

Take the Money and Run: Power, Money and Counter-Power, 19th June 2019
A response by Lewis Church

Introduction and context

On Wednesday 19 June 2019 the Live Art Development Agency (LADA) and the Managing the Radical Action Group hosted *Take the Money and Run: Power, Money and Counter-Power* at LADA's base at the Garrett Centre in East London.

Taking a moment to reflect upon some real successes achieved by campaigns such as Liberate Tate, the event invited artists, activists, curators, producers, researchers and anyone engaged with these issues to share ideas about how we might build for future struggles to free art and artists from their dependency on the proceeds of toxic capitalism. What might a politically and environmentally responsible approach to money in the arts look like today and tomorrow?

The power of capital to “cover” its tracks has increased with the financialization of everyday life: derivates, dark pools, and privatized debt hide networks of corruption and money laundering the world over. In parallel, the power of arts organisations to rehabilitate these agents of disaster capitalism through little and big acts of ‘art washing’ has also increased and come under sustained criticism and sporadic disruption in the radical organizing of arts activists. In these globalized contexts of power and corruption, who is able today to ‘take the money and run’?

Take the Money and Run: Power, Money and Counter-Power featured contributions from **Jess Worth** of Culture Unstained, **Jane Trowell** of Platform, **Elona Hoover** of The Common House, **Natasha Nkonde** of Edge Fund, writer and artist **Morgan Quaintance**, and **Cecilia Wee** and **Amit Rai** from the Managing the Radical Action Group.

Take the Money and Run: Power, Money and Counter-Power built on [Take the Money and Run](#), a 2015 event on ethics, funding and art organised by LADA, Artsadmin and Home Live Art as part of their Catalyst-supported research into ethical fundraising, and produced in collaboration with Platform.

Take the Money and Run: Power, Money and Counter-Power was the third in a series of Gatherings around the topic of ‘Managing the Radical’ (MtR) organised in part by the MtR Action Research Group in collaboration with LADA’s [Restock, Rethink, Reflect Five project on Managing the Radical](#). The event was supported through Catalyst and the Collaborations Fund of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Queen Mary University of London.

The Live Art Development Agency and the Managing the Radical Action Group commissioned Lewis Church to respond to *Take the Money and Run: Power, Money and Counter-Power*.

Rejecting Money, Accepting Money
by Lewis Church

It is not only the quality and content of artworks that require ethical interrogation and reflection. How artists pay for their practice and where that funding comes from are equally important considerations, particularly in the current moment of insidious late-stage capitalism. More than ever before, artists and activists are questioning the processes of ‘artwashing’ and other initiatives engaged in by the corporations that are destroying the planet and the people who live on it.¹ Returning to issues outlined in 2015 at the first *Take the Money and Run* event, this evening of presentations at the Live Art Development Agency under the subtitle of ‘Power, Money and Counter-Power’ was a chance to consider the current state of arts funding, highlight issues with existing models, and share strategies to negotiate the difficult questions of sponsorship and corporate philanthropy.

Taking place as part of [Restock, Rethink, Reflect 5](#), which is focused on the topic of ‘Managing the Radical’, it did so by giving a platform to artists and activists whose practices engaged with these debates in separate but overlapping areas: as funders, as those accepting funding, and as researchers and policy makers. Those of us who participated in the discussion as an audience were asked to consider how and why money circulates through the worlds of art and performance at the macro level, whilst also reflecting on how we might develop personal policies and strategies to negotiate this landscape.

The reengagement with these ideas, four years after that earlier event (which Mary Paterson’s response to can be found [here](#)), is itself reflective of one of the most important imperatives that emerged from the discussion – the need to continually reassess policies, best practice and personal boundaries. Referred to by researcher and activist Elona Hoover as an “ongoing critical evaluation” and by writer, artist and broadcaster Morgan Quaintance simply as “vigilance”, the idea that individual decisions and policies need to be re-examined in light of new developments and awarenesses is a challenge to the idea that simply *having* an ethical funding policy is enough. As was reiterated many times by speakers, such policies need to be continually revised to accommodate new information and changing attitudes.

¹ ‘Artwashing’ refers to the use of culture to distract from the ethical objections to a particular corporation or business practice. E.g. An oil companies’ sponsorship of a wildlife photography competition (Shell Wildlife Photographer of the Year, 2006-2008).

Return to, and consider again, the standards by which you judge your willingness to apply for or to accept money. This regular revision of where ethical boundaries lie is the only way to avoid the assimilation of resistance that major cultural institutions and corporate interests are so good at.

