'. I am interested in the tension between these terms. I always see The Showroom as an organisation, but sometimes I catch myself, or others, referring to it as an institution. An institution is something that's more rigid and hierarchical, a gatekeeper. It can be something to resist, and productive tensions can be produced through this. Ricardo linked organisation to 'organism', something that is more organic and can be shaped and molded, which I like as a term in the sense that it's living and changing.

## How to work together: Interview with Joe Scotland

Studio Voltaire opened in 1994 as a complex of 12 artists' studios. The studios moved in 1999 to their current location in Clapham, London, providing the organisation with increased studio provision and dedicated exhibition spaces. Studio Voltaire had worked on a cooperative basis where holders of studios participated in the administration of the organisation. Joe Scotland, who trained as an artist, has been working there since 2003 and was appointed Director in 2010.

Studio Voltaire has a current annual budget of £375,000. The organisation is going through staff changes over the next couple of months and will soon employ four full-time and two part-time staff. The gallery produces between five and six exhibitions per year as well as numerous events, performances, workshops and offsite projects. Since Autumn 2011 this has included *Not Our Class*, a programme of education and participatory projects that through research and practice take the work of Jo Spence as a starting point for investigating the legacy and potentials of her work in relation to contemporary culture and life.

[www.studiovoltaire.org](http://www.studiovoltaire.org)

### Andrea

Joe, you've worked in various capacities at Studio Voltaire for over ten years. Did this start from you being an artist with a studio here, and taking your turn at organising things?

### Joe

Yes, I used to be one of the studio artists here, and was first brought into the office doing half a day fundraising, and that was partly because they didn't have a dedicated fundraiser, but I'd actually had no previous experience of fundraising.

### Andrea

How did you learn?

### Joe

At the time I was also working at the Serpentine as a Gallery Assistant, and was starting to get interested in the structure of the organisation and the administration side of things. Working in an environment like the Serpentine Gallery, you quickly pick up certain management structures. Initially my idea was to try and emulate that structure, however inappropriate that was for Studio Voltaire.

### Andrea

At that time the Serpentine was beginning to be an ambitious organisation in terms of fundraising.

### Joe

Yes. I was there for a total of five years working part-time. It went through quite significant changes. Just seeing that kind of beast in action was...

### Andrea

So you were working at Serpentine then coming back here and doing your half-day a week fundraising and trying out some of the strategies you were learning at the Serpentine?

### Joe

Yes, I would look at their funding applications and pick up the language they

would use in applications. Basically just mimicking their approach.

**Andrea**

And did it work?

**Joe**

Yes, partly because we hadn't really done any fundraising here before, it was quite easy to make a difference; particularly at that time, as there was quite a lot of funding available from different sources.

**Andrea**

The money that was running the organisation up to that point would be the studio rents?

**Joe**

Yes, so there would just be studio rents. I think the overall turnover was around £50,000 a year, and the rent was around £10,000 at that point. Also they raised income from hiring out the gallery for exhibitions, it wasn't a curated programme as such.

**Andrea**

And what's your turnover now?

**Joe**

It averages around £375,000

**Andrea**

And what's your rent?

**Joe**

Our rent is now £55,000. As soon as you start fundraising or trying to do funding applications, then it automatically leads on to wider strategies. Just by looking at how you can function better and reach the aims of, for example, charitable status. In those early days it was very straightforward: how do we get an audience here? How do we support artists? Or how to even put on good exhibitions? Really quite basic—but important—things.

**Andrea**

You emerged as the person who was going to head up this cultural change?

**Joe**

There were a few people in the office who had started just before me and had similar ambitions for the space, so we were doing it together. Some people left and wanted to pursue their own work, and I wanted to drive it forward.

**Andrea**

You'd started paying yourselves?

**Joe**

Yes, we'd get a very basic salary, and that has slowly increased over the last few years.

**Andrea**

I'm aware that in many organisations of the scale of Studio Voltaire there's often a long history of people not paying themselves at all.

**Joe**

Yes, or it's like a full-time job, but you're only paid two days a week at a very low rate for a number of years.

**Andrea**

At what point did you begin to do things like formalise the structure?

**Joe**

In some ways it happened quite organically. As well as the office becoming more professionalised, the board of trustees was made external and we invited people with specialist skills (rather than it being made up of artists who had studios). But that happened over time, and for a long period there was a legacy from the system before: so we had a flat management structure up until about four years ago.

**Andrea**

What you mean by a 'flat management structure'?

