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The Community Arts Centre: ‘devaluing’ art and architecture (the case of the Albany Empire, London)

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Introduction

As an academic deeply embedded in the struggle to organise alternative epistemologies and economies of contemporary art and its antecedents, my approach to the contemporary values of architecture, as well as those produced through the inclusions and exclusions of architecture’s ‘heritage’, has been through the analysis of the points in the twenty and twenty-first century where art and architecture have interlinked precisely where social and aesthetic beliefs in value accrual and/or dispersal have been shared.¹ While, as will be briefly summarised, the majority of art-architecture collaborations have been highly capitalised via the forms of value accrual that remain normalised within the cultural and creative industries, there seem to have been – and continue to be – many such interlinkages that fall outside of this circuit, either by design or default. One of these can be found in the conceptualisation, organisation, fabrication and sustenance of what became known in the United Kingdom and elsewhere as the community arts centre.

Changing the value framework: Community Arts Centres

Community Arts Centres, which should be distinguished from the broader definition of ‘community centre’ through a particular infrastructural and ideological commitment to creative and cultural learning and experience as a process through which people’s lives are enriched, enlivened, made social and, importantly, made *more equal*, have long roots in post-Enlightenment Europe. In different locales Community Arts centres take different

architectural form, but most are united through their broadly social-liberalist foundation within the reformist, often religiously-inflected, philanthropic and educative principles (or values) that became, in the UK at least, the basis of the creation of the Welfare State in 1946. This essay takes as its frame of reference, and principal case study, from such UK heritage, and recognises that within such an ideological framework a tension exists between the above-named principles and the grass-roots organisation of Workers' Education, forms of protest and activist organisation and the historic and contemporary urgencies of women's and Black Lives rights that also took place in and around these buildings.

The community arts movement, a particular state-funded form of local social and cultural organisation, was usually housed in existing but cheaply repurposed buildings, in towns and cities across the regions of the post-war UK but looking outside such confines to other histories (as an example, often housed in old buildings built as trophies of the British Empire, many sought to build critical programmes around the continuity of colonialism in their own time, but many perpetuated it). A community arts centre network was formalised in post-war Britain and was briefly (1965-early 80s) recognised with government funding and a specific funding stream supported by Jennie Lee, the first UK Minister for the Arts in 1964. Precedents in other places such as the short lived cultural condensation experiments in the first years of the USSR, the former-Eastern European cultural hearth and cultural house systems and the Nordic Folkshuset provision were influential, as was the British and North American Settlement movement, all of which shared – and perpetuated the aforementioned ambivalent relationship between state provision and grass-roots organising.²

From the end of the second world war, community arts centres developed as a built form from more attached or supplementary forms, located either in temporary, short-life properties or buildings owned or bought by rich liberal benefactors (depending often on historic situatedness and/or perceived need). Burgeoning as architectural form in the 1960s, such hyperbolic projects as theatre director and socialist entrepreneur Joan Littlewood and architect Cedric Price's various Fun Palace designs and programmes, the Inter-Action Centre (with, again, Cedric Price's input), the various Arts Labs in London became well known internationally, particularly in attachment to counter-cultural community and cultural movements but, in at least the vision of Price, with spectacularised flexible, participatory – though often more ad-hoc built - form. Less glamorous organisations also emerged, such as the Midland Arts Centre in Birmingham (new build, 1962), the Beaford Centre (large rural

house conversion, 1966, now known as Beaford Arts), The Blackie in Liverpool (converted congregational church, 1967, now named The Black-E), and the Third Eye Centre in Glasgow (converted Victorian high street buildings, 1975, now the Centre for Contemporary Art³). These were often relatively rough and also flexible: the ‘welfare’ of welfare state was pivotal in that what was provided, often via voluntary labour in what we might now recognise as a circular economy, was semi-philanthropic, semi-therapeutic, often practical (creches, children’s food clubs, libraries, equipment loan facilities as well as music, art, theatre, etc.) and almost always politicised. Following the granting of Arts Council funding, a specific form of artist began to be defined. As Gail Fisher, writing up the published proceedings of a 1979 Community Arts conference, held in a venue no longer in use called The Warehouse, Newcastle, described,

1. The nature of a community artist lies in the desire to work with, and for, members of a community, on a continuing basis, to make their environment more imaginative, responsive and accessible.
2. A group of community artists realises, at some point, that it is capable of making their society more creatively productive, and may therefore be instrumental in effecting social-political change.

