

FUTURE COMMONS

Notes on a year of care,
connection and conversation

This publication compiles the experiences of 9 individuals who made up Future Commons in 2021–22:

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This publication is also available online as a PDF at iniva.org/programme/projects/future-commons, where links (🔗) are live.

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Future Commons began in 2021 as a peer-led support structure for cross-institutional curatorial trainees and other early career creative practitioners, which holds mutual care, imagination and conversation at its centre.

It is a responsive space for support, critical discussion and connection. The group emerged from the needs expressed for a space that nurtures creative belief, radical practice and open peer-level exchange outside formal work structures. Together, we favour process over outcome, intimacy over surveillance, and abundance over scarcity.

Future Commons emerged from iniva's Future Collect initiative, a three-year partnership project aiming to transform the culture of commissioning and collecting within museums.

care

institutional trauma is not
our anchor, interpersonal care is

audacity

we help each other ask
for more, for better

abundance

we remember there is plenty,
we are not in competition

our work is for us first, we
resist institutional surveillance

privacy

we do not play into burn-out,
we move at the pace of trust

sustainability

They're building something in there, something down there...

Here they meet those others who dwell in a different compulsion, in the same debt, a distance, forgetting, remembered again but only after...

These other ones have a passion to tell you what they have found, and they are surprised you want to listen, even though they've been expecting you. Sometimes the story is not clear, or it starts in a whisper. It goes around again but listen, it is funny again, every time...

Policy has concluded they are conspiratorial, heretical, criminal, amateur...

But if you listen to them they will tell you: we will not handle credit, and we cannot handle debt, debt flows through us, and there's no time to tell you everything, so much bad debt, so much to forget and remember again. But if we listen to them they will say: come let's plan something together. And that's what we're going to do. We're telling all of you but we're not telling anyone else.

☼ from *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, p. 67–68

To these other ones

by Priya Jay

You hold in your hands a zine which grew to be as thick as a small book. Made as a counter-offer when called to programme a public event, it feeds back, looks around and lets in. It was made for you, we think. You, the restless. The emergent, the precarious, the peers and also you the director, the senior, the manager.

Here, we share some of the quiet work and internal conversations we've been having as Future Commons since August 2021. And for wider context, I'll share my routes through this work below, in hopes of making anything that is useful open source. Because what becomes clear again and again, is that more spaces for support, celebration and criticism are always needed and therefore possible.

At the end of 2020, Sepake Angiama, Artistic Director of iniva, invited me to develop a network of support for curatorial trainees and other emerging practitioners. "Only someone who's been a trainee with iniva can do this work," she said, "it must draw from experience". I was one of three, and the only one unemployed and doubtful I'd stay in the sector much longer. Now I'm writing this two summers later, glad to have stayed somewhere on the edge,

neither in nor out, somewhere alive and inquiring,
with these other ones who gathered.



My Barbican-iniva curatorial traineeship began in 2018 and ended in 2019. I was an anthropology graduate, untrained in the History of Art but confident in the possibility of interdisciplinary research and creative collaboration. After countless applications to arts institutions that I naively assumed would hire an MA-less exhibition assistant, my year-long traineeship finally took me behind the scenes. I learned plenty of things about the work and conversations that go into exhibition-making. But I found there was a dissonance between the radicality, innovation and attention that were celebrated in artists' work that wasn't carried over to the curatorial work it was bound up with. I came to understand that making space for slower, dialogic and life-affirming processes is institutionally undesirable. Turns out structural change requires structures to change. And unless it could be presented as a carefully curated programme and reported to funders with a productive outcome, it was an unjustifiable risk.

Reluctant to take the natural next step into curatorhood, I applied for and received Arts Council DYCP funding. I wanted to give myself permission to follow my creative impulse, which had felt

unsustainable at best and insignificant at worst, as a curatorial trainee. I called my desires my “practice” and, among other places, they took me to India.

Sepake and I met for the first time there in 2020, in

- 🌀 Santiniketan, under the mango tree, just before the pandemic. It was “a self-organised gathering of unlearning” at Visva-Bharati University, which was planned by Sepake and her collaborators Clare Butcher, Tara Lasrado and Sanchayan Ghosh. The origins of our first meeting and the week we spent together in a space of radical pedagogy, fed the work that followed. It joined the many rivers already shaping change.

The network that Sepake invited me to develop and coordinate exists as part of a project seeded years prior by iniva’s former Artistic Director Melanie

- 🌀 Keen. Future Collect, which is now in its third and final year, was designed to re-energise and transform the culture of commissioning and collecting, by partnering with a different arts institution each year and selecting an artist to create a new work which would then be acquired by the partner institution. The collecting partners and commissioned artists are: Manchester Art Gallery and Jade Montserrat (2020–21), The Hepworth Wakefield and Emii Alrai (2021–22), and Towner Eastbourne and Maria Amidu (2022–23). Each year a curatorial trainee is hired to work across the two institutions, to offer a new opportunity for an aspiring curator, and to fulfil the aim of supporting and diversifying

the future curatorial workforce.

Art Fund's recent [curatorial diversity report](#) highlights some of the issues we are contending with, but we must be careful not to conflate representation with long-term structural transformation. Traineeships have a historical reputation for counterintuitively maintaining the status quo by bringing young practitioners, often from marginalised backgrounds, into institutions still sustained by racist and classist systems of power and knowledge production – despite diverse leadership. While gaining useful insider experience, they remain in a position of precarity, employed at minimum wage on a short term, temporary contract with no sign of continued employment. The hiring institution benefits by fulfilling their criteria for future funding and assumes they have done enough to transform systemic inequalities.

One year into the Future Collect project, it became clear that a support structure for cross-institutional trainees was both necessary and urgent. I re-joined iniva's team as a freelancer and by the time I stepped into my role of Network Coordinator, we had been through two national lockdowns, I was living with and caring for my grandparents, and [Barbican Stories](#) was about to be published. Again, rivers.

I had watched k'eguro macharia speak at the online symposium for [Critical Aunty Studies](#). They had said

"I am trying to think beyond 'what is your method?' to 'who is gathered by your invitation?'" This, and their final questions "How will you imagine freedom today? How will you practice freedom today?" were in all my thoughts. I sat with what, how, why, who would gather, for months, before the gathering happened. I thought out loud and sought other voices to help me trace the shape, drawing from the many existing and former networks. I asked past and current trainees what they desired. I spoke with those who have coordinated groups of young creative practitioners and asked what went well and what didn't go so well. I sat with myself, to feel into what was needed and what I could realistically offer. I listened to stories about iniva from 10 and 20 years ago and, paraphrasing Stuart Hall, I wondered "what do we inherit? What do we want to inherit?" Sepake had encouraged me to "maintain a healthy tension with the institution," I kept that close and felt free.