**Joe**

On paper, it meant that everyone had equal say. Even though we had our own job descriptions, we didn't have a director. We had an arts programmer, fundraiser, education officer and an administrator: everyone was supposedly equal, but in reality that didn't really happen. I think naturally within organisations there are some hierarchies, for example, the programme is central because it's more public facing—there's a perceived hierarchy, whether that's right or wrong.

I'd also been here the longest, and stuff would fall to me, so in some ways I was acting like a director, but at the same time, there'd be issues around certain staff members, which were difficult for me to resolve, because we didn't have a clear hierarchy. Also in terms of organisational strategy, it's a lot easier to be responsive and take a longer term view if there is someone who is responsible for this.

At that point we weren't funded by the Arts Council—only occasional project funding. The majority of the board members were quite happy with the structure and had a rather romanticised idea of this artist-led space. There was a natural changeover with the board, and then it became quite evident that this change needed to happen. We've been a quietly ambitious organisation, and as we've grown and professionalised, it's become easier. There's not a massive hierarchical structure, but to have some level of responsibility for overall decision-making and strategy has been really important, and by having that we've been able to progress even further.

**Andrea**

When you say that you've always been a quietly ambitious organisation, how would you describe those ambitions?

**Joe**

I think we just get on with it. In a practical sense, we are able to offer support for artists: both financial support and development, or time to develop projects. And also in terms of impact: I want to get projects seen by a wide audience, but at the same time, we're not particularly audience focused.

**Andrea**

Would you describe yourself as artist focused, primarily?

**Joe**

Yes. Although, in a really selfish way, I think I'm the primary audience. It still comes from the organisation, but I am inviting all the artists I would like to see, and as a result I think it's quite an idiosyncratic programme. That doesn't appeal to everyone, but that's also its strength.

**Andrea**

So you're the first public, but you also said something about wanting to develop audiences. How does that fit, and what's your ambition in terms of audience development?

**Joe**

It's not an objective programme, for example it's not trying to give an overview of emerging practice by giving artists their first London show, or supporting a particular approach. It's more subjective than that. I want an *appropriate* audience—not super large—but enough to make some form of impact on both audience and artist.

**Andrea**

Is there a particular audience at Studio Voltaire?

**Joe**

Our immediate audience tends to be artists and art workers. Interestingly, we have more people visiting from Southwark than from Lambeth, which is the borough we're in. I think it's because our audience is quite specialised: we currently only have a small Clapham audience.

**Andrea**

How have the increased financial resources of Studio Voltaire changed the culture of what you do?

**Joe**

Massively. Practically, I have to spend the majority of my time fundraising and there is a pressure to always maintain—and increase—levels of income.

**Andrea**

What percentage of your time?

**Joe**

Around seventy percent. We were made a National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) in the last round of Arts Council grants, and get £35,000 per year, so that covers only about eight percent of our total income. The ideal situation would be that revenue funding covers your core costs and you fundraise mainly for programming etc. Currently, we have to fundraise for our entire programming costs as well as a significant amount for core costs.

**Andrea**

Do you resent giving that amount of your time over to fundraising? Do you want to be doing other things?

**Joe**

Sometimes, but I like the entrepreneurial aspect of raising money, it does enable things, when you can see the results... to deliver better projects and be more effective with what you do.

**Andrea**

Do you spend a lot of time developing private supporters?

**Joe**

Yes, increasingly. That's been a real shift for me personally; not coming from that social background and suddenly hanging out in someone's home in Kensington.

**Andrea**

It's a huge cultural curve.

**Joe**

I do find the class mix in the arts interesting—you get to meet everyone, which I'm not sure you do in other industries as much.

**Andrea**

There are many people that really resent the entrepreneurial culture that is being demanded of previously well-funded public galleries. How do you feel about those kinds of attitudes in the art world?

**Joe**

It's difficult, because a lot of the time I get their point. A close friend of mine is always quite negative about certain things we have done. He runs a commercial gallery and was previously in the public sector, and at Studio Voltaire, partly out of necessity, sometimes we've had to act rather like a commercial gallery, in that we are selling work, which is quite unusual, but we've had to take on that model.

**Andrea**

Like House of Voltaire?<sup>1</sup>

**Joe**

Yes, but even before that—sometimes the works in exhibitions have been for sale. We also participate in art fairs. My friend's criticism was that the Arts Council was encouraging galleries to be entrepreneurial via different schemes, but you actually end up screwing yourself if you follow them because you're just paving the way for the Arts Council/Government to withdraw their funding and say it's not needed, because you're self sufficient.

**Andrea**

The funding for *How to Work Together* comes from such a scheme. But you're saying there is also a certain amount of enjoyment in running a small business, achieving and raising the money.

