

IT STARTS WITH AN EMAIL, IT ENDS IN BED

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Part of
Producing Liveness in Interesting Times

the uncultured

It starts with an email

Hey Rosalie,

We hope you're doing as well as can be. We are writing in your Keep it Complex capacity, specifically around the Solidarity Syndicate you did in 2020.

We would like you to write, in whichever way suits you best, about how we can try to make sure no one sinks during a crisis.

We want the writing to be engaging and thought-provoking, but the form and feel of the writing should reflect you or your topic in whichever way artistically and conceptually feels right for you.

To reflect the fee of £250, we would suggest this is approximately one day's worth of work. If the amount is lower than your typical day rate, we would want you to scale your labour and commitment to ensure you are appropriately remunerated.

If this feels clear and you are interested please let us know and we can pay you upfront, or if you'd like to talk anything through or just have a general chat please do let us know!

Hello, yes, this feels clear and interesting to me. Thanks for asking me to be involved.

We've dissolved the Keep It Complex collective that facilitated the solidarity syndicates, so I could only speak about this in personal capacity, is that ok?

Yes, sure. Is there anything else you need from us at this point? Really happy to chat about anything if you want to?

No, all good.

All good

All good

All good

No one sinks during a crisis

We can't make sure no one sinks during a crisis. The whole crisis is designed to make people sink.

Obviously, we could make sure that no one sinks. We could have different responses, a to-do list, a report, a process that becomes another optical illusion. I can't even get myself to write down demands for redistribution.

It's all been said so many times and I've got nothing left to say to those people that could actually make this a more equitable recovery.

A recovery in which your ability to survive would not depend on your immigration status, how you're being othered and racialised, which parts of your body are categorised as abled or disabled, who you're in relationship with and how you choose to find pleasure, how much money previous generations of your family have been able to extract.

I went to a public gallery last week. It felt exactly 1000% the same as before the pandemic, as always, as if nothing had ever happened. This continuity must be comforting to some people.

I've wasted a lot of my time criticising myself and the art worlds. I thought if I could only say what the problem was, if we found a common language to talk about it, we could change it. I've also spent a lot of time building up collectives or what I thought were alternatives, only to reproduce the same power dynamics, but with smaller budgets. The older I'm getting, the more I'm moving away from designing solutions, because there isn't a blueprint, there are only everyday routines and complicated relationships.

Solidarity Syndicates

The Solidarity Syndicates, or SolSYn for short, came about because at the beginning of the first lockdown, Arts Council England declared all submitted DYCP applications null and void. DYCP stands for Developing Your Creative Practice.

It's a bleak process, in which you're writing a lot of speculative fiction about how great you are and how relevant your practice is to the Arts Council's investment targets. I got told it's good to use the words "stepchange", "ambitious" and "risk taking" a lot. Once you've written your application, activity plan, portfolio and found somebody who will write you a recommendation, you'll have to then fit it into the Arts Council's portal, Grantium, which is very user-unfriendly. For most people I know, it takes about a week to a month of your life to complete this application. It's highly unlikely that you'll get the grant so you also have to spend a lot of energy to psych yourself up, find hope and motivation.

And now imagine being told that all this work you did is not even going to be looked at.

Instead of processing existing applications, the Arts Council opened emergency grants, for which a lot of people weren't eligible, especially those at the beginning of their careers or those working in the underfunded invisibilised parts of the art worlds. At the time, HMRC also hadn't started the self-employment grants yet, which, when they eventually did happen, only covered a fraction of culture workers.

Who has the confidence, time and skills to apply in the middle of a pandemic? Probably not those who need the money the most.

As a response to this decision by the Arts Council, a collective I was in called Keep It Complex and a group of colleagues quickly set up Solidarity Syndicates. This is not something we invented, but an old anarchic tactic of sharing resources.

Each syndicate consisted of some people who were eligible to apply for the emergency grant and some people who were not. The basic idea was to split the money made by playing the ACE emergency grant lottery equally within the group. So everybody would get some money, regardless of if they've been categorised as disposable or picked for survival.

I was part of one syndicate with 6 people and the three of us who were eligible to apply got the money, which we then split between the six of us.

We quickly found out that it's hard to talk about money. Especially asking for money, demanding it, taking it when it's offered. It's a complicated dance: refusing money, competing for it, denying you need it, never declaring how much you have. It's also easy to confuse being generous with actual change. The myth of meritocracy runs deep and the power dynamics are awkward and solidarity is so much more than sharing money.

I've heard back from a few people who also set up Sol Syns, and what they valued most were the conversations they had and the relationships formed. Which hopefully lasts longer than the tiny drop of cash.

When I hear rumours about big London art institutions, the galleries and NPOs who apparently don't know how to spend all their Culture Sector Recovery funding, I'm left numb. When I see the expected turnaround and deadlines which funders put on their application forms, it makes me laugh.