In May 2021, I presented my process in a Zoom room to line managers and senior managers from different arts institutions implicated in this work. To help illustrate my method, I told them who I was and where I was coming from, which included my work as a carer. At a time when 'care' was weaponised as a programming trend, it felt important to name my messy tiring joyful everyday experience with my grandparents, which was untouched by Access, Diversity and Inclusion. Where I was coming from

also meant where I was referencing from, and I shared excerpts from adrienne maree brown's Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds (2017), Jemma Desai's This Work Isn't For Us (2020), Teresa Cisneros' Document 0 (2018), Jamila Prowse's podcast series Collective Imaginings (2021), Shawn Wilson's book Research is Ceremony (2008), and Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's book The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study (2013). My presentation (and the work that followed) was buoyed by further conversations with Barby Asante, Amal Khalaf, Rehana Zaman, Melanie Keen, Chloe Austin, Jack Ky Tan and Amrita Dhallu. My most important reference was my experience of Peer Forum during the year of my traineeship.

Peer Forum (2018–19) was a peer group initiated by Amrita Dhallu — who had completed the Barbican-iniva traineeship the year before me — funded by Artquest and hosted by Camden Arts Centre. I met with this group of curators, artists, writers, and friends, every couple of months. It was a place to listen, gossip, share work and do crits with invited mentors such as Helen Cammock and Imran Perretta. More than anything, it made me feel like my practice could be creative, expansive, experimental and supported. I saw the network I was charged with coordinating as a similar responsive space. Aside from Peer Forum, I had experienced participation in other curatorial networks and support groups which felt too loose, too rigid, too outcome-specific

and too... traumatised, where we'd relay experiences of frustration, glad to have found others who relate but ultimately depleted by its cyclical nature.

FROM CONVERSATIONS: WHAT'S NEEDED

"Would've been great to know there are tools and tactics I could employ to align with the values and communities I want to support"

"How to do a studio visit"

"Want a place where we don't have to produce outcomes to legitimise where we are, how we got here"

"Failure is ok - important to have a rigorous conversation about this and therefore what it means to be successful - how do we measure it?"

"What can curating be?"

"A place where there is no fear, where we can celebrate each other"

"Possibility of doing collective research together - might want to put something out together → useful beyond the traineeship"

FROM CONVERSATIONS: WHAT'S NEEDED

"A space to come together, be introduced, talk"

"Being in dialogue with others"

"I lacked confidence & belief in what my interests were, need for a space that encourages creative belief"

"A place for creative freedom, peer level exchange to double-check research & ideas"

"Opportunity to meet artists and thinkers you might have just read/heard about"

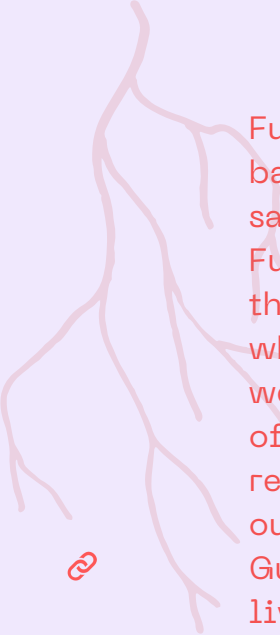
"Encouraging presenting ideas and research, invite mentors for crits"

"Potential themes to explore together: how to build your creative practice"

🌀 from my presentation slides, May 2021

I imagined a space of joyful critique, mutual care, celebration, group study, open-ended questions and meandering conversation. So far I only knew how this network could feel, its shape would be made and held by those in it and around it. I held onto a set of values to anchor my trust in the unknowable.

They were: **sustainability** (I do not want to burn out, I want to coordinate in a way that is spacious and giving for me, and those I'm gathering), **imagination** (there is power in imagining another way, another world, another possibility), **study** (coming together to learn, share and produce knowledge in horizontal ways), **conversation** (as bell hooks and Stuart Hall say, conversation's fluidity and exchange make the profound and transgressive possible), **paradox** (I am working with and within institutions but I am also imagining what we can be and do beyond or without them), **emergence** (this is ever-unfolding, ever-responsive), **audacity** (be audacious together, help each other ask for more – paraphrasing Jemma Desai), **care** (how do we show up for each other and ourselves?), **liberation** (try to move beyond representation and towards liberation – paraphrasing Rabz Lansiquot), **process** (prioritise process over outcome), **privacy** (these conversations are confidential and this group is not indebted to institutional optics) and **abundance** (resist extractive practices, we will not be left depleted, there's enough space and time for us all).



Future Commons was named in a way to point backwards and forwards (or sideways) at the same time. It alludes to its parent project, Future Collect, and suggests the leakage of the collection into the commons. It asks: what is common between us and what might we want to become common? It is a question of co-becoming, mutual ownership and rich resources. Could the energy we generate feed our peers, past and future? Alexis Pauline Gumbs said "the future is soft enough that my living shapes it". What soft futures are we living into existence?

The formation of the group who would embody Future Commons was delayed and in many ways nourished by my need to step away to commit to end of life care and the grief rituals that followed. At last, last summer, I called in 9 others who were already curatorial trainees or ex-trainees in iniva's orbit, and the group that for months had only existed in notes and thoughts, suddenly took solid shape. We were scattered across the country but miraculously most of us were able to meet for the first time in person a couple of weeks later. Nikita Gill, who was the Future Collect curator-in-training with Manchester Art Gallery and iniva at the time, brought us together at her place in London. We met and ate ackee, plantain, greens, lentils, chicken and rice, with wine and Fanta – the first of a few celebratory dinners built into the project budget.

