

ART REVIEW OXFORD

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issue



WORK

Editor's Note

Responding to the ongoing precarisation in the university, a major cause behind the most recent UCU strike, this issue addresses work: how we conceptualise it, grapple with it, inhabit it, collectivise it, and resist it. We reached out to the UCU to open our pages for them to present the recent situation and its “temporary” resolution that halted the strike. During the strike action, we organized a teach-out with the editorial team and Ruskin School of Art BFA students to discuss the changing relationship between the institution of the university and students in light of COVID changes and the strike. Frank Wasser offers us a closer reflection on the physical walls of the institution, while Serubiri Moses unpacks how the experience of work moved Howardena Pindell toward articulating an anti-racist position. We’ve worked to put this issue together for you, our reader, our shared community, and to provide a platform for urgent discussions and writing - we are eternally grateful to our contributors for their generosity. For us, like our contributors, this is work but not our job. That said, I am uneasy with how to follow that last line and what we actually should be advocating for within it...

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Precaritisation, Negotiation, Industrial Action: UCU Rising

Tim LaRock

The University and College Union (UCU) represents academic and academic-related staff across the higher education sector. The union, which represents workers at more than 150 universities, has been in national dispute with higher education bosses for years, fighting against the erosion of our pensions, pay, and conditions. At the heart of these disputes are issues important for the Higher Education (HE) sector, but not unique in the UK industrial landscape. From postal workers, to railway workers, to junior doctors and nurses, the existing economic order is failing workers across the country.

Here at the University of Oxford, our branch of the UCU has taken industrial action in these disputes over the past few years, including the most recent national industrial action that started in November of 2022 with Action Short of a Strike in the form of working to contract, followed by 16 full days of strike action spread over the past few months. This strike action has been both difficult and invigorating, with lively rallies and picket lines across Oxford sustaining our energy and confidence as we face lost work and pay deductions.

As in any union, our members would always prefer not to resort to strike action. However, offers from our employers have consistently fallen well short of addressing the erosion of conditions in our sector. Over the past decade we have seen growing working hours, loss of job security, and lost value of pay, conditions that have forced many workers to leave the sector.

Industrial action is our collective voice saying to employers: enough is enough. Only fair and secure working conditions can allow us to deliver the world class research expected of us and the full education our students deserve.

At the heart of our worsening job conditions is casualisation. In many professionalized workforces, a permanent job can be reasonably expected after a level of education or certification is attained. This is not so for many academics and academic-related staff. Prospects for permanent employment are few and far between. Instead, universities hire academics and professional services staff on fixed-term or even zero-hours contracts to deliver teaching, research, and administration. These contracts may last for a couple of years in the best cases, but 6-month or term-by-term contracts are common. Early career members like postgraduate teachers are more likely to be stuck in casualised work. There are some in our sector who need to reapply for their own job every few months, despite employers knowing what amount of work they will require in the future. In fact, the University of Oxford is being sued by two former employees over the “uberisation” of academic work.¹

¹ Rachel Hall, “Academics Sue Oxford University over ‘Uberisation’ of Teaching Contracts,” *The Guardian*, 23 January 2023.

The effects of casualisation reverberate across the sector. Without job security, career-vulnerable academics feel forced into accepting overwork conditions for low pay, in some cases working on multiple different contracts for the same employer. It also makes it nearly impossible to plan for the future, since even the best fixed-term contract will expire and potentially require a move for a new job. Casualisation also exacerbates existing inequalities, such as the documented pay gaps along lines of gender, race/ethnicity, and disability. Finally, for professional services and administrative staff, casualisation leads to substantial staff turnover by design, which then creates more hiring, training, and retaining work at all levels.

Even workers on secure contracts have seen conditions worsen. Real terms pay has fallen behind inflation by about 25% since 2009. That means that compared to someone employed in the sector 15 years ago, we are working a staggering 3 months for free each year. Low wages not only make life difficult for those of us already in the sector, they also keep talented workers away from the UK.

It is not only our immediate pay and conditions that have been under attack. Last year our pension, the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS), was cut based on a valuation carried out in March of 2020 at the worst of the pandemic downturn. The cut reduced eventual retirement benefits by about one third on average. This is the latest in a long fight over the scheme, with university bosses trying to reduce their liability in the long-term, while workers fight to keep the defined benefit scheme alive and healthy.

These conditions have led to two formal disputes with the employers. The first is with Universities UK (UUK), the employer body with which we negotiate changes to the USS pension scheme, where we are demanding that the cuts imposed last year are reversed and that changes to the scheme must be made more responsibly in the future. In a joint statement released March 15, UCU and UUK announced that there is agreement on prioritizing the restoration of pension benefits and this process has been set in motion.

In a recent formal consultation our membership voted to formally Note this progress, indicating that we accept the progress of the negotiations, but will not formally end the dispute. Instead we stand ready to take industrial action should it be necessary to hold employers to their word as the restoration process unfolds. While this is not a complete victory yet, it is worth celebrating that our industrial action earlier this year - as well as local marking and assessment boycotts at over 20 universities last year - have brought us this far. Only the sustained credible threat of further industrial action can hold the employers to finishing the restoration.

Our members have rejected this proposal as inadequate. Now our negotiators will go back to the table with UCEA and demand an offer that includes concrete gains and commitments on the issues. To up the pressure on the employers, we have now commenced a national Marking and Assessment Boycott (MAB) against UCEA to force them back to the negotiating table with an offer including a pay uplift that addresses the cost of living crisis, as well as meaningful, measurable, and enforceable national action on closing gaps in pay equality, reducing workloads, and curbing the scourge of casualisation.

One of our most powerful industrial tools, a MAB will make it difficult for universities to progress or graduate students. We do not take this action lightly - it is the kind of last-resort pressure that a trade union only undertakes when all other reasonable avenues of negotiation have been exhausted. The responsibility for ending this dispute lies with the employers. We know from the widespread threat of 100% pay deductions for MAB participation that the threat of a national boycott scares university managers. We also know that students - tired of being treated as consumers - will see through employers' attempts to pit us against each other, and that they will place the blame squarely where it belongs: with employers who refuse to negotiate real solutions to real problems in the sector.

Dr. Timothy LaRock is a UCU member and Co-Secretary for Membership and Recruitment for the Oxford branch, and a Postdoctoral Research Associate in the Oxford Mathematical Institute.

The second dispute is with the University and College Employers Association (UCEA), a different employer body with whom we negotiate over pay and conditions. Known in UCU as the Four Fights dispute, it includes pay, pay equality, casualisation, and workload, all discussed above. On pay, a 5% pay uplift has been imposed on our members for this year without our democratic consent, while inflation has been consistently measured above 10%. The employers say that pay negotiations are exhausted, but we have not ended this dispute.