The purpose of community arts’ work, then, is in helping each community discover how it can best express itself. The importance of this work in a society that celebrates popular culture, with its superficial and degraded role models, cannot be overemphasised. Through providing skills and opportunities, community artists facilitate the processes whereby any community can explore its unique nature.

This necessitates that the community artists maintain a low profile – encourage rather than lead – and recognise that it is a slow process. As agents, community artists are seeking nothing less than to involve an entire local population in creative expression.⁴

This cultural ‘movement’ in the UK was by no means perfect – many internecine battles commenced, many people worked for little or no reward, scandals and divisions born of poor resources were a continual undercurrent. But, at a community arts centre, you might encounter free space where the value forms of, for example, art and architecture, were irrelevant. It didn’t matter how ‘good’ or ‘successful’ you were at a certain craft (although folk heroes were welcome and skill was recognised); the point was to allow space for

experiment and involvement, a non-meritocratic structure run on low paid labour and practical skills exchange. In other words, a diversification of value-forms operated in close and, in the best of cases, uncontradictory proximity; from a well-thrown pot to the ability to keep children entertained; from a well-articulated argument to local government to the defence and extension of vernacular building). Community centres provided a range of services: art classes, dark rooms, creches, theatre groups, cafes, discos, gigs, union meetings, CND and anti-apartheid organisation, scratch orchestras, sound systems, sometimes a potters' wheel and a kiln. I used to hang out at one such place in my home town in middle-England, smoking dope and learning about reggae, helping with the creche, perfecting my amateur dramatics. No one asked about my right to be there. I encountered people unlike me and learned to negotiate my difference. I learned what a 'we' meant and how to participate in its formation. This was the 1980s – these were places to escape Thatcherism and support the Miners' Strike.

Most of these buildings have now gone, redeveloped for other purposes in processes of gentrification or expansion. Under the Blairite New Labour government of the late 1990s many were pump-primed to establish a new network of art galleries with a new breed of staff: directors, curators and programme budgets. Significantly, the architectural competitions that were established to rebuild or build anew such infrastructures became much fetishised. Art and architecture refreshed their economic relationship – affective, reputational and fiscal. Also significantly, space use changed: gallery space became larger and predominant, social, experimental and meeting space became marginalised; here the division between curatorial and education (learning, social engagement, outreach, etc.) within arts institutions became reified. The value form of architecture reverted to more conventionally recognised aesthetic – and ideological – formats.

An example of trying to do things differently: the Albany Empire, London

There are a few places left that buck this trend, although they are under constant threat of divestment or, worse, architectural, managerial and thus social polishing. One such is London's Albany Empire, opened in a Victorian theatre in the 1970s, destroyed by fire in 1978, rebuilt with community funds and famously reopened by Diana, Princess of Wales. The Empire's focus is on performing arts, reflecting the diverse community of its location in Deptford, a historically marginalised area of south London's docklands where constituencies

from many nations, ethnicities and cultures settled as part of the pattern of dockworking, forming one centre of London's cosmopolitical landscape. The Albany – the website has a fantastic archive of images past and present⁵ – is dominated by a large community cafe on the ground floor, a meeting place for old people, very young people, the unemployed, the homeless. It runs many workshops, from singing and dancing to stage management and social volunteering. It has lots of bookable meeting rooms. It offers extremely cheap activities for local people, and a music-hall-oriented rotation of entertainment. Outside its door is a cheap, daily local market.