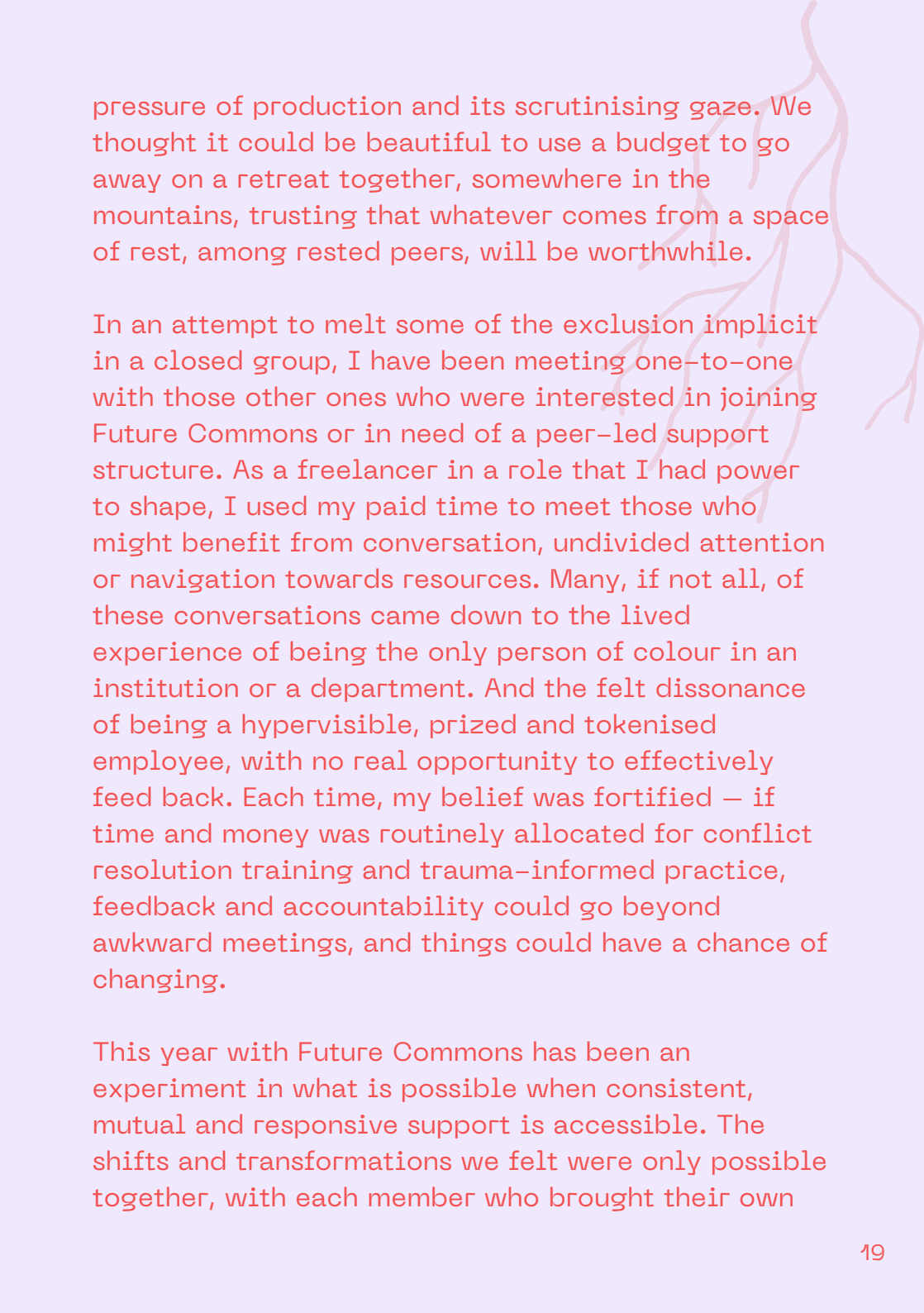
At the time of writing this, Future Commons lies across London, Wakefield, Gateshead, Manchester, Reading and Matsuyama, Japan, and is fed by the many rivers of all 10 members' lives, practices and desires. Early on in our gathering, we decided how and how often we'd like to meet and Zoom, every other Friday was agreed – and I would be available for any one-to-ones in between. I had spoken to almost all of the members' line managers in advance to let them know about the group and, since this is a form of professional development, they should be able to take these meetings in work hours. I also emphasised that their trainee's participation in this group does not count as structural change on their part, it should not impede attempts to develop their own support system for short-term, low-paid trainees, nor should they assume I'd relay feedback about trainees' experience unless asked by a Future Commons member to do so. In our early group conversations we discussed the values that were at the heart of our coming together, and care, conversation and audacity floated to the top.

As interest in Future Commons grew, it became clear that it should be a closed group for the time being to enable us to move at the pace of trust and be attentive to the individual and collective needs that arise. Over the past year, we have had many conversations, read bell hooks, had group crits, asked difficult questions and tried embodying loving criticism. We found that the fault lines revealed at

the smallest scale are the fault lines that exist at the largest scale. We organised studio visits and group conversations with artists such as Zeinab Saleh and Languid Hands (Rabz Lansiquot and Imani Mason Jordan), we were led through Lubaina Himid's exhibition at Tate Modern by its co-curator Amrita Dhallu and showed up to one another's openings. All the while, we maintained consistent communication and witness to each others' experience through Whatsapp, Zoom, lunches and dinners.

In April, when many of the directors and curators from our respective institutions were at the Venice Biennale, we invited ourselves there and experimented with the feeling of taking up space together, fully-funded and outcome-free. Through intentional time together, we reformulated for ourselves what knowledge, experience, skills and culture could be, and how we might curate otherwise.

Invitations to give talks or facilitate workshops came our way, but resistant to institutions bypassing transformation through trend-based programming, we declined. Instead, this zine is a medium of our choosing. Jade Montserrat and Nikita Gill's research on archiving the embodied and the ephemeral fuels this thinking! Future Commons does not have a social media account, although it may appear above the surface every now and again, like any other rhizomatic network. Mostly, we imagine how we might live and work away from the continuous



pressure of production and its scrutinising gaze. We thought it could be beautiful to use a budget to go away on a retreat together, somewhere in the mountains, trusting that whatever comes from a space of rest, among rested peers, will be worthwhile.

In an attempt to melt some of the exclusion implicit in a closed group, I have been meeting one-to-one with those other ones who were interested in joining Future Commons or in need of a peer-led support structure. As a freelancer in a role that I had power to shape, I used my paid time to meet those who might benefit from conversation, undivided attention or navigation towards resources. Many, if not all, of these conversations came down to the lived experience of being the only person of colour in an institution or a department. And the felt dissonance of being a hypervisible, prized and tokenised employee, with no real opportunity to effectively feed back. Each time, my belief was fortified – if time and money was routinely allocated for conflict resolution training and trauma-informed practice, feedback and accountability could go beyond awkward meetings, and things could have a chance of changing.

This year with Future Commons has been an experiment in what is possible when consistent, mutual and responsive support is accessible. The shifts and transformations we felt were only possible together, with each member who brought their own

language, experience, knowledge and capacity. Being attentive to shifting capacities also meant that some of the group's initial ambitions could not be met such as more studio visits and regional travel, which required more time and more money than we had. I also hoped to try out more experimental collective decision-making strategies, but the role and fee attached to my work meant that I often assumed default responsibility. Still, it has become abundantly clear that intimate, audacious, well-funded and peer-led spaces are desired and possible.

Our hope is that this book can be added to existing blueprints of other ways that we can gather and affirm life within our work. Rather than expanding this one group, our hope is that many small groups or Commons can take root and emerge across regions in the near future. Each of them contained enough to generate momentum and connected with others to maintain the circulation of knowledge and experience.

Mixed media facilitation over the past year, through Zoom, was useful for our particular group but with this rare opportunity to trial alternative support structures within the bound timeline of Future Collect, we'll try something new between now and June. We want to include other precarious art workers, such as volunteers, visitor hosts and administrators, who also fall between the gaps of curatorial care.

The next iteration of Future Commons, supported by iniva, will experiment with hosting practical workshops based on the needs expressed by peers, artist-led excursions and crits, open to all. By meeting on the other side of screens and walls, and by meeting immediate wants and needs, we hope to expand, again, the idea of a network from a group of individuals to a set of shared resources.

In the spirit of rivers and rhizomes, may Future Commons occupy the cracks and fissures, may we meet and diverge and meet again. May we use institutional funds to work together and out of sight, measuring scale through the tenderness of our connections, in ways that do not reproduce the structures of oppression, such that we may outlive the institutions altogether.



🌀 first dinner at Nikita's place in August 2021

If you're interested in knowing about future open gatherings, get in touch at futurecommons@iniva.org, or keep an eye on iniva's [newsletter](#) & [social media](#).