On the pay-related issues, after confidential negotiations mediated by the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS), we were merely offered Terms of Reference for further time-limited confidential negotiations that would end in October 2023 or February 2024 depending on the issue. The outcome of these negotiations was to be frameworks that would then require local implementation, meaning that individual branches would have to enter into local negotiations to win any concrete gains.

Teach-Out on Education and Work

*Elleanna Chapman, Xinyue Liu,
Harmanpreet Randhawa, Ashkan Sepahvand,
Jason Waite*

In the midst of the recent UCU union strike, Art Review Oxford organised a teach-out at a local pub to discuss the role of labor, work, and study and how it is altering the university as an institution post-COVID.

Ashkan Sepahvand: There is a lot of doom and gloom about the situation with the strike, with classes canceled, and scrutiny on what it means for education. It leads me to think about the present Bachelor of Fine Art (BFA) students at the Ruskin; how everyone has lived through the COVID times where the experience of school and the normative expectations about how learning takes place was upended with distant learning only for a strike to happen a year later. Teachers aren't available and the ethical questions arise: for example, do I go into the studio building or is that crossing the picket line? Looking at the many strike days happening this term, it seems as though the term is almost canceled. But I question the way we fetishise the notion of the university as an institution and the way older people are now looking at present students as the "lost generation" because they didn't get a "good" university education. It makes me wonder what is actually going on within the structure of the university, as the university offers a framework for study but that is not what actually constitutes study.

Study is the way you organise yourself with your peers within the infrastructure, and I was wondering within the gaps and fractures of the time of COVID and then the strike, were there interesting moments of self-organisation or alternative study? And how does all of this change your perception of the university and what has been your experience in this institution?

Harmanpreet Randhawa: I'm in my third and final year, but it was hard to have expectations around university as my first year was the COVID year. As an artist, I feel like COVID actually helped me. I didn't have to do my A-Level exams and when I got into Oxford I was relieved that I could read and make without thinking about presenting it anywhere or getting it marked by anyone so I really thought of those three months as my foundation period.

Then I came to Oxford for the first term and got my studio, but then COVID hit. I went home for the second term but after having a term with a studio it was a bit difficult to produce at home. But it was through these moments that I realised what being an artist means to me, which is about working with what you have. For example, working with pieces and fragments. At the time I was creating collages, then scanning them, and at the end of year I made an artist book.

In the moment I felt like it was just something I did but now I look at it and I'm like wow that was kind of exciting and it is not that far conceptually from what I am doing now even when the time and conditions are quite different. Other things which were slightly annoying were the three-hour anatomy lessons in front of a laptop and we never had them in person. But it felt like teachers were giving a lot of effort to make classes happen.

During that time our student cohort organised our own shows and initiatives. For example, someone set up a zoom call where different performances took place and it was open to the entire school. It seems at that moment it was easier to do those type of initiatives. There was something that was pushing us to connect with one another, perhaps the condition of separation. In the first term people did walks in groups of six and then in the third term we could have big groups of people in the park with music, drinking, and picnic vibes. It was more spontaneous with people reading poems or doing actions. For example, someone would say, I wrote this thing and then they would read it out and then the group could provide feedback.

Xinyue Liu: Do you feel like your conditions of work under COVID are similar to the situation now with the strike? How would you compare the amount of freedom you had under COVID with now, where the strike disrupts your schedule?

Elleanna Chapman: My routine has been disrupted as I'm not going into the studio. In addition, my practice is political so it has been holding me accountable when it comes to strike solidarity. It's not like there are people picketing in front of the Ruskin School of Art, but I do understand that the picket line is in front of all Oxford University buildings and that includes the Ruskin. So my absence at the studio is that symbolic visible invisibility of me not being there, as usually I would be there everyday. In regards to my labor as an art student, I haven't stopped working, I'm just doing work at home as I can't just take eighteen days off in one term as my supervisor would kill me.

I don't enjoy the strike but I understand it because if I were a UCU union member I would strike. My boyfriend's mother is a lecturer at University of Surrey and it's really difficult as she isn't taking from the strike fund because other employees earn even less and need it more. The strike opens up these relationships of sacrifice and solidarity, it is not to romanticise the action, it is a necessity to put the government in its place.

Xinyue Liu: I had a teacher that told me before I applied for my DPhil, "if you want to be an artist you should never be in a university." This came from someone who teaches at a university but never studied at one. What does studying art at a university mean to you? Do you consider your studio work some kind of unpaid labor?

Elleanna Chapman: In my situation I am making art and consider my student loan as my payment. After I graduate, I am looking at what other institutions can offer, like a bursary from the Royal Drawing School. If I want to move to London after I graduate, I am going to find that financially difficult. An institution can give me that support. But I do feel a separation between my practice and the institution. I am making my art for me, and I happen to be in this institution. I do have an awareness of labor and money; I'm an aspiring artist and it is difficult if you don't have mum and dad to pay for it and you have to generate your own income. I am aware of the time that I put into my practice, the time researching, the time making, and everything in-between. I am also conscious of how I am paying my bills with my student loans with Oxford money, but what happens after I leave the safety net of my student loan? How am I going to make art and pay my bills? So this year I have been trying to work on developing a career as an artist. It feels like an unviable, really difficult path, and people ask me what I'm going to do with my BFA degree and I say I want to make art, and they respond, "but what JOB are you going to get?" I know I am invested in my practice and making art is what I want to do, but I also realise my life is dictated by the laws of the economy.

Ashkan Sepahvand: I wonder about the relationship between the lecturers and the perception of them, when during COVID one could see inside their bedrooms or kitchens and realise that they are real people with a home. Then during strike times when it becomes clear that lecturers are employees who are not necessarily making the money that they need to survive. This palpable material reality brings into question what relating to one another really means. I remember assuming for the longest time that if someone is teaching at a university that they are a professor. Then I learned that there are different levels—some are making more money than others and some might not even have a contract. That made them more real for me as people, but the ways they might be struggling is not always revealed.

Harmanpreet Randhawa: Starting university during COVID times meant everyone was quite vulnerable to begin with and I feel the Ruskin was quite open about that from the beginning and discussions around that vulnerability were encouraged. I think talking about feelings and emotions was something that I appreciated about my time at Ruskin. I started wondering whether I would fit in as many of us do, and it was actually talking to the lecturers who were willing to share their experiences of being at institutions that really helped me to understand that I am here for a reason. Those conversations with lecturers helped me to trust them and with trust comes respect.

Ashkan Sepahvand: I think it is important to note the level of precarity of academic labor at the Ruskin. The ones who have the most to lose are the ones striking; They are mainly either women or people of colour. The full time faculty is almost completely white and has been majority male. The lecturers that I or we want to spend time and have encounters with, have the most precarious relationship with the university. They also tend to be the ones who show up the most and put in the most labor.