**Joe**

For me, the ideal situation is that you have a certain amount of Arts Council money, and that's matched elsewhere. Because then, in terms of your relationship with the Arts Council, you're not totally beholden to them. Wherever your income

1. House of Voltaire is a temporary shop selling unique works and special editions to benefit Studio Voltaire. The first shop opened in 2010 and has been successful in raising significant amounts of income for the organisation.

comes from, there are always going to be certain conditions or expectations attached. It's much better to have a portfolio approach where you have equal responsibilities to each, and you're not reliant on just one of them.

**Andrea**

Did you ever decide to do some management training, or some financial training, or have you just learnt everything on the job?

**Joe**

It has been mainly on the job, although I did A-Level Business Studies! I didn't even do very well in it, but somehow that aspect has really stuck with me. I even still have the textbook, which I occasionally refer to... some of it was really basic stuff about accounts and profit and loss. Some of it was about managing staff, and how people work together; I was always really interested in those things.

**Andrea**

So are there types of business strategy that you're interested in? Or are there management styles that you're interested in?

**Joe**

In terms of management, the Serpentine ended up being very informative in that I wanted to do the opposite. Although there were positive aspects to the job—such as working with other recent graduates from different colleges and being able to observe how an organisation operates, I found it a difficult environment to work in. It's obviously a very hierarchical style of management, which you have to have a particular personality to be able to survive in. It's partly why I really like small organisations, because there is always a bit of necessary hierarchy, but it's relatively small.

**Andrea**

Is there a tension in running a small organisation between trying to develop an ethos of equality, or equality of voice, and the necessity to occasionally ask people not to do things? Or to need to control what is said about the place, which is of course what the Serpentine is extremely good at.

**Joe**

I used to find it very difficult, but now I find it's become very easy for me to do. Hopefully I do it in a constructive way, and because it's such a small team, I have a regular dialogue with everyone. There is a good dialogue—staff normally come to me when they are pissed off about something, and it gets resolved.

**Andrea**

It is a small organisation—the equivalent of three full-time staff. Would you want more employees here, would you want more space?

**Joe**

I think you need an appropriate scale. We are hoping to appoint two new members of staff and increase the days of current staff, but we wouldn't really want to increase more than that. We need a full-time education curator and a marketing and communications person.

**Andrea**

Who does all of that at the moment?

**Joe**

With the PR stuff it's mainly me, but some of the responsibilities are shared out. And with the education curator, there is currently no one in that role.

**Andrea**

Are there other arts organisations you admire, that you learn from?

**Joe**

I have a lot of respect for peer organisations and organisations of a similar scale, like White Columns in New York, for example. I'm not that interested in larger organisations.

**Andrea**

What about other artist-focused organisations?

**Joe**

Organisations of a similar scale; I feel camaraderie and respect for them. There are some commercial galleries I look up to, such as the Modern Institute; because of the way in which they have supported artist's careers beyond what one might expect of a commercial gallery, and the role they play within their local context. That level of support and ambition for the projects—it's not just financially motivated.

**Andrea**

I've noticed over the past decade that much closer relations between public and commercial galleries have developed, not simply at the level of co-financing exhibitions and projects, but also at the level of developing and promoting aesthetic understanding. Yet these relationships are politically and socially complex.

**Joe**

We've experimented with commercial strategies. They can come at a price; it can really alter your relationship with artists in quite a negative way. For example, when we started working with Phyllida Barlow and asked her to do a show in 2010, we asked why she had never worked with a commercial gallery, and she said that no one had ever really asked her. So we said to her, why don't we act in some way as your commercial gallery? We'll sell your work, but we'll also proactively help to find a commercial gallery for you. So as well as selling works that we commissioned, we were also selling stuff from the studio. It was good for us and for her, in terms of income, but I think the relationship suffered as it became too much about money and dealing with sales. Also, we were inexperienced with this kind of stuff and made some mistakes such as selling works to people who just flipped them at auction. Looking back, it is difficult to separate this stuff from the artistic stuff. Perhaps it was just an extreme example as there was so much interest around her. We have also had many positive experiences with acting commercially.

**Andrea**

Is this a viable model to develop in the future?

**Joe**

It can be, but there are issues with this model. Why it works for commercial galleries is that they hopefully have a very long-term commitment to their artists, whereas for us with Phyllida, it was just for that moment. When we do fairs we always say we are representing the programme and not the artists, as a way of making it clear to people. Although beneficial things have happened for artists—both in terms of income and new opportunities, it's equally about audience development and increasing the platform we provide.

**Andrea**

What is important about doing what you do?