The original Albany Institute was built using monies from the Deptford Fund, founded in 1894 by the Duchess of Albany (it was a settlement building that, along with its more famous cousin Toynbee Hall in nearby Whitechapel, was premised on the idea of bourgeois citizens with religious and/or humanitarian concern for the living conditions of the poor in London, 'giving back' in the form of investment and education). Following the fire in 1978 (widely presumed to be a racist arson attack⁶), the site was moved and a new building was designed by Howell, Killick, Partridge & Amis (1979-81) as a 'progressive, independent community agency.'⁷ They prepared for the eventual design by studying Price's Inter-Action Centre in Chalk Farm (North London) and employed Tim Ronalds as the job architect who went on to develop refurbishments of the Hackney Empire and Wilton's Music Hall, long established East London local entertainment palaces. The new Albany Empire had two foci; a large ground floor café and a theatre co-designed with resident theatre group The Combination.

Granting HKPA the contract for the design of the new Albany, sent mixed messages. Whilst the firm was certainly recognised as a glamorous adjunct to the fashionable architectural scene in London and the UK, receiving positive reviews in sector journals and magazines and now written into celebratory histories⁸, the design incorporated what might be understood as *representative* attributes of 'community' (a large café, a modular community theatre space) drawing on the 'authentic' genesis of Joan Littlewoods Theatre Workshop in Stratford as well as Price's work.⁹ However representative in its conception and fruition, the building is nevertheless used by people in their own ways despite this cautiously patrimonial approach. This fundamental value-conglomeration should not be lost in any analysis of the use of community arts centres; architecture *does not matter* above and beyond basic necessities; its reification is side-lined through use (in a way reminiscent of the historian and ethnographer Michel de Certeau named a form of self-animating tacticality.¹⁰).¹¹

Alterity at the level of value

How do my examples of community arts centres, and specifically the aesthetically sanctioned but unglamorously utilised Albany Empire, relate to alternative epistemologies and economies of contemporary art and the concomitant need to rethink the values of art and architecture? In his 2018 book, *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value*, Brian Massumi says,

It is time to take back value. For many, value has long been dismissed as a concept so thoroughly compromised, so soaked in normative strictures and stained by complicity with capitalist power, as to be unredeemable. This has only abandoned value to purveyors of normativity and apologists of economic oppression. *Value is too valuable to be left in those hands.*¹²

While I agree with the gist of Massumi's text, my thesis is different, and concerns processes of devaluation, rather than re-assimilation (influenced by the degrowth practices of radical ecology rather than the capture politics of extraction and accelerationism). What is epistemological and what is economic, what is social and what is aesthetic are not so easy to untangle, as the striving for reputational, affective and fiscal economic growth in both art and architecture borrow methods from each other in terms of scale, selling techniques and even, in some cases, price points.¹³ Despite both art and architecture having radical histories of alterity – political, situated, organisational – that often intertwine, both are also behoven to the forms of homologation that are propounded by their notional position within a framework of capitalist consolidation (at least those practices that are recognised as 'art' and 'architecture'; of course there are many forms of practice that escape or have successfully evaded such definition, and long may these practices lie hidden from our inquisition). Is it possible to evade value, as it is understood as an 'economy of culture' (to quote the title of the conference where this thinking was originally tried out)? Can systems and processes of *devaluation* produce an alternative logic? Can we name devaluation, rather than a process of fiscal, reputational and perhaps personal loss, as the letting go of forms of value that are produced by capital and the loosening of the grips of property and privacy that are enmeshed within the keening of value desire? Devaluation might not mean 'not caring', could involve the cutting loose of the property and possessive forms of value that are so endemic to our structural affiliations.