Elleanna Chapman: Yes, and it feels uncomfortable to reach out to them because as a student you don't want to ask them for more unpaid labor.

Jason Waite: One of the important framing elements of this conversation that Ashkan set out was around the notion of study, which has been articulated by the theorists Fred Moten and Stefano Harney in the book *Undercommons* relating to an alternative notion of shared learning and the actual value of being in such a community in contrast to formal classes and the university as an institution. Personally, I feel a little bit uneasy about the formulation of the undercommons as needing to steal time and/or resources from the university because the Ruskin is a small intimate department and we are also privileged as being or having been Oxford University students which is generally well supported. You all mentioned earlier about feeling invested in the Ruskin and I do as well, and within that I acknowledge that this is also part of the operation of the university to make people feel "invested" in it as a way for them to happily contribute free labor, yet as Oxford University and its colleges have a lot of sway in the labor negotiations, I do wonder if working constructively within the framework is possible?

Ashkan Sepahvand: I think it is a bit more subtle. On the one hand there is the aspect of a student loan that you have to pay back, which means you're literally indebted. On the other hand I think what the institution tries to create is a subject who is affectively indebted to the university—"thank goodness I was able to get this education or go to this prestigious school." It is this form of gratitude that I think Moten and Harney are trying to break down. For example, what happens if you don't pay back your debt or re-route what is being given to you? What happens if you don't consider the loan and credit that you have to pay forward to society? Rather, you're "stealing it," making it your own or appropriating it. That connects to their proposal of study as being just what you do. It can look like just having drinks or going for a walk together. Study can be all of these things that we don't normally consider being a part of study.

Elleanna Chapman is an interdisciplinary artist and student at the Ruskin School of Art

Xinyue Liu is a DPhil artist-researcher at Ruskin who studies the cinema of ecological grief.

Harmanpreet Randhawa is an artist based Oxford, his practice deals with the notions of longing, belonging and desire.

Ashkan Sepahvand is an artist, writer, translator and DPhil candidate in Fine Art at the Ruskin.

Jason Waite is editor of Art Review Oxford.

Instructions for recreating the surface of the Irish Museum of Modern Art or the exterior walls of a home I can no longer call home or some of the backside walls of the University of Oxford.

Frank Wasser

I am typing these words sitting snug between the MDF boards and the concrete cavity blocks which make up one of the many walls in the art school. I stayed here overnight again, and nobody noticed, again.

I have slept between the walls of the art school for 30 days over the course of the last 2 years. The question of why I am doing this is for the time being not so relevant. Besides which, I don't think I am the only one here so maybe somebody else will answer this question for you.

I am rewriting a small appendix from my Thesis.

I type.

I am typing.

Back to the intended form.

Things you will need:

- Lime
- Cement
- Sand
- Arts Council funding or the privilege of the many that surround you.
- Tarp or sheet
- A trowel
- A Bucket
- Pebbles (or other small natural items, eg.bones)
- A place you call home. (Rented properties may cause complications)

1. Backgrounds to be rendered should be examined for contamination, deterioration, surface roughness, suction and strength. Rigorously. Cardboard surfaces are inadequate. Most modern camping tents are made out of nylon and polyester and would also be deemed as inadequate surfaces.

2. Dust and contamination such as residues of concrete release agents, gypsum plaster, paint, other coatings, organic growth, salts, repressed memories and efflorescence lighting should be removed prior to rendering.

3. Salts and efflorescence should be removed by dry brushing, gently (non-metallic bristles). Other special precautions may need to be taken if this removal is not achievable or possible.

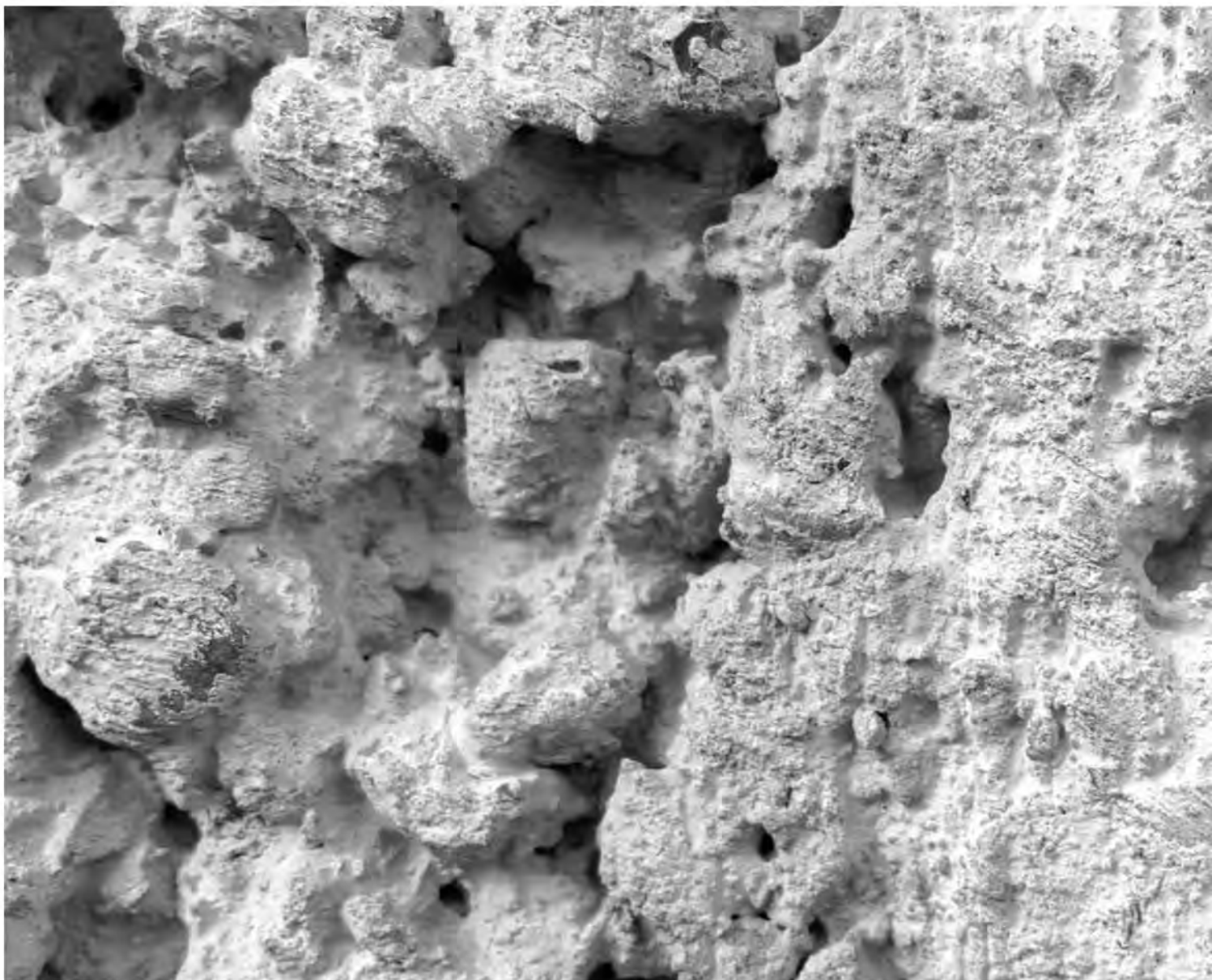
4. The line and flatness of the background should also be assessed to determine if the render can be applied to a uniform thickness or if dubbing out is required. Language should be considered as a means to communicate these processes but can also act as a natural barrier.