**Joe**

I think in terms of having a belief in culture—I want to contribute to culture and make a difference, however small it might be. I believe in the inherent power that culture plays in shaping our everyday lives and understanding our existence. I'm certainly left-leaning—however much Third Way/ New Labour I might be with all the entrepreneurial/engaging in commercial aspects—I'm in it for social good. And importantly I identify as queer and feminist—this comes out in the programming, which again relates to wanting to add something to our culture—providing a platform for women and homosexuals.

**Andrea**

How does the idea of social good work within the organisation?

**Joe**

The staffing structure is important. I think we're all quite respectful to each other. I think we're quite lucky in that at the moment we all get on, and there aren't too many difficulties in terms of working together. It feels like it's a nice place to be and be doing stuff together. It's also an enjoyable thing, which is really important. An idea of fun in life is a good thing. It's a really privileged thing. Even with the fundraising, you try to make it enjoyable. It's quite social, for example we do House of Voltaire instead of having an auction-type structure and actually have some fun with it. It's more work, but we enjoy doing it. It's another way of working with artists, and playing shop in the middle of Mayfair is very entertaining.

**Andrea**

Do you all do that: go there and sell?

**Joe**

Yes, and that's another good thing about small galleries, that you do almost everything. You might be cleaning the toilets, but then you're doing a funding application, installing a show with an artist, talking to a patron. It's really varied.

**Andrea**

Is there something important about that for you?

**Joe**

It's not quite a retort to Marx's division of labour, but it kind of nods towards it in some ways.

**Andrea**

A kind of socialism?

**Joe**

A kind of sharing out of labour, different types of labour.

**Andrea**

Presumably that would influence the kind of people you would employ here?

**Joe**

Yes, you have to be able to muck in. It's been quite interesting, in that we've had interns from certain backgrounds who just haven't been able to cope with certain things. And it's not because we're horrible, and give them all of the rubbish jobs!

**Andrea**

One could surmise from what you're saying that Studio Voltaire is programmed on the particularities of the director's vision of what's important in culture. That's quite an autonomous position, isn't it? It's quite unusual within the publicly funded arts perhaps. Do you think it's important?

**Joe**

Yes, I think it's vital. I think at the moment we're in an interesting period—particularly in London—where you have all these different organisations within what you might define as the small gallery sector, and I think that its real strength is that you have this diversity of voices and approaches.

**Andrea**

You said it was vital, what exactly?

**Joe**

It's in some ways an opposition to more mainstream culture, or certainly, hopefully, an opposition to more corporate or commercial production, which I think the art world is increasingly moving towards. And not just the straightforward commercial market—it's also a kind of professionalisation of the industry, which in some ways is good, that people are working better, but I feel it's also slightly killing it. It's becoming standardised production.

**Andrea**

But you have professionalised Studio Voltaire. Who do you rely on to help you keep a balance between professionalisation and non-standardisation?

**Joe**

The board are very supportive, and there are a few individuals who I have a really supportive relationship with, I guess sometimes in a kind of mentoring way. Also the team—I think we work well together and I think increasingly I'm sharing more stuff with them; we discuss things and decisions are made collectively a lot more. Then there is Common Practice. I don't know how many years I've been a part of it—maybe three or four years—and the real value of it is talking with other Directors. Sometimes it feels like you're having a bit of a group therapy session, but it's been incredibly helpful. It is difficult to keep this balanced. I don't think I am personally ever going to be totally professional—it is just not in my character.

**Andrea**

Do you have time to think about what you're doing in a broader artistic and social context?

**Joe**

It's really limited. Even just general research for the programme or thinking around ideas is really limited.

**Andrea**

So ideally, you'd want to spend more time reading and thinking?

**Joe**

Yes. It feels a lot of the time that you have to do your thinking via a business plan, which you are doing because you have to do it for the Arts Council, rather than naturally considering what your role is, or why you are even doing it. And in some ways it's useful, but it's not necessarily the best way of working, and I think just to have more time to consider things, just in a very general sense, would be really helpful. One of the strongest projects I think we've done is probably the Jo Spence retrospective which we did in 2012 with Space Studios, and I think it's because it was the first kind of historical show we've done—we had to really research the work to make it happen—which you don't have to do when you commission new work.

**Andrea**

Was it the first time you worked with an artist who is no longer living?

**Joe**

Yes, we normally produce a commissioned exhibition by a living artist, so it was quite a shift for us, and it felt very different anyway, because you suddenly feel very responsible, and it actually made me realise how easy commissioning is: you're basically just giving the space and resources over to an artist, even though this involves discussion and dialogue.

**Andrea**

You said that you identify as queer and feminist. How does that affect what you do?