As Jane Trowell, of pioneering social and ecological arts collective [Platform](#) suggested, this process of revision is best understood as an ongoing practice in itself. Policy making can be personal, a method by which organisations and individuals articulate and reiterate where their lines lie and the basis on which they make those choices. The goal, as Trowell explained, is to develop questions to be asked of potential funders, rather than to create unchanging lists of acceptable or unacceptable sources. In the process of asking, answers come that may or may not be universally applicable to all organisations or artists, but are nevertheless based on a policy able to be tested and assessed at each turn.

This dual process of articulation and revision was at the core of the event, with speakers and conversation devoted to unpicking the tangle of politics, vested interests and problematic examples of art and finance sitting uneasily (or perhaps too easily) together. The presentations from the speakers asked the kinds of questions advocated for by Trowell, praised activist responses to hypocrisy and highlighted alternative models for fundraising and philanthropy rooted in a progressive outlook and solidarity.

Rejecting Money

But whilst moral imperatives and political conviction are of course important and necessary, any conversation around funding also involves a level of realpolitik. Artists need money to make their work and to support themselves whilst they do so. They are, as we all are, unavoidably constrained by the neoliberal pressures of modern society, a situation in which the advice to ‘take the money and run’ can seem enticing or necessary. But rather than using this to rationalise any compromise and in the absence of a complete restructuring of society, this reality could instead be a catalyst to force change within existing funding models, or to close them down and construct new ones in their place. Quaintance referred to his interest and reflection on the money artists need and its distribution through

commissioning structures as a focus on “the politics of production”, of the need to “attend to all levels of how money is allocated and infiltrates existing structures”. This attention is essential, as only it can provide the basis for a cogent policy.

Quaintance’s contribution was conducted in conversation with Jess Worth of [Culture Unstained](#), whose presentation on the campaign group’s efforts to pressure arts institutions to divest from fossil fuel and arms investments offered an example of direct protest that has had significant success in subverting the status quo. Their work rightly draws attention to the positive public image reaped by companies like BP from their sponsorship of major cultural events and institutions. Protesting against the infiltration of these companies has made clear the cost of allowing businesses destroying the planet to piggyback on culture by embarrassing organisations who are content to accept it. Whether through Culture Unstained’s direct action of [clamping themselves to the gates](#) of the BP Portrait Award gala or Liberate Tate’s [interventions](#) in the pseudo-public space of the Tate galleries, activist practices are a radical response to cultural complicity, one which makes plain unexamined or camouflaged conflicts of interest.

Recognising that the sponsorship of culture by these organisations is strategic, and designed to deflect the worst PR excesses of their global vandalism is one of the first steps to understanding the infiltration of money that Quaintance and Worth reference. Oil and weapons are huge and almost cartoonish in their horror, though, and there are other, far more insidious examples of compromised money at the heart of the art world. Whether the diversion of public funds to middle-management institutions ([siphoning off money that should go to artists](#)), the courting of the super-rich by galleries and museums or arts organisations with significant cultural capital but unethical business models, the questioning advocated for by Trowell and Quaintance is one that needs to be applied on a broad basis to all sources and uses of all funding. The dangers of conflating positive cultural output with ethical business is the effect that corporations chase, and they use an identification with the interesting, exciting and innovative to cover up the harmful and wrong.

As Worth went on to explain, even activism and radicalism itself is in constant danger of absorption and neutralisation by market-driven neoliberal cultural forces. These issues were

crystallised by the 2018 exhibition *Hope to Nope: Graphics and Politics 2008-18* at the Design Museum in London, discussion of which took up much of the later part of Quaintance and Worth's conversation. As a direct participant in both the original exhibition and subsequent protest, Worth outlined her realisation that the promise of the show, an exhibition of radical protest material, was being undermined.² During the exhibition's run it came to the attention of several of the artists involved that the Design Museum was also hosting a private function for the one of the world's largest arms companies, the Leonardo corporation. Artists marched into the gallery to reclaim their work, refusing to allow the institution to stage a show of progressiveness whilst facilitating the dealing of weapons. Leaving the gallery half empty, the removal of work was a clear sign of the inability (or unwillingness) of the institution to consider in detail the cognitive dissonance between a source of income and the artworks they displayed. The variety and scope of the work on show, and the solidarity displayed by the artists who removed their own, demonstrated how different protest movements and strategies can intersect with and reinforce others, the pressure from one group of activists to recognise a particular form of injustice or hypocrisy pointing in turn to others.