5. The background should be reasonably dry and free of frost or dampness, with a temperature of +5 °C or above at the time of rendering or other recommendations by the manufacturer followed. Dampness is commonly found in rented properties and is a characteristic of most state funded buildings.

6. Avoid dashing in the winter for ideal results. If the suction is very high, low or uneven the use of a preparatory treatment, metal lathing, mental health or special factory-made render should have been considered as part of the design.

7. It is important for the wall not to be too wet at the time of rendering. Ideally you would emigrate before applying any of these instructions. Nostalgia and anger will accentuate the premise of your labour. Any dampness will cause the structure to crack and break within weeks of application. In which case, therapy will be insufficient.





8. Walls that have recently been exposed to heavy rain should be allowed to dry out sufficiently before rendering is attempted. Do this by blowing your shivering breath in the direction of the surface. Do not attempt to apply render if any of the materials to be used are frozen or if there is a risk of frost damage before the render has taken an initial set. Do not apply in full sun as normal curing is impossible and fast drying will occur.

9. Appropriate surface preparation is vital for sound trouble free rendering. Examine all surfaces carefully to determine what if any preparation is needed. If practical, try a sample area to establish what will work. Whisper your biggest fears to the wall and spend whatever time you have telling the wall your full knowledge of colonialism.

10. If an area is affected by moss or algae ensure it is removed completely and prevent further growth by killing the spores. Always follow the manufacturers instruction when using any chemical based removal products. State advice is advised.

11. A hammer or tap test can be used to identify areas of loose, hollow or spalling material. Tap testing can be done by simple 'ringing' a painter's scraper (lightly held between finger and thumb) over the wall surface. Defective areas sound dull. Hammer testing uses a chipping hammer on the surface and again a defective area will have a dull sound compared to an area that is sound.



12. The whole area to be rendered will require testing. You will be required to assemble a large team of cultural practitioners (drawn from your close contacts) to establish whether or not you have the cultural permission to proceed with dashing. If you're using lime, sand and cement, first prepare the lime according to the manufacturer's instructions. Then mix 1 part lime, 6 parts sand and 1 part cement. The amount needed depends on the surface area you're covering. Apply the initial layer of the render with a trowel. Make a very smooth coat of render. You also may want to rake or score it to help the next layer adhere better. Leave it to dry overnight or for about 24 hours.

13. Before application, wash your pebbles and bones (or other materials) thoroughly to ensure they're ready to attach. Then mix more render and apply it to the wall on top of the first layer smoothly and evenly. After this step, you're ready for the fun part.

14. Lay a tarp or sheet under a section of the wall; then take handfuls of pebbles and throw them at the wet wall. (Here you can also use a trowel) Alternatively fill your mouth with stones and spit them at the wet wall in anger. Some will stick, but others may fall to the ground and on the tarp – empty the fallen pebbles into your container periodically so as not to waste them. If you save enough you still won't be able to use them to build a house.

15. Results may vary. (See Images)

Bora Rex in Conversation with Uriel Orlow

As artist-in-residence at St. John's College for Trinity Term, Uriel Orlow staged *Reveries of Collective Walkers* in the Oxford Botanic Garden on June 12, 2022. The ambulatory reading performance saw participants read chosen texts about plants to the plants themselves. The plants “love the CO2 emitted in the act of reading”, Orlow explained.

This was followed by an evening screening of three of Orlow's films. *The Crown Against Mafavuke* (2016) and *Imbizo Ka Mafavuke Mafavuke's Tribunal* (2017) are part of a trilogy of films made in South Africa exploring conflicts, both historical and present-day, surrounding indigenous knowledge of plants.

In *The Crown Against Mafavuke*, Mafavuke Ngcobo (an inyanga herbalist tried by the white medical establishment in 1940 for so-called ‘untraditional behaviour’) is resurrected in a reenactment of his own court-case, while, in *Imbizo Ka Mafavuke*, he helps prepare an imagined people's tribunal against the bio-prospecting of modern pharmaceutical companies. Also screened was *The Fairest Heritage* (2016), a performative response to projected archival slides documenting the 1963 jubilee celebrations in Kirstenbosch, the national botanical garden of South Africa in Cape Town.

All three films form part of Orlow's ongoing examination of plants as stores of and agents in national and cultural history.

Bora Rex: Tell me a bit about *Reveries of Collective Walkers*. What is it and how did the idea come about?

Uriel Orlow: It's basically a group of people coming together, walking in a park or botanical garden (as it was here in Oxford) and reading texts about plants (or in which plants feature as protagonists) to the plants. Everybody could bring their interests, their area of study, different languages—we had texts in French and Latin and English and German. I'm interested in what collective reading can do. There are traditions of reading aloud and to other people, but it is something that we're doing less and less. Also, we've been separated from each other for two years, reading on our own, so I think trying to think of formats that bring us physically together is perhaps quite useful at the moment. But it is also connected, of course, to what I'm interested in as an artist, which is plants and thinking about plants as agents or actors rather than just backdrops.

B: The Botanic Garden is so ornamented that it is itself a curated space. How do you navigate the freedom of performance, where everyone involves things of their own, in such a strictly curated space?

U: I've been interested in botanical gardens for a while. They're a bit like colonial museums often, because many evolved with colonialism and the botanical exploration that went hand-in-hand with the expansion of the colonial project—looking for plants, bringing them back, studying them, seeing where else you could cultivate something. And then, of course, it also ties-in with a kind of rationalisation of nature, like through Linnaeus, who developed a kind of classification system where each plant, each living being, has one place. So, it's already a space that's conceptually quite rigid and regimented, as well as highly organised in terms of where plants are and how they are distributed. This event was something more connected to what in the history of art would be called a 'happening'. There is a kind of script to it, a basic script, but then it just takes its own course. It has its own flow. It goes a little bit counter to that regimented, structured space of the botanical garden and inserts something more organic, as it were.

B: Just showing up for it felt slightly like an act of non-conformity.

