

CASTING SPELLS

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Producing Liveness in Interesting Times

the uncultured

Our funding systems are fucked and fucking us over. The hyper-competition of these systems, the privilege of institutions and the protectors of the status quo, destroy our collectivity.

Against best intentions and better judgment, we become suspicious and self-protective, deferential and obligated, and viciously self-critical and self-precaritatising. Because apparently, these are the necessary tactics of self-preservation in a world of precarious, freelance and independent cultural work, in a sector where there is apparently not enough to go round.

Here is a list of some things that make me sad about being a freelancer:

- Encouraging, detailed conversations with organisations that go nowhere.
- The pressure to seem constantly happy, positive and busy - because a busy freelancer is a good freelancer.
- Feedback is not a priority, even though I took loads of time in between juggling several deadlines for a project that is now paying less than minimum wage to apply for another project which would probably result in a similar situation, but would pay the bills for a bit.
- Lack of respect and transparency in communication about work, from pay and working conditions to expectations about deliverables, being credited for your work, and so on.
- The expectation that freelancers should be grateful for the opportunities they have to work with organisations, because of the ridiculous levels of precarity and competition.
- Assumptions by organisations that working in an organisation is the Holy Grail of work, and that all freelancers want to 'progress' to being employed by an organisation.
- Freelancing is, for some, undertaken out of necessity rather than choice and / or the result of experiences of marginalisation and discrimination in organisations, particularly for Black people, people of colour, disabled, working class, LGBTQIA+ and elder folk.
- Teaching as a zero hours lecturer in higher education with an understanding of funding systems means I am entangled in a system that perpetuates (the lie of) creative work as a route to self-determined cultural production.
- To be a good freelancer means being good at self-policing opinions, needs and desires about working in the sector, because of a fear of being 'cancelled' by the organisations we work with.

I am sure you have many of your own to add...

Ain't no organisation gonna save you, or me.

Gratitude is inevitably part of our sector, because it is partly funded by taxes, the lottery and the public purse. However, the privilege of being part of this system also entails an institutionalisation of gratitude which has created carceral, punitive dynamics. The basis of the word gratitude is 'gwere' a Proto-Indo-European root meaning 'to favor,' that encompasses both the emotion of being thankful but also the act of giving praise as it shares the same root as the poetic, singing 'bard'. Gratitude is therefore perhaps baked into the history of artworkers and artworking, linking a rationale for art-making to propaganda. And yet, we know this isn't the only story...!

In Jacques Attali's *Noise - The Political Economy of Music*, he writes about the travelling musicians otherwise known as the troubadours who sang for their supper. Whilst this created a relationship of service, that payment also gave the troubadours liberty to articulate that which was problematic and contrary to their paymasters' ideologies. They harnessed the ambivalence of trickster energy

to poke fun at and critique social hierarchies and institutions, temporarily turning the world upside down through Bakhtinian carnivalesque moments. And this tradition is continued by artists today.

And yet, such strategies are assumed as unavailable to producers and artworkers who operate with complicity inside the spheres of culture making.

What parallel forms of resistance and refusal can be practiced by producers and other freelance artworkers? The imperatives of freelancer professionalism (that are predicated on white, male, ableist and middle class models), gratitude and deference towards institutions, is part of a colonial apparatus of judgment, hierarchy and stratification that pits us against one another. In this context, the reclamation of resources, visibility and voice for freelancers is a decolonial process of refusing the paternalism of organisational logics. What forms of resistance and refusal can we practice that simultaneously enable us to thrive?

We are casting spells.

We are scrambling to get our nuts together.

We are intervening in inappropriate situations in order to turn the tide (of populism, and all the conditions that reinforce our individualism).

We divert the water's flow, redistribute and re-appropriate resources for our communities beyond the parameters of institutions.

We are abolishing the expectation and language of being appropriate or professional.

We own being feral, and explore what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten meant by being 'fugitive'.

We unlearn the strictures of existing institutional logics in their specificities, we learn from other environments, especially those ways of working that sit outside the arts.

We sit with the mess and see what it offers.

We refuse to be part of the chains of cultural appeasement.

We are tired of over-producing.

We catch sleep and enjoy it.

We recast networks of belonging that connect us to our locations and the reality of our practices.

We are conscious of the trappings of nepotism and how exclusionary politics are reproduced through the making of culture.

We know about the lie of the linear career and recognise this is part of a politics of exceptionalism.

We resituate arts work as work.

We speak on behalf of our own selves.

We think these words are bullshit.

We talk about the problematic and taboo aspects of arts work that should be probably kept behind closed doors.

We imagine and initiate other ways of working that facilitate our individual and collective actualisation.

We name and resist exploitative practices. We work together to hold organisations to account.

We make different types of relationships with organisations.

We uncover the histories of cultural funding and resources in all their contradictions and complexities.

We normalise talking about money, how it circulates, where it comes from and its power.

We celebrate the solidarity economies that are already in existence and all those who are producers but not recognised as such, who are un-professionally creating resource and value within their communities.

Reading List

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