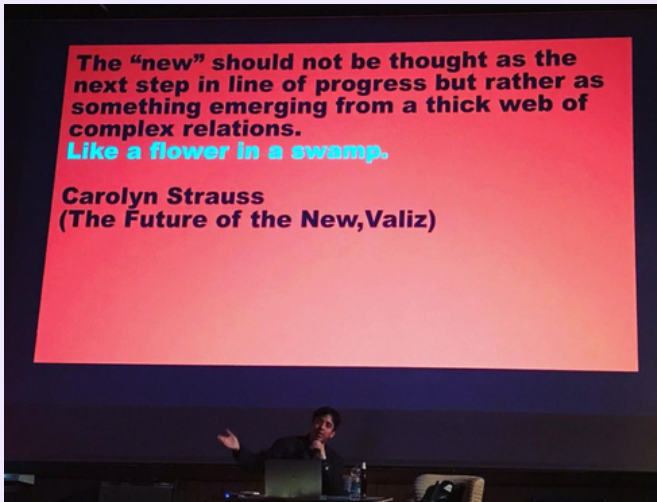
"What does curation mean again?"
Curators:



from [Freeze Magazine](#)

**The "new" should not be thought as the next step in line of progress but rather as something emerging from a thick web of complex relations.
Like a flower in a swamp.**

**Carolyn Strauss
(The Future of the New, Valiz)**



from [ALL IN GOOD TIME](#) by Carolyn F. Strauss, via [Slow Research Lab](#)

What does it feel like to receive care?

A conversation

by all of us

The following extracts are from a conversation we had over Zoom on June 24th 2022. We asked each other questions and let the responses meander. They appear throughout the zine and can be differentiated from other contributions by the speech bubbles they are enclosed in.

They can be found on pages:
24 – 27, 34 – 36, 39 – 41 and 43 – 46

What does care feel like? Like, how does it actually feel to receive care – in your work, and that can be your institutional work or your practice, or in any care work you do at home, or in other relationships?

I think that for me, care comes in many different forms. My mum prepares food for me to make sure that I eat because she's aware that when I'm thinking a lot, when I'm stressed, I tend to focus less on what I'm putting into my body, but what I'm putting into my body provides me with the energy to be able to action any of the things that I'm worried about or stressing about at work.

I guess in a work context, from the point of view of being "managed", care feels like confidence. I have the confidence because I know that my employers trust me. And therefore they trust the decisions that I'm making, and that it's a mutually respectful relationship that we have.

I think for me, it's deeply related to just breathing and being able to do that, with ease.

I think what you said about care being trust also really resonates for me, especially in more institutional settings. Mutual trust. Because I think trust ultimately indicates a willingness to listen. Or, a willingness to compromise or maybe meet someone in the middle. I think trust is, yeah, trust is something which is quite soft and malleable in that way. It's something which allows you to mould or bend things to your terms without feeling like you have to sacrifice anything.

That communication is something that really allows me to function in the workplace. I think it is the most important thing and being able to communicate well and sensitively is kind of the bedrock of care, especially when, in the arts, you're often working in such precarious situations.

Communication as opposed to obfuscation is the only thing that is going to keep you reassured and therefore allow you to continue to do what you're doing. So I think in terms of that, that is what care in an institutional setting looks like to me, but also I really resonate with what you were saying about care at home.

We're at a time now where attention feels really fractured and scarce – there's always 10 other things you could be looking at in any given moment. So to have a conversation with someone knowing that you have their undivided attention feels like a really caring gesture to receive. There's something to do with attention here that I feel is deeply powerful and rebellious.

I thought about that too during the process of trying to facilitate a caring and sustainable space. I realised the thing that I have that I can easily offer is my attention, and maybe it could feel like a loving gesture to give and receive, at a time when attention isn't always accessible or consistent.

When I remind myself that I actually exist within a web of care and I'm being cared for as I'm giving care. It feels like I can just exist as a whole person like a whole being who exists in a whole system with every other being that breathes, and hopefully breathes easily.