U: Yeah. I mean, we also had a conversation about how we're all taught not to speak in public to ourselves because it's considered a bit mad. So, to then be walking around reading a text aloud without an obvious audience—the only audience is the plants—is a little bit transgressive, I suppose, or subversive to certain social rules.

B: You have mentioned your interest in considering plants as witnesses to and agents in histories both national and on the level of individual communities. What is it about plants that makes them a useful centrepiece or test-case for these discussions of colonialism and ownership?

U: I guess one useful thing for me is that we don't often think about plants in that context. They are sort of forgotten or unacknowledged. And I think if you want to look at something afresh or, in my case, also obliquely, not necessarily to tell the story of a certain colonial history head-on—this happened, this ship arrived, then this happened, then this land was conquered—if you want to disrupt this linear historiography, plants can be quite 'useful', as it were, because they're not the obvious target. When we think about colonialism or any history for that matter, we don't think about plants.

There are limits, of course. There are dangers of anthropomorphisation. So, even the notion of witnessing, or of plants as more-than-human witnesses, has its limits because plants don't articulate their witnessing. Their testimony cannot be spoken. They are kinds of material witnesses. If we think about trees, trees can get several hundred years old. So, you have trees that have literally been around in the 1660s or 1750s. There is a particular tree I am thinking of and also worked on, in South Africa, where slaves were bartered and under the same tree the treaty was signed after the Boer war, where the Dutch handed over sovereignty of the Cape to the British. I'm interested in these complex histories and entanglements.

B: Almost like artworks, plants can be latently political but they have an aesthetic appeal that you have to imaginatively dig beneath.

U: Exactly. Actually, the notion of latency is very important for me. I often talk about latent archives, archives that are embedded in the material world and are not necessarily accessible in the conventional way you access an archive or document. I often use the analogy of analogue film, where you have an inscription of an image on a chemical emulsion but it's not visible. The film needs to be processed to become a negative and then it needs to be printed to become a positive. So, it's a kind of latent image that needs processing and I guess that processing is what I'm interested in.

B: So, they are histories that you have to learn how to read. A bit like a language, they require work to be able to understand.

U: Yes. And they require work again and again. It's not work that can be done once, which is the work that a monument would do. There are people like James E. Young who have studied monuments and how they actually promote forgetting. Once you put a monument somewhere, you commemorate a certain event and that's it. We no longer have to be engaged in commemoration; the monument is doing it for us. But I'm talking about active processes of reading and understanding—and of course, imagining is also a big part of it.

B: So, linking the idea of repeated action to the performative element of your work—either performances in situ like in the Botanic Garden or on film like *The Fairest Heritage*, a different kind of performance in a botanical garden—does a film allow that performative work to be ongoing and repeat itself?

U: Yes, because it's not like a historical treaty.

In this case, it's not a historical treaty on botanical nationalism and flower diplomacy during apartheid. It is there and it is what the film engages with, but it's done in a kind of playful way, in an interactive way. The actor, Lindiwe Matshikiza, engages with this archival film material, steps into it as it's projected, confronts it, and imagines a kind of different history. It needs us to read those images again and to engage with them. It's not a historical statement. This idea of processing and reading continues once the work is made and it needs the viewer.

B: You mentioned your films being 'playful' ways of doing that. Your films do draw attention to themselves as films quite playfully—the changing of costumes, characters shaving their hair and the editing meaning it's constantly being regrown and reshaven, or, in *Imbizo Ka Mafavuke*, as you intersperse black-and-white behind-the-scenes footage. Why is it effective for film to be playful and aware of itself as film?

U: I suppose playfulness is more inviting. It makes us engage. It's different from reading a 400-page book on apartheid South Africa. Of course, it doesn't have that historical or academic detail, but playfulness, I think, has a place and in the arts we can make use of it. About the film drawing attention to itself as a film, it comes from a slightly different angle in that I'm not trying to create a kind of absolute illusion or even a truth. So, that the film draws attention to its own constructed-ness—that it's clearly made, it's set-up and we see that set-up, we see that change of costume, or we see the filming going on at the same time—is a kind of *mise en abyme*, I suppose. It reveals itself as something that is constructed, a hermeneutical object. And playfulness is part of that. I think art has always been connected with playfulness.

Bora Rex makes things with paint, wood, celluloid, and words.

Review:
Screening Program
**The Genetically Altered Seed Breaks
the Rhythm of an Earthly Music**
Tate Modern
29 October 2022

Xinyue Liu

A flotilla of lilies, now still, now spill forward profusely under the unbearable weight of light, now leaking thin trickles of liquid lustre over an electric drumbeat. They pulsate with tides of purple glossiness—now full of life.

So mesmerising were the lilies, my reverie was cut short by the sobering realisation that they were a virtual simulation, a fanciful creature native to a London nightclub. The flowers, according to Lawrence Lek one of the six filmmakers in this Tate Modern film programme, feed on ‘the vibrational energy of sound rather than light.’¹ The intense life pouring from the flowers was computationally produced, a digital rendering of their counterpart in nature. The lilies bloomed with such vibrancy that I forgot for a moment their non-existence.

¹“Fragments of a Hologram Rose,” Feral File, Accessed January 5, 2023, <https://feralfile.com/artworks/temple-lily-26s>.

Flowers that were never there gave the simulation of life—a metaphor, perhaps, for the willing hallucination that is cinema. The programmers of *The Genetically Altered Seed Breaks the Rhythm of an Earthly Music* promise “a haunting, hallucinatory gathering where ecology and technology are kin.”² The subjects of the films vary in genre and method of depiction, thematically linked together by mostly featuring plants as protagonists.

The temple lilies prompted me to think: Can a filmic image with a dystopic tone generate a response towards nature, inviting a closer bond? After all, is it not self-defeating to long for luminescent plants that feed on sound instead of light while we still have countless wild lives on the edge of extinction? Lek, whose art often deals with simulation and artificial reality, had two works in the programme. He opened the programme with the fever dream of *Temple Lily* (2020) and closed with the rich, sonic Valhalla of *Dead Souls* (2020). *Dead Souls* has no image, exiling the audience to a hallucinatory realm filled with susurrating spirits. Listening to the soundscape in the theatre, I drew my knees closer and closer to my chest. I suppose if I were a lily I ought to be dancing. But with whom? People clubbing after the apocalypse?

² “The genetically altered seed breaks the rhythm of an earthly music,” Tate Modern, Accessed March 10, 2023, <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/genetically-altered-seed#:~:text=The%20genetically%20altered%20seed%20breaks%20the%20rhythm%20of%20an%20earthly%20music,-29%20October%202022&text=Kawchu%20otherwise%20known%20as%20the,the%20films%20in%20this%20programme>.