Why do they all expect us to run so fast, as if we didn't have bodies and were just hands typing on a keyboard or eyes scrolling down.

how we can try to make sure no one sinks during a crisis

Olives, huge olives

At the beginning of the pandemic, I was one of a cohort of artists who were selected by Artangel for a Thinking Time Award. When I first got the email I thought it was a scam. Somebody offering me £5000?

It really sent me into a tailspin.

It's nice to be seen. It's nice to be in good company. It's nice not to have to worry about money for a few months. I finally had resources to start therapy. We went on a cute farm trip and milked goats. A huge amount of thinking happened.

But I was also taking money from an organisation that I know doesn't have a unionised workforce. Who defended the Haygate Pyramid. I've heard all the stories about the directors. It was also an award attached to the Freelands Foundation, the newest Murdoch way of corroding society, this time with investments in 'radical' art projects.

I tried to have a conversation with the directors about what was wrong with the Freelands Foundation, but I just felt like a stupid girl wasting everybody's time. They insisted that the Freelands foundation had no curatorial input. And they asked me if they did have any curatorial input, would I refuse the money?

Because of my naivety and privilege, I thought for a long time that there must be a reason for all of the horrible working practices, overproduction and general misery in the art world. Surely this way of working must give pleasure to somebody? I thought that maybe the people higher up on the food chain actually enjoyed it.

The more I got to know the art worlds and also meet people who are in positions of institutional power, the more I realised that this system truly works for nobody. Not even for the people on the £100k salaries and the gallerist-collectors refurbishing islands with art. Everybody is confused, disconnected, overworked and miserable.

I've also become much more aware of who has to continuously do the work of making this nonsensical world make sense and the toll this takes.

As I was now being included on the Artangel mailing list, I got invited to a zoomerama. The directors presented the programme for the year ahead, the angel investors had a pleasant evening with live art and an opportunity to be in break out rooms with artists, what a beautiful distraction from the misery of lockdown!

Before the zoom, a delivery driver came round to our flat and brought a bag full of snacks. Delicious nuts. A drink. And a glass of olives.

The olives were huge. I've never seen olives that size before. They were literally as big as your thumb. You had to hold them with two hands to eat them. I couldn't get over it. They were so big and lush and green.

The olives have since taken up a lot of space in my head. They live there rent free. These big juicy olives.

Do we have to be grateful for the big olives?

Is it solidarity if you're only giving what you'd like to give?

Stop making a big thing out of these olives, Rosalie! Just focus on your work. Tell us about your work. We'd love to hear about your work. That's what we're here to do.

Eat the olives and move on. You got to use these olives so they benefit you and your work. You have to make yourself into an olive, a huge juicy green olive. We believe in you and we think you can be the seminal, groundbreaking olive you desire to be.

And don't forget: There is a huge value in the social time and the temporary spaces of freedom which you as a huge olive can provide. And I think it's really important to remember that as a huge olive you're not there to save the world, your job is to be an olive. Every single job you'll do as an olive is a compromise, so it's about what you do with that compromise. And you have to be honest with your limitations and not put too much pressure on yourself.

You need to decide whether you are going to be one of those olives that cares too much, and ends up burning out and quitting. Or will you be one of those olives that can get through tough decisions and be strong enough to make a proper career as an olive.

Acknowledging that we can't make it work under these conditions is the first step. Especially for those who work in art institutions as producers, educators, assistant to the director, events programme coordinators, invigilators, facilitators etc, you know the role.

The role you play when you're enabling the show to go on but you can never determine the conditions of the show. You are busy all the time. Because you have the amazing ability to make things work that nobody else can make work. You're the magic invisible

glue that holds this together. And you're burnt out. Cynical. Under-resourced. Scared to really look at it. So you talk about it endlessly, with your friends, in your head, but you never really say it out aloud to the people who need to hear it. You smile. You clean it up. You blame yourself. You cope. You move on. You try to include, diversify, horizontalise. Because we must try, there must be a way, better in than out, compromise is part of life. We all have to pay rent and at least you are making some changes, small changes, but ... just stop.

There is power in not keeping going.

It ends in bed

Here I am, sitting in my bed at 10.05 on a Monday morning. My partner is away, the meeting I had scheduled was cancelled, so I have time, alone time, to sit and write this down.

A year or two ago, I would have tried to write this together with other people, because: hey, it's about collectives and mutual aid and all of us doing it TOGETHER. Now, I'm thinking, the time it takes me to organise everybody and then split the £250 between 5 people and edit this text together, it's just not worth it for anybody.

There is always money to talk about it, but hardly ever any money to do it.

Links

Dean Spade on Mutual Aid

The Revolution will not be funded

PCS demands

**Migrants In Culture
Culture Sector Recovery**

Keep It Complex Sol Syn

This work was commissioned by The Uncultured as part of their project, *Producing Liveness in Interesting Times*.

Producing Liveness in Interesting Times is a collection of writing, thinking and cheat-enabling works by Live Art and Performance Producers and Producer-adjacent arts workers who are working in the UK.

To explore other writings from *Producing Liveness in Interesting Times*, visit:
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