I really think that's how this group operates in terms of care, it's this network that works like laterally and flows in all directions.

~~~~~> continued on p.34

# Thoughts, learnings & musings

by Tobi Alexandra Falade

This feels like an Anti-Conversation in Conversation, as our words move across lines, pages, rooms, spaces, walls, they're thinking, connecting, and questioning...

I always talk about things that need to change, but how can I change them, is it up to me to change them?

I want to leave behind what doesn't serve us to flourish and develop our communities, friendships, and kinships instead.

On the next pages, I share some quotes that resonate.

I've had a lot of clouds  
but I have had so many rainbows.  
And one of the things I do  
when I step up on the stage,  
when I stand up to translate,  
when I go to teach my classes,  
when I go to direct a movie,  
I bring everyone who has ever been kind to me  
with me.

Black, white, Asian, Spanish-speaking, Native  
American, gay, straight, everybody –  
I say, come with me, I'm going on the stage,  
come with me, I need you now.

And they all did. So I don't ever feel I've had no  
help.

I've had rainbows in my clouds  
and the thing to do, it seems to me,  
is to prepare yourself, so you can be a rainbow  
in somebody else's cloud, somebody who may  
not look like you...

🌀 from Be a Rainbow in Somebody Else's Cloud  
by Dr. Maya Angelou via @zebablay



Other people put a lot of time and energy into me, and they deserve something too, and love means nothing unless we are willing to be responsible for those who love us, as well as those whom we love.

People don't just love you out of the blue you let them, and people have loved me when I needed to be loved.

So, as an adult, I must give some of that love back to those who want it or it would have all been for nothing.

I think I am no different than any other coloured girl

who has to grow up and make decisions and live by them.

I think we are all capable of tremendous beauty, once we decide we are beautiful, or of giving a lot of love, once we understand love is possible.

And making the world over in that image, if we choose to.

I really like to think a black beautiful loving world is possible.

I really do,

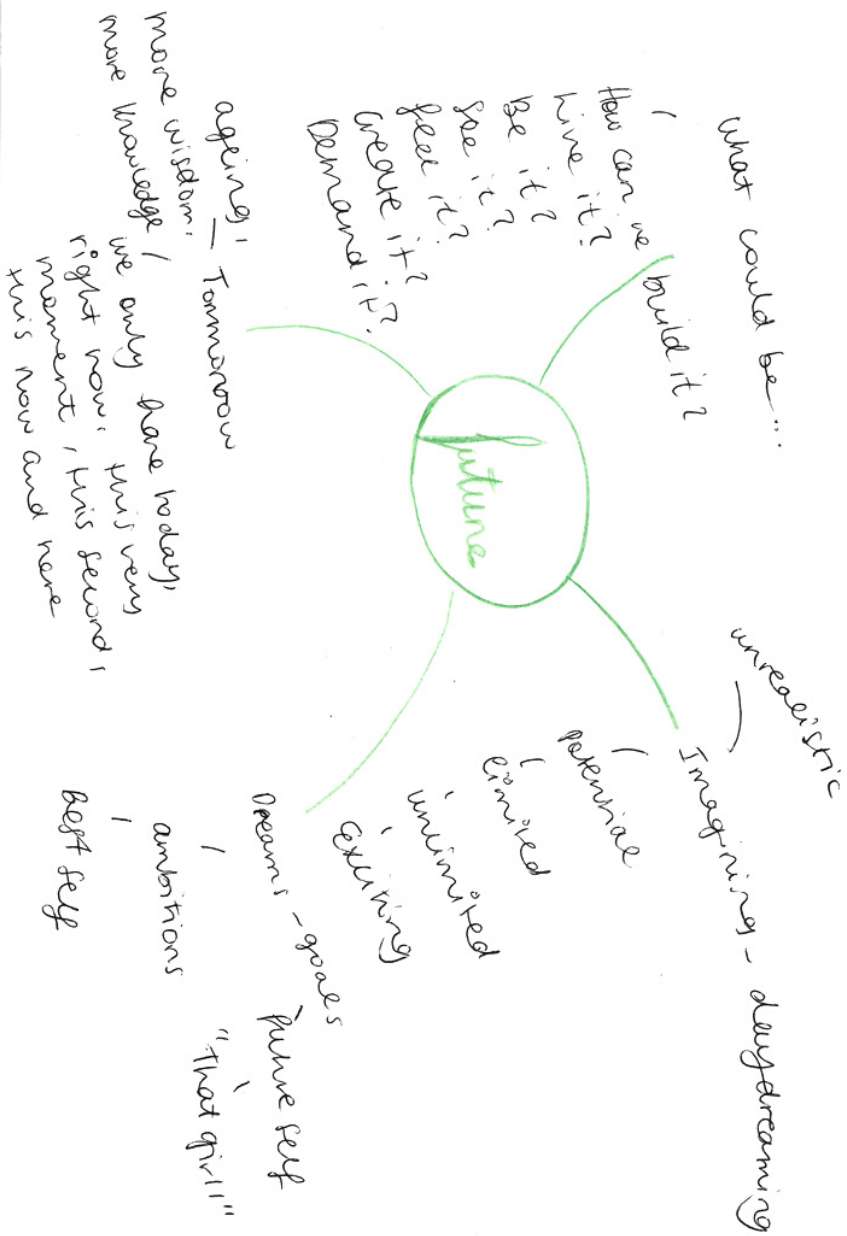
I think.

🌀 from Gemini by Nikki Giovanni from @zebablay

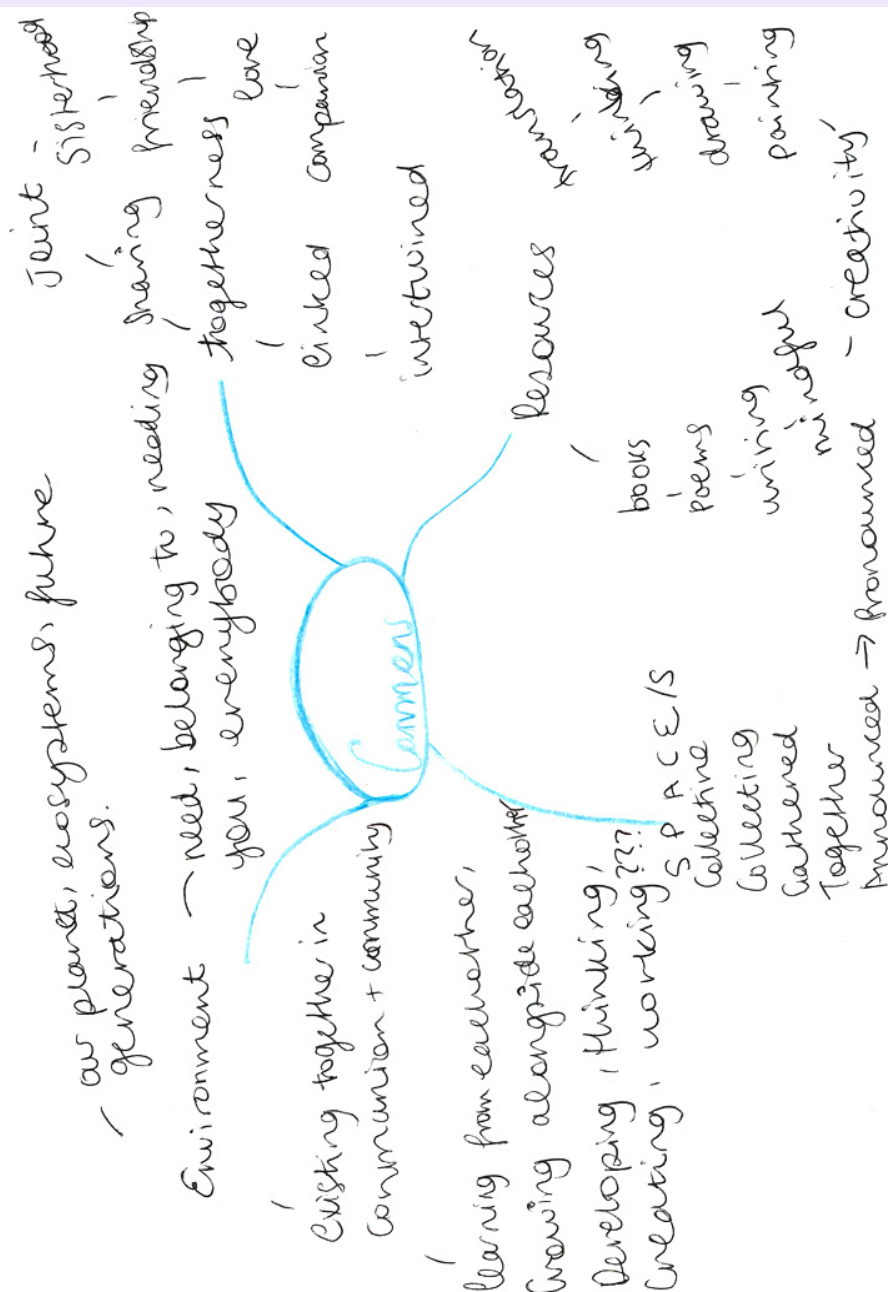


To live our lives based on the principles of a love ethic (showing care, respect, knowledge, integrity, and the will to cooperate), we have to be courageous. Learning how to face our fears is one way we embrace love. Our fear may not go away, but it will not stand in the way. Those of us who have already chosen to embrace a love ethic, allowing it to govern and inform how we think and act, know that when we let our light shine, we draw to us and are drawn to other bearers of light. We are not alone.

🌀 from All About Love: New Visions by bell hooks,  
Chapter 6 – VALUES: LIVING BY A LOVE ETHIC







I'm hearing a lot of worry about what's to be expected as an emergent curator. As a person who's going from a trainee, volunteer or internship position, which provided the freedom to grow, to think, to dream and to learn, to a position that has a certain title that therefore means that you don't have the time to do those things. So what are the parts of your creative practice that you lose and that you aren't willing to lose as you progress?

Yeah, that kind of lateral sense of collaboration, flexibility and working really responsively is not something that the framework of my new role will really allow. And I think that's really interesting. At the same time, being a trainee is a really loaded position in terms of what people expect of you in the workplace.

And this isn't written on paper in any of the job descriptions for trainees, but we all know that people who tend to be picked for traineeships tend to be people of the global majority – and there tends to be a really unfair burden of representation and unfair expectation that this is a fix for institutional racism packaged within the role. And that is one thing that I don't miss.

What needs to be understood about a trainee or person in training, is that they're an actual investment. You're learning how to put into practice skills that will support you to live and you're contributing your intellectual labour, your physical labour, your emotional labour, your mental labour. And you have to do it twice over if you are someone who is from the global majority, because there's a lot to unpack and quite frankly, none of these institutions – from what I have seen – ask you anything about what your needs are. They see you as a resource rather than an investment.

The idea of traineeships as investments is really interesting, because what would count as a 'return' on their investment? Often, it manifests in quite a possessive way, like the marker of success is retention – did they stay in the sector, did they become the curator we trained them to be, was it worthwhile? And that's why Arts Council funds these positions because they're investing in a future workforce. It's a little more layered than that because, actually, there were skills that were learned that could be useful in a completely different direction and that should be absolutely fine, not seen as contradictory to the traineeship. It doesn't erase the work that was done, it just builds on it in a non possessive way. Their investment is in a messy brilliant human, not this factory model of a new cog for an ever-grinding machine.