It is unclear who the dead souls are or where they come from. Yet anonymous ghosts permeate the programme. Dead Souls is part of an album composed after Lek lost a close family member. An invisible capitalist ghost contaminates the dripping white blood of the rubber tree in Adrián Balseca's *The Skin of Labour* (2016), as it then wanders into Jodie Mack's *Wasteland No. 1: Ardent, Verdant* (2017), a eulogy of technological wasteland written in the most invigorating tone, lending the colourful, rapid juxtaposition an undercurrent of agitation. More vividly, the victim of femicide returns to the site of her death, whispering her story to only the cacti that stood immobile in Colectivo Los Ingrávidos' *Coyolxauhqui* (2017). The common denominator for all the films in the programme is *unheimlichkeit*, the sense of being haunted—something is not quite right but one struggles to speak of it directly.

It is a choice to speak in cyphers when the subject of haunting is as pervasive as postcolonial and ecological violence. Counter Encounters, the curatorial and research group that organised the programme, uses the term 'ethnographic refusal' to speak about this type of reflective art practice. It aims to regard the subject matter as non-passive, practising a cinematic language that refuses the clarity of cut-through narratives. It is therefore fine to step into a story when the narrator has gone missing, as it is about being titillated by the opaque.

Another filmmaker, Kent Chan, decorates his short film *Tremors* (2021) with visitors at the Calcutta Botanic Garden, 'the largest colonial garden of European empires.'³ They were asked to hold their poses for so long that their stillness became eerie. This was Chan's visual experiment to reveal the absurdity of conservation practice under colonial rule and its lingering implication. The film draws inspiration from a Dutch seventeenth-century botanical treatise, *Hortus Malabaricus* (1678), whose illustration style predates the tradition of *naturaleza muerta*—dead nature or still life, a painting technique that fixes plants and carcasses in stiff, theatrical arrangements. Such paintings might preserve life, yet I feel the life it holds, regally flamboyant as it is, yearns for more life. It is cruel, Chan's film argues through these prolonged poses, to present a living body as a taxidermy specimen. Lives begin to tremble with confusion and impatience when asked to hold perfectly still.

3 "The Calcutta Botanic Garden, nineteenth century," Digital Encyclopedia of European History, Accessed April 6, 2023, <https://ehne.fr/en/encyclopedia/themes/ecology-and-environment-in-europe/environment-and-colonial-empires/calcutta-botanic-garden-nineteenth-century>.

The oxymoronic uneasiness of fixing something alive into a definitive spacetime prolongs into cinema. To be alive in front of the camera comes with the cost of the subject carrying its own death, as the photographed subject differs drastically from the one standing before the camera—the former lives permanently as a representation, while the latter continues its linear progress towards an eventual demise—this has been sufficiently and elegiacally elucidated by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (1980). Yet, one can also question the forms of violence that determine *lebensunwertes leben* ('life unworthy of life'). Not only is the arrangement of the group portrait a distant nod towards the colonial discriminating view of marginalised groups as vegetative specimens, it also brings to mind how capital masters nature—by accelerating nature's tempo. A plant's or animal's biological functions are manipulated as if it were a machine—a process known as 'real subsumption'—through interventions that include selective breeding and genetic engineering⁴. Living beings who cannot fend for themselves are deprived of their own pace. Uprooted, displaced, those who are first depicted as unworthy later become so—the 'quick' becomes the dead.

Chan's visual comparison, potent as it is, still risks rendering plants 'as symbolic enablers who call man into being.'⁵ Who knows what the plants really witnessed when we were not looking?

Perhaps that is the wrong question to ask. Scientists have long debated whether plants should be regarded as intelligent as despite lacking brains they display intelligent behaviours. The philosopher Stella Sandford, for example, aligns herself with the branch of neurobotany that considers the propensity for life as a fundamental form of intelligence. After all, is it not already an achievement to be alive and to sprawl across the Earth's surface? Sandford rebukes a common zoocentric framing of plant physiology, that is, an arbitrary ascription of animal-focused models to plant life. Questions common in popular science such as, can plants see, can they hear, do they feel, in fact stymie research on plant behaviours because they obscure how plants are sessile and adaptive in non-animal ways. Further, since we do not fully understand the complex chemical process through which plants function, any presumption of their 'feeling' may very well fall short of the depth and range of their ability.

How, then, should cinema deal with the 'stillness' of plants? What language should one use?

Minia Biabiany's brilliant short film *Musa* (2020) makes manifest colonial violence imposed on women's bodies by working with a musa flower, treating it as a stand-in for the tale of generational suffering. Biabiany reads the fleshy petal as she would someone's palm, carefully uttering a few slow verses:

*Should the door of no return be
crossed again? Ouidah.*

The flower brings memories back.

*Grandma, grandmother, mother,
sister. My Atlantics. Bones covered
with sand, and on the sand rest of
boats, no lack of self-esteem.*

*Should the door of no return be
crossed again? Ouidah.*

⁴Troy Vettese, "A Marxist Theory of Extinction," *Salvage*, May 25, 2020, <https://salvage.zone/a-marxist-theory-of-extinction/>

⁵Anat Pick, "Why Not Look at Animals?" *NECSUS* 4, no. 1 (2015): 111.

The flower *brings back* memories. One does not know what the flower itself remembers. The narrator does all the memory work; it was Biabiany's voice, her pain, which flowed through *musa*. It feels to me an emotive *infection* was caused by the sensorial characteristics of the flower. The infection is also a mandate. The poet feels compelled to speak an affectionate doublespeak, carefully peeling back the layers to reveal what the perpetrators wished to extinguish on the inside, but couldn't.

This brings me to the difference between speaking *on behalf* of versus speaking *through* something when depicting non-humans in cinema. The former can be expressed through maudlin narratives that presuppose a total knowledge of nature, whereby one pretends that non-humans think exactly like us. An example would be nature docudramas that conflate non-human lives with our own, yet this leads not to sympathy but insouciance. Heavy-handed production can turn ecological filmmaking into morality plays about human society, suggesting that denizens of the plant and animal kingdoms experience friendship, kinship, and grief the same way we do. Yet anthropomorphisation reduces the immense complexity and difference of nature to our tiny sliver of experience.

This is nothing new. Researchers have pointed out that a preoccupation with the personified nature is neither honest nor helpful for conservational efforts. What *Musa* does successfully, is to situate the human alongside the non-human entity, not to speak for, nor to exert authority of how the other 'must have felt,' but to reflect on the encounters with a plant using one's own senses—a way of "being through others." Because speaking *through* is akin to holding out a hand without the expectation of it being held back, it respects the dignity of the ones being depicted and leaves out the obligation of reciprocity. This way of being is to be at the other's stake, where one considers not only oneself but the historical conditions from which both parties emerged. Instead of speaking over the plants, the films in *The Genetically Altered Seed Breaks the Rhythm of an Earthly Music* root themselves in the vicinity of their lives.