Contemporary art and architecture are (have always been?) mired together in a substrate of value. From the way we educate architects and artists to the way we design galleries, houses, businesses, cities, the meritocratic process of individuating ascendancy is based on economic valuation. To devalue is at once a psychic and political attempt to decouple our love of things from the kind of love that demands individual possession. In a system that produces rampant inequality in the arts, destroys lives and promotes the privatisation of wealth, can we uncouple forms of value from accumulation? Devaluation can be caring less about teleology and paying more attention (but not in a libidinal-economic sense) to autochthonous knowledge and process in the sense that 'value' assumes accumulation and a telos, whilst 'devaluation' proposes not simply a different end in the future, but a concept of value/s without an 'end'. In this sense, devaluation comes close to many forms of anarchist thought and is certainly informed by feminist and ecological critiques of possession. But it is also a demand that we pay less attention to the look of things, quite literally, learning from the radical redistribution techniques of the squatting and community arts movements, as well as various indigenous understandings of matter and use. Here is the danger in Massumi's text: In contemporary art and architecture, through different processes, the style of an object or construction may bear relation to the aesthetics of redistribution in anarcho-communitarian ways, but not to the *fact* of redistribution, dispossession, radical delegation. These are/were the forms of the community arts movement both as process and content: as Fisher says, being involved in community art necessitates 'that the community artists maintain a low profile – encourage rather than lead – and recognise that it is a slow process.'

Value: how it is produced: homologation

The Albany Empire, and the network of community centres that it belongs to, have epitomised forms of de-homologation that struggle to exist in contemporary art and architecture collaborations (and still do where community arts centres have managed to survive with such an ethos intact despite the corporatisation of public funding and its attendant demand for novel architectures). This is reflected directly in the architecture from an amateur or user's perspective: the niceties of design were less important than the function of community sustenance and provision. The ecology of relations, their careful and often difficult balance, more important than the outwards appearance of the building.

Six years ago whilst teaching at Goldsmiths I carried out an extensive research project with my colleague Suhail Malik in which we analysed the contemporary art market in the UK.¹⁴ This analysis was propelled by a number of factors, not least the fact that, as pedagogues on one of the world's most famous MFA programmes, we recognised the contradiction between that which we were teaching (broadly speaking, theories of cultural value as formations of financial and affective economies influenced primarily by Marx, Bourdieu and their sociological descendants as well as emerging theories of soft power and platform capitalism) and what we were helping to produce (market-ready artists with a focus on privatised socio-cultural milieus of practice emanating through the globally dominant and historically founded studio model of practice). This research involved a detailed analysis of histories of art dealerships and developments of galleries and museums to accommodate the increasing but historically devised patronage model formulated initially during the Italian renaissance (although even this 'starting point' has antecedents through the church and, perhaps even more substantially, within the feudal enclosure of forms of aesthetic production so brilliantly described by scholars such as Isobelle Stengers and Sylvia Federici¹⁵). In particular I was interested in what the art market analyst Raymonde Moulin called, in her analysis of its movement from Paris to New York in the 1950s, homologation.¹⁶ This term, drawn from the language of financial management, means the process of approval and confirmation of value and, as such, demonstrates very clearly that value is a fiction based on the technical amassing of ratings (or taste) rather than something with any form of intrinsicity. The stock market is a method of homologation, as is the local vegetable market's settling of the rough price of a bunch of carrots, as is the demand on academics to rate the performance of their students. Today homologation works at lightning speed in flash trading and digital currency forms. In art, homologation is what dealers, gallerists, auction houses and art consultants do: it serves to describe the coming together of value forms to produce what, in our more basic world, we might call, in the end, cost. What Suhail and I found, of course, was the impossibility of 'breaking open' the art market's process of homologation in a bid to expose distributions of power and money, which was, essentially, our aim.

With this research we were joined by an art dealer, a cultural entrepreneur, a number of gallerists, a museum director and, eventually, an art fair director, all of whom were interested in contributing significantly to our research. We learned a lot from them, of course. What we were more naïve about was the condition of their interest. In our analysis, in order to produce the forms of redistribution that were our aim, we needed to prove the ways in which