~~~~~> continued on p.39

Exploring a work for P(R)OG(R)ESS

by Jessica Lowe-Mbirimi

Many things are perceived through a goal-oriented lens, failures are considered 'Ls' and successes are considered 'Ws'. What about the in-between stage? The growing stage, the liminal stage, the betterment stage, the moving on and carving out space for change and growth? What can this look like?

For most of us, Future Commons began when we had recently started our traineeships, together we went through a process of being nurtured in this community of our own manifestation despite the numerous lockdowns or nuances of our personal and professional lives. I liken this to the metamorphosis stage when a caterpillar is in the cocoon.

When trying to articulate this process, I decided to explore this as the R stage. A series of 'Rs' which I hope can be used as a framework to refer to by those who are in a similar place that we once were with a desire to be collectively supported.

R for Retreat, both becoming a retreat but also in having a space to go away to, be it virtual or physical.

R for Regular or Routine, understanding that despite our busy schedules, the regular check-ins built the foundations of our friendship and trust.

R for Reaffirm, reaffirm ourselves to be audacious and to remind each other that we can take space and that our feelings were always valid and heard.

R for Reassess which came from the support encouraging us to step back from things that exerted us beyond our mental or physical capacity.

R for Recuperate, where we saw rest as necessary, not as a reward but as a form of resistance even when our bodies and mind would tell us otherwise.

R for Rich, the context of our conversations. Listening intently to each other's ideas and projects that were full of creativity and inspiration.

R for Right, not like the opposite of left but like alignment, feeling like we were on the same page.

R for Relocate, whilst navigating the changes that many of us went through with new workplaces or environments we continued to support each other and, in some cases, collaborate.

I don't feel like I should have less time to do research now that I'm no longer a trainee. And no, I don't feel like I should have less time to travel to documenta or Venice, for example, or any of the other places that senior members of staff go to and come back with nothing. They go to be seen. Why should you go to be seen but I can't go to learn? So yeah, I'm not giving up any of those things. I have faith in the people that I work with, and the institution that I work for, to support creativity in the institution and the city. I have faith that they will trust me with these opportunities to research, to read, think and dream, and then share what I've learned.

I really liked your use of the word 'emergent' rather than 'emerging'... this idea of always arriving and shapeshifting, which helps me destabilise the linearity of it all. I guess that's also why after my traineeship I felt really resistant to taking on that 'natural next step' of becoming a curator, I just wanted to stay in that realm of learning, questioning, possibility and that anything could happen from this point.

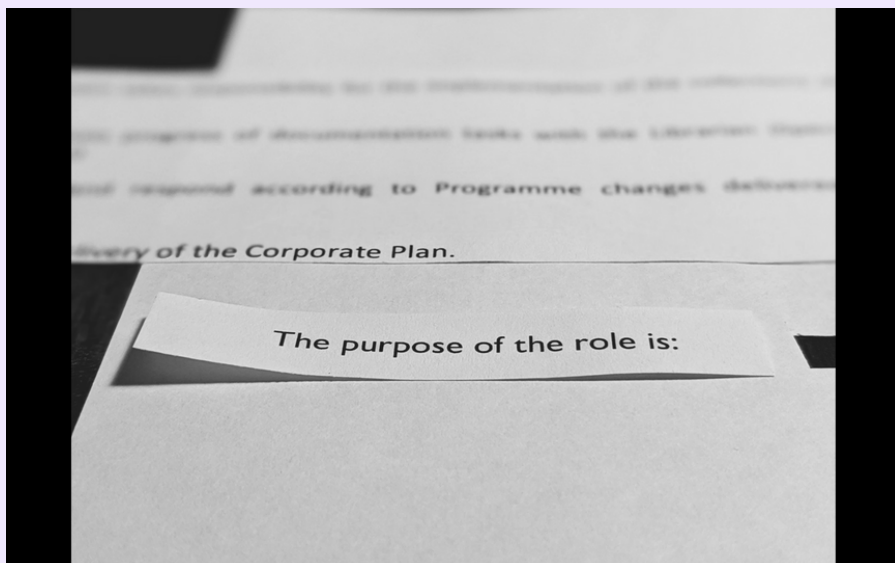
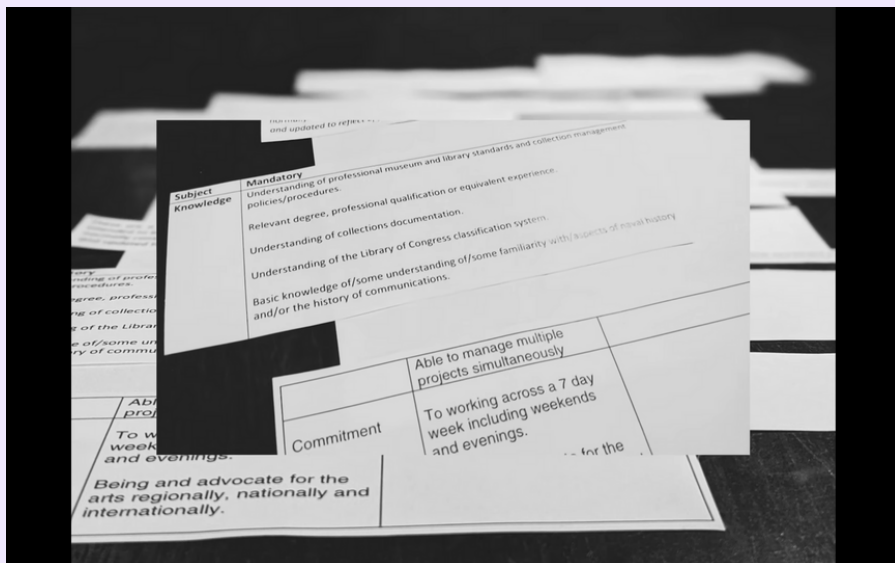
As a trainee, knowing I was the only person of colour, the least paid, the youngest and the newest to the institution, I took inspiration from the trickster figure in mythology. I liked the possibility of using my precarious and loaded role to ask the questions no one seemed to be asking or felt like they could ask. Talking to those in power with all the wide-eyed curiosity my role encouraged. As a freelancer now, I've been able to keep an aspect of that because I've stayed on the periphery, I can kind of maintain that generative tension with the institution because I haven't been absorbed by them.

Maybe it's not the roles that are the problem, but the attitudes around curation that can be quite problematic. Curation is a group effort to make a project but in the end, it doesn't really feel like that, it just belongs to the lead curator. That's something I was thinking about recently, how it's such a prized and coveted role that's difficult to get or let go of.