Perhaps humanity has transformed the Earth without always improving it. The idea of kinship is flawed when we assume that nature recognises humans (and the technology we create) as kin—when the relationship has become so unequal and harmful. We do not know how plants feel; if they 'feel' at all. What we do have is a responsibility to them. The portrayal of nature ought not to displace nature outside of a darkened auditorium, or to help stave off the grim reality of ecological degradation. Film can, however, unsettle the current condition by showing different ways of speaking through nature. This is not to say that we cannot envision an alternative future where technology and nature morph into one. We should simply be wary of making claims about nature, to speak in its stead, or to mummify it in another archive of there-once-was. It would be as if we are impressing more species into *Hortus Malabaricus* and claiming an early death.

Lest us believe lilies do grow in nightclubs.

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⁶Stella Sandford, *Vegetal Sex: Philosophy of Plants* (London England: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

⁷Keith Somerville, Amy Dickman, Paul J. Johnson, and Adam G. Hart, "Soap Operas Will Not Wash for Wildlife," *People and Nature* (Hoboken, N.J.) 3, no. 6 (2021): 165.

⁸Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 109.

Review:

MoMA PS1, New York

Frieda Toranzo Jaeger:

Autonomous Drive

September 22, 2022 – March 13, 2023

Jessie Robertson

I came across Frieda Toranzo Jaeger's exhibition *Autonomous Drive* by chance at MoMA PS1 on a recent, pandemic-delayed trip to New York. The architecture of MoMA PS1, a repurposed nineteenth century schoolhouse in Long Island City, with an austere walled and pebbled yard, long hallways and multiple utilitarian staircases, lends itself to this kind of unexpected encounter. Each floor of the former school is lined with a seemingly endless and disorientating string of doors, many closed, but some of which open out into surprisingly cavernous gallery spaces converted from the former classrooms. On the third floor, *Life Between Buildings*, an understated yet absorbing exhibition exploring the history and socio-political significance of community gardens in New York City stretches out across one of the classrooms turned gallery spaces, while a vast installation: *Break, Take, Erase, Tally* alongside two feature length films by Jumana Manna fills PS1's main gallery space.

Descending one of the building's many staircases, into the second floor exhibition spaces I find myself immediately drawn toward the bright colours and unusually shaped canvases of Frieda Toranzo Jaeger's paintings. *Autonomous Drive*, the artist's first major institutional solo show in the US, consists of twelve recent works, including three new commissions, which range in scale from the intimate to the monumental. Across the three interlinked galleries, discrete canvases are exhibited alongside complex, multi-canvas hinged sculptural paintings



View of exhibition Frieda Toranzo Jaeger: Autonomous Drive, MoMA PS1, New York, March 13, 2023. Image courtesy MoMA PS1. Photo by [unreadable]

with subject-matter ranging from car engines and space travel to Christian iconography, lush florals and botanicals and erotic scenes of queer love-making.

The exhibition opens with a large, multi-panel canvas painting of an unfolded car which, as the artist explains in the audio guide, has been painted on a 1:1 scale to the human body, inviting viewers into the work to experience it as if seated on the car's plush leatherwork. The wing-like car doors which unfold upward toward the ceiling on cut-out curved



Anonymous Drive on view at MoMA PS1 from September 22, 2022 to
photo: Steven Paneccasio

canvases, take on the uncanny appearance of the eyes of a whale, through which a deep aquamarine sea stretches outward as a city burns below.

The animalistic quality of this deconstructed automated object - the driverless car - signals hybridity, a recurring theme in Toranzo Jaeger's work which she uses to explore and challenge colonial systems of governance and control. Ironically titled *Hope The Air Conditioning Is On While Facing Global Warming (part 1)* (2017) the painting addresses the contradictory feelings of hope and fear

for the future. The unravelled, hybrid driverless vehicle offers an imagined escape route from the impending reality of global warming and social collapse and invites viewers into the artist's own queer, decolonised future, an alternate world which comes to life across the canvases that fill the exhibition space.

In the opposite corner a black-rimmed, round canvas hangs suspended from the ceiling, a few feet from the wall. *Lovense (2018)* is a riotous tableaux of partially nude bodies and miscellaneous car parts, the surface of which has been carefully embroidered, giving the canvas a tactility which both interrupts

and blends into the painted surface. The circular shape and embroidered surface of this work are inspired by Toranzo Jaeger's indigenous Mexican background. Pre-Columbian compositions, which are non-linear and expand outward from the centre, without beginning or end, are common to Toranzo Jaeger's paintings and serve to challenge dominant Western narratives of storytelling and myth-making within the history of painting.¹ The use of indigenous embroidery techniques is a further disruption of Western painterly traditions. The artist hires her family members who are trained in traditional Mexican embroidery to work on her paintings, introducing craft techniques which have historically been perceived as feminine into the male-dominated colonial history of European painting whilst also emphasising a collaborative shared approach to art-making.

Toranzo Jaeger's fascination with the history of painting is further evidenced in the exhibition's numerous hinged works which take direct inspiration from fifteenth and sixteenth century altar pieces. Some of the works adopt the traditional three panel format while others are comprised of multiple panels which can take on different arrangements depending on the space in which they are exhibited. The three-panel altar-like format is particularly effective for a work like *Sappho* (2019), which unfolds to reveal a scene inspired by the ancient Greek poet Sappho, of two women making love on the backseat of a car, surrounded by verdant trees and exotic florals and flanked by fluffy pomeranians peeking out from the luscious greenery. The side panels are positioned at a 45 degree angle, creating a cocoon-like environment which draws the viewer into this celebratory scene of queer pleasure.

The re-mixing and re-purposing of classical influences and traditional Christian painting techniques appears multiple times throughout the exhibition

¹Frieda Toranzo Jaeger as told to Emily Watlington, 'Frieda Toranzo Jaeger on Semiological Vandalism and Decolonial Futures', *Art in America*, 25 June 2021, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/interviews/frieda-toranzo-jaeger-interview-1234596828/>, (accessed 21/12/22).

with some of the works making overt and specific art historical references.

The artist is particularly inspired by the German Renaissance painter Lucas Cranach and references to his work appear in two of the new commissions produced for this exhibition. The large scale, satellite-like sculptural canvas *For New Futures We Need New Beginnings* bears a 'copy' of Cranach's *Adam and Eve* (1528), with two Eves in place of Adam, while *End of Capitalism, the Future* 2022 reimagines Cranach's Fountain of Youth, (1546) as 'a post-capitalist lesbian utopia'.² For Toranzo Jaeger, the reimagining of these art historical motifs and techniques to envision a future of queer freedom is a tactic of resistance against, rather than simply a critique of colonial structures. Toranzo Jaeger explains that 'when it comes to painting, revisiting and repurposing history is, to me, a core practice of decolonization'.³

²Frieda Toranzo Jaeger: *Autonomous Drive* press release, <https://press.moma.org/exhibition/frieda-toranzo-jaeger/>, (accessed 21/12/22).