individual works of art produced value through a complex matrix of primary and secondary market sales data, what we called ‘artwork biographies’ (how value changed as diverse artworks are made, displayed, traded, stored, retraded, rediscovered, displayed, etc). In other words, an unpacking of artworld homologation processes, where and how value is settled. This specific methodology, if perfected, might more generally produce more accurate figures for the worth of (and thus, in our view, unequal fictions produced by) the art market (and more generally, the cultural sphere). We were, in Massumi’s terms, trying to take back value. Rationally speaking, it is not surprising that people whose jobs it is to produce that value (dealers, galleries, auction houses, museums, art fairs) would both be interested in, and keen to ambiguate, such data-driven provability. On one hand, the cultural sphere is in constant search for modes through which to prove its worth, whether in order to increase public funding in a sector that is formed through privatised practices, to change tax legislation, to increase property investment as a correlate to market mechanisms in culture or produce support structures for public-private income initiatives in the arts. On the other, the ambiguation of price is a central aspect of valuation through status. In the end, the research project failed: we were unable to collect the pivotal data on price to triangulate with other factors such as reputational and affective value produced by exhibition worth, global reach, representation, etc.

The context of value: the violence of modernist epistemologies and colonial power

All of the above needs to be contextualised within the framework of Westernly geopolitics and infrastructures of power. It goes without saying that both ‘art’ and ‘architecture’ are concepts produced by historical aesthetic frames of value operationalised by the development of physical and metaphysical structures of the occidental trade routes, epistemologies of social hierarchy, power broadcast through coloniality and colonial administration to many other parts of the world in narcissistic, violent and engorged form. The categorisations of work forms – whether they be craft-based or organisational, or even both, has historical bearing on shifts in cartographic power at both local and trans-local levels (as it does on the process of devaluation, a method of different valuation so often deputised to the poor, the unofficial, the hippie, the indigenous). Mapping the territory involves categorisation: submitting objects to order; submitting souls to the count, forcefully eradicating magical purposes and anthropophargic uses (this has bearing on and relates to forms of planetarity thought and post-anthropocenic notions of life). What shadows do the categories ‘art’ and

‘architecture’ cast across other understandings of the relation between shelter, pleasure, toil and living? Between gender and work, sex and work, day and night?

Changing the frame: devaluation, alternative valuation.

One of the critical calls we hear from the environmental movement concerns degrowth. Environmentalists warn that continued expansion not only affects the availability of resources and increases what Neil Smith called the unevenness of global development, but that we need to disentangle ourselves psychically from the concept of growth *per se*.¹⁷ Here the non-teleological – non-ending – practice of devaluation takes on a richer meaning close to Giorgio Agamben’s idea of *impotenza*:

If there is today a social power [potenza], it must see its own impotence [impotenza] through to the end, it must decline any will to either posit or preserve right, it must break everywhere the nexus between violence and right, between the living and language that constitutes sovereignty.¹⁸

It is clear that contemporary art is caught up in growth addiction, and its relationship to architecture feeds this addiction through both processes of commissioning and affective and ideological intimacies. How can we counter such a frightening and destructive process? Albany Empires are one answer. The Albany Empire repurposes the cultural economy through a redistribution – or resettlement – of value. Howell, Killick, Partridge & Amis, though celebrated at the time within the architectural press, may not have been the most radical architectural office in their ideological commitment to building alternative paradigms for local, social, equitable life in Deptford, but in a sense, this does not matter, as has been explicated. All they had to do was build a shell for such processes. The Albany Empire is almost literally just that; a shell for use.

Devaluation is not a paradigmatic concept of loss, although forms of loss will have to be undertaken: the loss of power, demeritocratisation within the arts, the loss of ‘empty’ space, the loss of psychic and actual property. We need to learn to let go of value. How might this work in practice? In the UK the continued investment through public-private initiatives into new arts’ buildings needs to stop. Instead the money should be spent on strategies of dissimulation, not dictated and managed by cultural quangos and government agencies but by local community leaders and groups who come together through shared matters of concern.

Devaluation also necessitates the real adjustment to fiscal value of art commodities on the art market: at least we need to design an economic infrastructure in the arts that is diversified at real rather than simply aesthetically organised investment level.