So two organisations created my position, which was specifically for people of colour and people from underrepresented backgrounds. Which I think is amazing because, you know, it lets someone like me to enter into an institution, have stable income for a while, have a foot in the door, essentially. But I don't think they've thought about what it means for a person of colour to be dropped into institutions that haven't figured their own shit out yet. Offering an external mentor could be a good step.

I also just wanted to add and emphasise that this sense of stability that a few of us have mentioned can't be underestimated – like, how important it is for us for our mental, physical and spiritual health. I'm actually only able to do the work that I do right now because I moved back home – and at home I'm also an unpaid carer. All of these things are the invisible backbone to the work that is being done in the arts, the very visible work has this invisible layer of labour and insecurity that is kind of propping it up. Most people just don't see that part.

~~~~~> continued on p.43



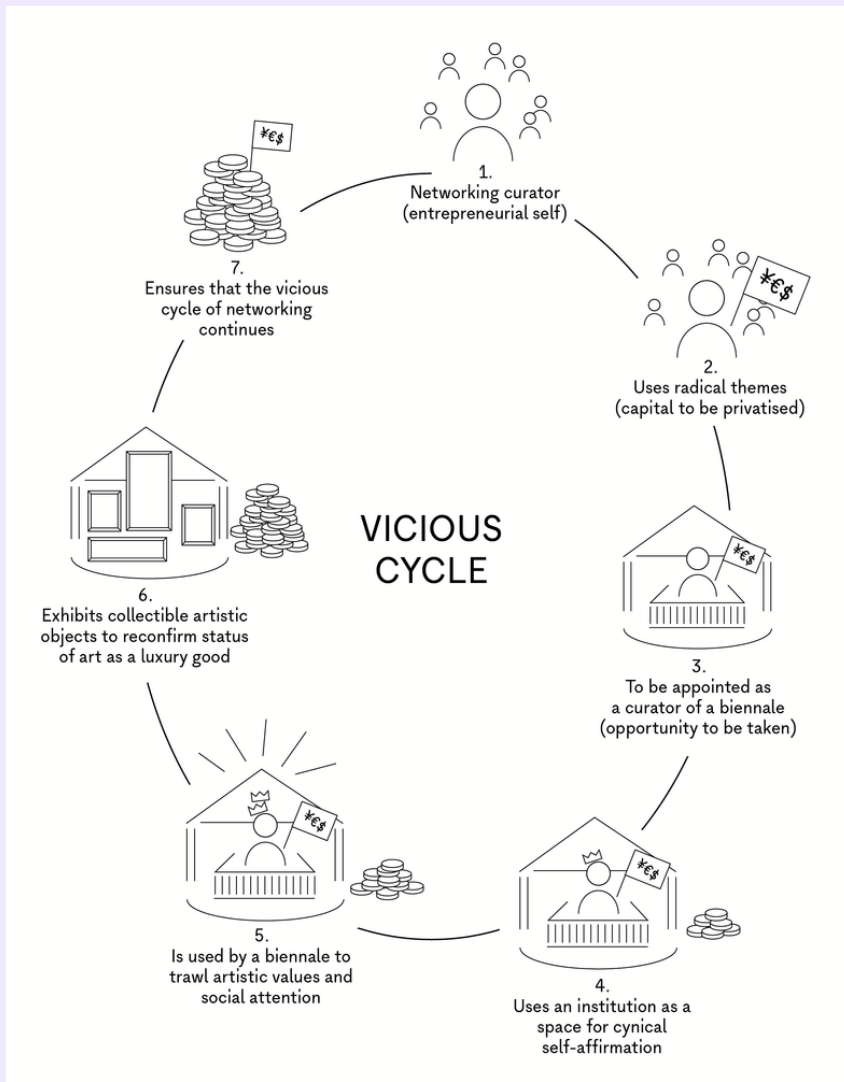
🔗 🌐 stills from 'The Purpose of the Role', a [video performance](#) by Nikita Gill, for Block Universe's 'You've Got Mail!' series (August 2021)

→ continued from p.41

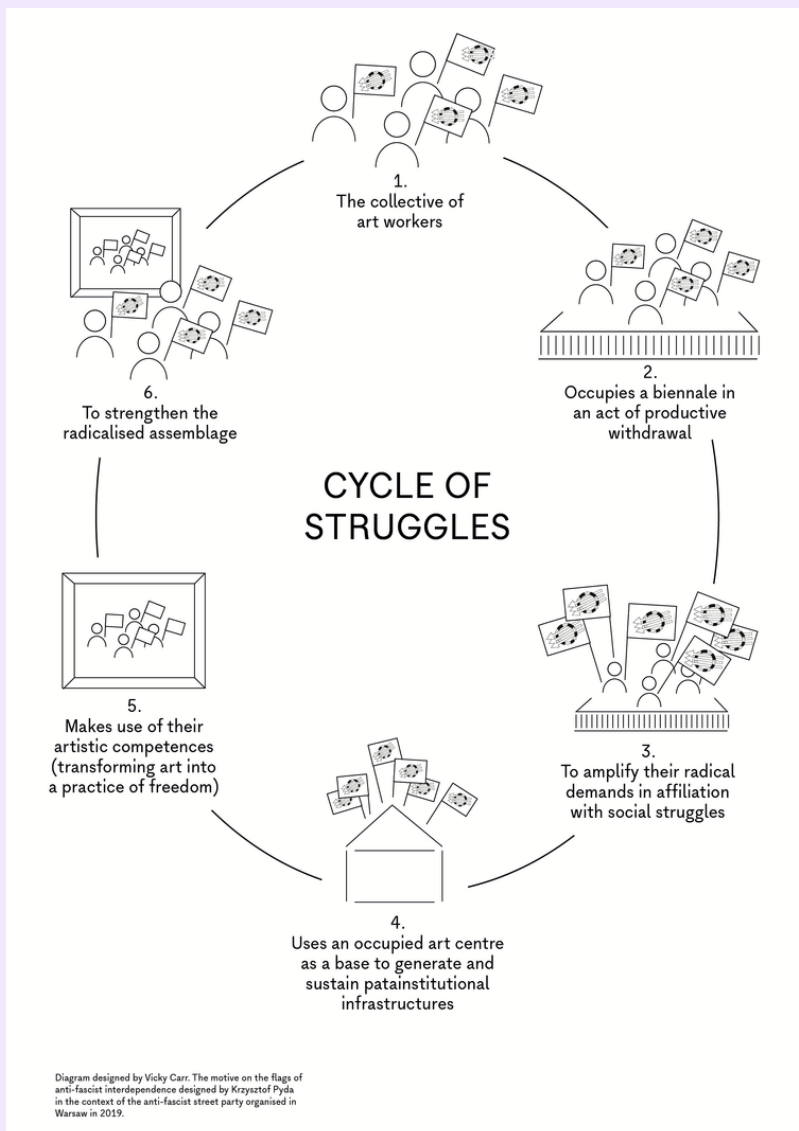
It's interesting to think about what it means to to be able to do any kind of field research or learning about how you fit into this world. The people who get to be away from their desk, speaking to people are often the most senior. Shouldn't a director say, "well, I have a massive travel budget, let me give that to others in the team that might benefit from it". Why is it that all the people that don't even actually have time to action important things are the ones that are the faces being seen at events and openings? Why isn't it the other way around? Just an open ended question, I guess.

I guess that's one of the reasons why I liked being in Venice with you all, it just felt so good. It felt like we just invited ourselves there.

Yeah it's like that diagram I sent in the WhatsApp group, the one from Kuba Szreder's book.



from The ABC of the projectariat: Living and working in a precarious art world by Kuba Szreder, p. 206



🌀 from The ABC of the projectariat:  
 Living and working in a precarious art world  
 by Kuba Szreder, p. 207

Not having to mask or worry about being inappropriate for talking about my feelings, just being myself with people who I care about, who care about me too, like we could talk about art and anything else too, because those are the things that make you who you are. And that's actually the basis for how you came to be in this space or role in the first place. That's your heart. I would definitely like to, at some point, find a way to go back to Venice again for four or five days. Funded by our institutions collectively, to come together, just to be. That would be what care feels like to me for Future Commons.



🌀 Future Commons in Venice, April 2022

# Retreating to the Commons

by Amber Li

## retreat (v.)

early 15c., *retreten*, "to draw in, draw back, leave the extremities," also "to fall back from battle;" from *retreat* (n.) and in part from Old French *retret*, *retrait*, past participle of *retrere* "to draw back." Related: *Retreated*; *retreating*.

<https://www.etymonline.com/word/retreat>



## retreat

noun

UK /nˈtri:t/ US /nˈtri:t/

**retreat** noun (POSITION)

**C2** [C usually singular, U]

a move back by soldiers or an army, either because they have been defeated or in order to avoid fighting:

- the retreat **from** Dunkirk
- Enemy soldiers are now **in** (full) retreat.

**C2** [C]

a private and safe place:

- a country/mountain/lakeside retreat

[C or U]

a period of time used to pray and study quietly, or to think carefully, away from normal activities and duties:

- We **went on** (a) retreat **at/to** a monastery in Wales.

The director of an art institution once told me how they'd arrived in their position by being intensely passionate, by working so hard that they devoted all their time to their career. They said, "I worry for the younger generation. There seems to be such a lack of resilience."

I was unable to respond. In truth, I'd been feeling fragile and worn down. At that moment I felt so far from resilience that just the mention of the word made me want to retreat inside myself. Resilience sounds like something hard and unyielding, maybe armour. Its staccato syllables rhyme with brilliance, another word used to uphold exceptionalism in the art world. When something (or someone) is brilliant, it is almost too bright to bear looking at.

I said nothing much in reply; I pulled my sleeves over my hands. I wanted to retreat into darkness instead. I wanted to protect myself against overexposure, against the idea that in order to validate my position in the art world I had to offer a display of how I toiled. It was partly because at that moment I genuinely didn't feel capable of bone-breaking work. But it was also because I found the concept boring. There is no room for mystery or wonder in insisting that working in the art world must come with excessive physical and mental demands. There is no romanticising the taxing labour which accompanies a severely underfunded cultural sector.



Future Commons re-enchants by retreating:

○ Through leaving the extremities of the body (the doing hands, the walking feet) for the stillness and strength of the core and the heart.

○ In order to avoid fighting even while art institutions urge that we struggle.