³Freida Toranzo Jaeger quoted in Emily Watlington, 'Seeing & Believing: Christian Imagery in Painting Now', *Art in America*, 1 December 2022, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/interviews/christian-imagery-in-painting-now-1234648301/>, (accessed 21/12/22).

This idea of challenging and reimagining dominant Western historical narratives also underpins Umar Rashid exhibition *Ancien Regime Change 4, 5, and 6* which inhabits the adjoining galleries across the hall. Rashid's multidisciplinary works combine history and fantasy, myth and pop culture from varied cultures and geographies to question and resist the erasure of marginalised peoples from Western histories. The pairing of these exhibitions is by no means accidental and highlights a move beyond colonial critique towards an exploration of futurity which demands that dominant narratives and histories be reframed and retold. Toranzo Jaeger's brightly coloured and carefully embroidered scenes of decolonised queer joy feel both urgent and necessary whilst maintaining a deep and at times irony-tinged awareness of the (art) historical and current socio-political conditions within which the work exists. Navigated through the autonomous technology of the driverless car, Toranzo Jaeger's paintings imagine alternate possibilities which refuse colonial and patriarchal structures and invite us all along for the bumpy ride ahead.

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Leaning in to Being “Free” and “White”: Anti-Racist Critiques of Work

Serubiri Moses

In her time as one of the original members of the A.I.R. Gallery, a feminist co-op in SoHo, during the early 1970s, American artist Howardena Pindell sought to further her professional career in a community-oriented institution whose values of gender-equity she shared. But it would take almost a decade for the artist to articulate an anti-racist position with regard to her professional experience in the artworld in her important short film *Free, White, and 21* (1980). Pindell’s seventies experiences, which reveal the importance of reclaiming autonomy from artworld structures, remind me of my time in graduate school in 2017 when I would wake up to dance to Gqom and Amapiano as part of my morning routine to counter the insane workload of reading entire academic monographs every week on top of long-term exhibition planning and logistics at the museum.

In the evenings and on weekends, I spent a lot of time listening to the comedy specials and sketches of Monique Hicks. More than merely an opportunity to relieve stress by laughter, Hicks’ comedy sketches also pointed back to my graduate school work quite directly. In one of her comedy sketches, she says, “Girl, you going to work tomorrow?” Then she responds in another hectic voice, “Girl, fuck that job!” This was long before I would be introduced to the motivational mantra of “Do the work” which life coach Iyanla Vanzant, host of *Iyanla, Fix My Life* (OWN) says is about reclaiming “the truth of who you are.” What Hicks and Vanzant would bring to my attention was their specific articulations of work.

These were models of work that were less about productivity, climbing the corporate ladder, or as most of my peers at graduate school had remarked: viewing the school as a way to get networked into the art world. Rather, these were models that were spiritually inclined, as well as models that made me understand what it meant to reclaim autonomy from the corporate and capitalist structures in which we, misguidedly, aimed to become more entrenched.

“Do the work” became a motivational mantra for those who understood and appreciated Vanzant’s tough-love approach. She had a clear-eyed focus on spiritual pedagogy, and often this tough-love was geared at aggressively rooting out the stumbling blocks towards her guests witnessing “the truth of who (they) are.” I will show how these memories of graduate school and Vanzant and Hicks’s articulations of work speak to the theme of this journal’s issue on work, particularly in their light-hearted reference to liberation theology and anti-racist critiques of work in the work of American artist Howardena Pindell.

During the 1970s, Pindell worked as a curator at the Museum of Modern Art. Having graduated from the Yale School of Art with an MFA, she kept an art practice alive by working in community-oriented galleries such as JAM - Just Above Midtown gallery (founded in 1974, closed 1986) and A.I.R. Gallery (founded in 1972). Both galleries were located in the heart of the New York art world, serving specific communities that were often marginalised and/or silenced within it. This tendency was reflected in other organisations such as the design-oriented activist group ACT UP, which as author Sarah Schulman reports, while predominantly a white male organisation, ACT UP members learned their activist techniques from the women and people of colour in their organisation who had come up in the 1960s Black feminist and Black Power movements.

The activities of A.I.R. Gallery in particular followed the women's movement and other co-ops in the downtown area. Pindell's inclusion as the only black member in the gallery's first few years reflects the dissonance of working within the organisation that viewed cooperative work as an action to counter gender inequality within the art world. Then, how did Howardena Pindell "do the work"? Did she find the middle ground in which to practice a liberation theology? What kind of actions would have led her to Emile Townes' idea that "liberation never ends"? How could Pindell practice "freedom" on a daily basis? I am thinking here of Angela Davis' notion that freedom is a constant struggle.

If "work" was defined in A.I.R. gallery as cooperative – meaning that members would pull resources together to pay for the functioning of the gallery, giving solo or group shows to its members according to an annual or biannual calendar – what did this mean for the singular black woman within it? It meant that despite Pindell being an exception, that is until Ana Mendieta joined the gallery later on, she still had to paint the gallery, fix up the gallery walls and contribute finances like everyone else. Thus, it was the kind of work situation that many find themselves in now, where the logic of work – even when aiming for gender justice – reinforced racial oppression. Scholar Allison Page writes on the black feminist critique of work by arguing that this critique is opposed to racial capitalism's definitions of work and productivity. Page also suggests that such definitions of work suppress anti-racist feminist mobilisation, particularly with respect to the welfare state. However, when Page suggests that to "lean in" reifies these racial capitalist models that date back to Antebellum slavery, I begin to wonder: had anyone had told Pindell to "lean in" while working at A.I.R. gallery in the early 70s? And what would that have meant then?

It would take Pindell almost a decade to articulate her position in a short film titled, *Free, White, and 21* (1980) in which the artist role-plays two characters: herself and a white woman who keeps negating Pindell's experiences of racist micro-aggression. In the film, Pindell recounts her experience searching for a job after graduate school hindered by systemic and structural racism. I was particularly interested in the fact that the artist chose A.I.R. gallery as the place to debut the film, screening it there in 1980 in one of A.I.R. gallery's evening members' only public programs given that it was the context for much of her growth as a professional artist during the 1970s.

That Pindell was breaking the silence at A.I.R. said something to me about what kind of work needed to be done to further transform the institution with regard to institutional racism. Returning to my own experiences in graduate school and to Hicks's "fuck that job" and Vanzant's "do the work" I want to argue that articulations of work through liberation theology and anti-racist action may not always be in sync with either graduate education or with the professional career of an artist or curator. But like Allison Page says, it is possible to view alternatives to the neoliberal mantra of "lean in" that so far define these career paths as principally corporate.



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