Devaluation in this sense means not worrying so much about the preciousness of commodities – it is a socialist call for the spread not just of fiscal amenities but also of the psychic social transfer of value within art – from the few, to the many contexts and communities in which it exists. The Community Arts Centre is by no means a perfect model, but it is at least a model that practices caring for people over the objects of profit.

¹ See: Curating Architecture <https://art.gold.ac.uk/research/archive/curating-architecture/index2.html> [accessed 18 March 2020]

²In the context of early twentieth century Harlem, Saidiya Hartman recognises the regulatory nature of the Settlement Movement, a cross-national precursor to Community Arts Centres, when she quotes Jane Addams, co-founder of the Hull House Settlement in Chicago, on the need for urban social reform in the pursuit of “civilising agencies and processes.” Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives Beautiful Experiments* (London: Serpents Tail, 2019), p. 220.

³ ‘They came out of hippydom, the Third Eye certainly did, a sort of psychaedelic squat where you do everything in one room and suddenly all these arts are mixed together.’ Francis McKee, Director, CCA Glasgow in Angela McManus, ‘CCA at 40: a look back at the arts base that opened as the Third Eye Centre’, Glasgow Evening Times, 27 April 2015.

<https://www.glasgowtimes.co.uk/news/13306677.cca-at-40-a-look-back-at-the-arts-base-that-opened-as-the-third-eye-centre/> [accessed 18 March 2020]

⁴ Gail Fisher, Editorial, Community Arts Conference Report 1979 (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Tyneside Free Press, 1979), p. 6.

⁵ See: <https://www.thealbany.org.uk/about-us/history/> [accessed 18 March 2020]

⁶ See: Past tense at <https://pasttenseblog.wordpress.com/2016/07/14/today-in-london-radical-history-albany-community-centre-gutted-by-probably-fascist-arson-attack-deptford-1978/> [accessed 18 March 2020]

⁷ Geraint Franklin, Howell, Killick, Partridge & Amis (Swindon/London: Historic England/RIBA, 2017), p. 142.

⁸ See Alastair Fair, *Modern Playhouses: An Architectural History of Britain's New Theatres, 1945-1985* (Oxford: OUP, 2018) pp. 240-241.

⁹ See Eleanor Dickens, ‘An introduction to Joan Littlewood's theatre practice’, British Library 2017. <https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/an-introduction-to-joan-littlewoods-theatre-practice> [accessed 20 June 2020]

¹⁰ ‘In the technocratically constructed, written, and functionalized space in which the consumers move about, their trajectories form unforeseeable sentences, partly unreadable paths across a space. Although they are composed with the vocabularies of established languages (those of television, newspapers, supermarkets, or museum sequences) and although they remain subordinated to the pre-scribed syntactical forms (temporal modes of schedules, paradigmatic orders of spaces, etc.), the trajectories trace out the ruses of other interests and desires that are neither determined nor captured by the systems in which they develop.’ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: UCP, 1984), p. 18.

¹¹ A contemporary example of contradictory values between architecture’s professional and artistic valuation and its capitalisation of community value can be examined in the case of the British architectural collective Assemble, whose locally contested ‘anti-gentrification’ development of Granby Four Streets CIC in Liverpool went on to win the 2015 Turner Prize, awarded by Tate Britain. See:

<https://assemblestudio.co.uk/projects/granby-four-streets-2> [accessed 20 June 2020].

¹² Brian Massumi, *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value: A Postcapitalist Manifesto* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018) p. 2.

¹³See: Andrea Phillips, ‘Pavilion Politics’ in LOG 20 Autumn 2010 (New York: Anyone Corp, 2010)

¹⁴ See: Suhail Malik and Andrea Phillips, ‘Tainted Love: Art’s Ethos and Capitalization’ in (eds.) Lind & Velthuis, Art and its Commercial Markets: A Report on Current Changes and with Scenarios for the Future

(Berlin: Sternberg, 2012)

¹⁵ See: Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers, *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) and Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004).

¹⁶ See: Raymonde Moulin, *De la valeur de l'art* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995).

¹⁷ See: Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (London: Verso, 1984).

¹⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Mean without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) p. 113.