The removed work was later exhibited at a community venue under the revised title of *From Nope to Hope*, reclaiming some of the promise of the original show. Its new site of display at the Brixton Recreation Centre, free and open to the public, offered an instance of more hopeful outcomes to these conversations – a return to an open and accessible community model where the 'legitimisation' of major institutional support was not required. By working in solidarity, artists and activists bypassed the need for endorsement by an established locus of high culture, creating instead an exhibition that reflected the values of the work that it displayed.

The success of this artist-led alternative show raises a broader question, one which has a deep significance to the central question of negotiating money in the arts. What does the money being offered bring? This question was seeded in the conversation between Worth

² Hope to Nope exhibited graphic work that explored the 'intersections between design, technology, politics and protest' and included work from BP or Not BP, The Space Hijackers, Guerrilla Girls and Shepard Fairey.

and Quaintance and developed by each speaker over the event, an idea more fundamental than a simple choosiness over where artists accept funding and support from. The idea of rejecting money or institutionalisation can form part of an interrogative structure, used to explore the reasons artists have for accepting funding. Is it only through institutional patronage that artists are able to accrue cultural capital? Does recognition from existing structures legitimise their practice? What would it look like to move away from a reliance on compromised institutions to do this? Worth and Quaintance together agreed on the importance of reevaluating the notion of success itself, and pointed to the Brixton Rec exhibition as an example of an alternative model that bypassed the requirement of institutional permission or support. Ultimately the value of an opportunity like that originally offered by the Design Museum derives not from the display of objects, but through the giving over of space to activists.

Accepting Money

That reconsideration of the notion of what ‘success’ looks like might engender a funding ecology that moves away from the idea of competition. Speakers agreed that careful attention should be paid to the tyranny and inaccessibility of application forms, and the arms race of impact between organisations to account for their work. This is a contest that reflects the worst excesses of our neoliberal moment. At a time when we are all asked to constantly market ourselves as though we are a product, the linked notion that that the arts should justify themselves at every turn pushes the experimental to artificially account for its own success. Many opportunities open to artists to receive funding seem to almost by design preclude collective support.

In her discussion of ‘commoning’, a practice of shared endeavour and support, Elona Hoover spoke of undoing this process by creating “subversive alliances” to “imagine alternative economies”. It was a notion almost immediately applicable to the conversational themes that ran through the evening. What was the Brixton Rec exhibition, if not a commoning? It brought together individual practices in a shared venue of celebration. It was the participation of multiple artists that lent it weight. Legitimisation was arrived at through the

attention of a community rather than the name of an institution. Its significance came from sharing, and its impact was implicit rather than meticulously recorded.

This reimagining of impact was again raised through Natasha Nkonde's presentation on the work of [Edge Fund](#), an organisation that funds radical grass roots activism that would otherwise struggle to access money from trusts, foundations and more established sources. Funded by a small membership, Edge Fund operates under a rubric of radical transparency. It is an alternative to the funding bodies with barriers to application, developed by activists after a deep reflection on what was needed within the sector. Its existence is a direct challenge to what Nkonde called 'the expertise of being rich', or the undue influence that wealthy individuals have on the disposition of funding through their personal trusts and foundations. Edge Fund subverts the power dynamics between funder and funded, engaging in a conscious revaluation of their process of award by drawing on the expertise of previous funders. Their process is open and transparent to encourage applications from groups usually shut out of funding by the scale or content of their work, the impenetrability of processes or the closed circles of institutional support. Nkonde explained that the model of participatory grant giving practiced by Edge Fund is one where accountability is between those in the community around it, rather than a remote board or restricted panel. Their work functions on a notion of consensus rather than hierarchical endorsement.

As the final presentation, Nkonde's sharing of the work of the organisation was one which felt hopeful, providing a functioning example of responsible fundraising and concretising some of the concepts floated by Hoover, called for by Trowell and interrogated by Quaintance and Worth. For although each was distinct, the speakers at the event together provided an incredibly rich basis for the consideration of money in the arts. Whilst the evening ended with more questions than answers, more reflection than revelation, as Trowell suggested that is an entirely desirable state of affairs. Sometimes literally toxic money always waits in the wings, ready to use culture to guard against criticism and the existential crises that they face as industries. But by working together to develop more questions, artists, activists, researchers and organisations can use their cultural capital to call corporate capital to account or subvert it entirely. The legacy of the current cultural moment, with all its problems, could easily be the model for something new and better.