**Joe**

I think, in terms of the programme, we show a lot of women. It's not a strategy as such, it's just naturally happened, and maybe on a personal level, I like working with women. And then there's still the fact that even now in the art world there's under-representation and inequality, both within museums and the commercial sector. The programme is not always overtly feminist; Phyllida Barlow doesn't describe her practice as feminist, but in terms of how she deals with and occupies space with the work, I see a feminist position. So it's not necessarily a heavy-handed programme, but there are certain things running through it as a whole.

I quite like difficulty within art, when things don't always work out and aren't resolved, I think it's in these difficult situations where there's antagonism or things not fitting, that's when interesting questions come up.

**Andrea**

Do you have a clear idea of who you are catering for?

**Joe**

I find this quite difficult. I was thinking about the art world before, because we were saying how it is very socially mixed, but in some ways, it's still privileged, even just the percentage of people involved who had a comprehensive education—it's predominantly private school. I felt, particularly in my twenties, not disadvantaged, but you're aware of the fact that you've had a comprehensive education.

**Andrea**

I agree with you that the mainstream of the art sector is grammar school or privately educated, full of people who are wealthy enough to be able to maintain a position where their potential exploitation is not personally and financially significant.

**Joe**

I think that's very true, that you can afford to have a position, and in a general sense it's something that concerns me as to how things are going. I've mentioned before this idea of professionalisation, because I've been really fortunate in this position—I kind of fell into this job. I didn't necessarily intend to do it. If we advertised this position, it's people with MA Curating, you know, who have worked a certain way up, who would apply. I was lucky in that I was able to train on the job, which doesn't really happen now, and I think with the professionalisation, you're getting a certain type of person, you're not getting figures like Robin Klassnik—these really wonderful, slightly wayward, passionate, cranky figures—you're not going to get these people anymore.

**Andrea**

That's true. This is related: can you make autonomous decisions? And is this an important part of your role?

**Joe**

Yes, very. I don't think I could work in a larger organisation where I didn't have that kind of power.

**Andrea**

But it's interesting that autonomy has been criticised as a value. The problem with autonomy is that it individualises aspirations and doesn't take into consideration social context. Could you defend your right to make autonomous decisions?

**Joe**

Autonomy allows for certain freedoms and different approaches—different approaches to working in a social context—which you wouldn't get otherwise. I've always seen autonomy as a really positive thing. The figures I've always respected are people like Robin, who have their own particular way of thinking and working. I'm also drawn to artists who have their own thing going on.

**Andrea**

How do you think the way your organisation is run affects its workers, including yourself? You are taking on huge amounts of work in order to not have your team exploited.

**Joe**

Yes, I think that's really true.

**Andrea**

We've already talked about how you don't have time to think.

**Joe**

Because it comes down to *autonomy*: because it is your thing, it's unfair then to make other people do the work. It's part of the price you pay, I think.

**Andrea**

Why should you have to pay a price?

**Joe**

Because you're in a really privileged position. I think most people don't get those levels of freedom. Beyond the art world, I'm incredibly lucky with my job—I don't get bored, which is a good thing.

**Andrea**

You spend seventy percent of your time fundraising...

**Joe**

But even then, you do it because you have to, and it's a means to an end.

**Andrea**

So, to summarise, you're saying that the self-exploitation feels like an ethical obligation on the basis that you've created for yourself a realm of freedom?

**Joe**

Partly. I think also it comes down very much to a personal thing. I find it really difficult to switch off, and I'm always on my emails when I'm at home, and I don't really stop at the weekends. I don't know if I'm necessarily working more smartly by doing it. It was really interesting when a few months ago I had a friend staying with me with her baby for a month, and I kind of got into this routine of getting up at 5 or 6 in the morning, helping with the baby, going to work at half 8 or 9, then coming back at 5, and then during the evening being with the baby and then, when the baby went to bed, having adult time. So I had to be really strict on when I was working, and maybe I was slightly more productive, so it's maybe more a personal thing of not being able to balance my...or letting work be an excuse.

**Andrea**

Do you think your work colleagues would recognise your descriptions of yourself, the ways in which the organisation runs, and also for instance, your aspirations for change?

**Joe**

I'd say yes, broadly speaking. I don't think we'd discuss some of the larger questions perhaps, but maybe it's inherent values that are there. It's going to be interesting to see how things change in terms of talking about things more, on a kind of wider level.

**Andrea**

Do you think that would be interesting, or do you think, oh God—that's just another layer of stuff I have to do?

**Joe**

I think it's an interesting thing, in terms of strategising... maybe that's the wrong word, but just thinking about what we do, and why we do it.