○ To a private and safe place of conversation and sharing, away from institutional surveillance.

○ So that for a period of time we might be able to study quietly, or to think carefully.

Retreating involves movement away, movement backwards, or movement inwards, towards a softer, blurrier, more mythical place.

# Poetics of Traineeships

by Amina Jama

To those            who are very confused  
                         who get it  
                         who do not get it  
                         who get it and do not get it  
                         who get it but realise there is nothing to get  
                         who realise there is nothing to get.

I want to hide my body and ideas, thoughts  
behind a perspex hood. This is more for your  
protection, trust me. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] keeping tabs [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] What do we talk about when we've been  
talking for days? [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

It feels natural to retreat into the page, into  
myself. I've done this often over the course of my  
traineeship and rely heavily on the power of words.  
Trainees are pooled necessity, with greased elbows,  
bismillah, verily if we openly share our qualms, we  
may never stop talking.

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] We welcome applicants from underrepresented groups. The gays, the theys, the shes, the others? [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I ooze [REDACTED] pus spat out onto my zoom screen. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] zero sleep, zero energy, [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

Trainees seek alliances, often with fellow junior members of staff, those on zero-hours contracts, [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] socialise on a budget [REDACTED] private views and gallery hopping. We're in the midst of a living crisis  
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Just remember, I'm not listening.



# What is The Good Life?

## A conversation

by all of us

The following extracts are from a conversation we had over Zoom on July 8th 2022. As before, we asked each other questions and let the responses meander. Like the previous conversation, they appear throughout the rest of the zine and can be differentiated from other contributions by the speech bubbles they are enclosed in.

They can be found on pages:  
54 – 56, 59 – 63 and 66 – 65

I've been thinking a lot about what it means to live a good life. And like what a good life is and whether I would be doing any art in a good life. Like, if I was living a good life, am I making art? Or maybe would I think of it as art or as something else?

I feel like if you lived a good life, you wouldn't even call work 'work' because it wouldn't necessarily feel like work. It would just be things that you enjoy doing that happened to be fruitful to you.

I'm trying to have a job that gives me enough enjoyment that I'm not just living for my weekends. I don't want to constantly live for the two days I get at the end of the week. And I don't think that that's sustainable either. It's kind of mad to me that you're expected to work five days a week and have two days of rest and to fit in everything else in your life.

As much as I want a good life to be soft, I also want to have some sort of challenge, I want to be pushed – not in a way that there's pressure to change, but things always change. So for me, a good life is enjoying the fact that things are going to move and adapt and being able to meet that process.

I've spent some time in the past two weeks away from London, and every time I go it seems like people are living a better life. They seem to have more access to basic things like locally grown, affordable, delicious food, which is the basis of a good life. And have access to a space where you can rest, work, be in proximity to your friends and not feel like you have to constantly struggle.

London puts so much pressure on you to do otherwise. It just strikes me how much a good life starts from something small like the fruit you eat in the morning... what if we had access to our own farms, or we were all neighbours and shared land and a studio.

I have this thing where I personally feel like jobs that are advertised for three days a week are scam, because really that means you'll be working all five days for three day's pay.

I realised a couple of weeks ago that I'm constantly in pain, to the point where I thought maybe I'm someone who lives with chronic pain.

And then when I went away on holiday, I was living pain-free for a week. All of the pain that I had in my body suddenly dissolved and I could actually breathe easier. I was shocked at how much I internalised my environment.

Someone said to me the other day, "I didn't become a curator to work hard, above and beyond my hours, if I wanted to work hard, I would've become a doctor or something." I needed to hear that.

~~~~~> continued on p.59


Breathing space / words on time

by Tammi Bello

I can't even express the importance of taking a moment to exhale. To take in what serves and leave what doesn't. Creativity can't sustain constant production, things need time to cook, to simmer.

What's important about spaces like ours is the lack of pressure to produce. People say diamonds are made under pressure but I don't think creativity can be compared to a diamond, real creativity is like naturally occurring Citrine. Rare. Slow.

Mother Earth naturally creates citrine with her geothermal heat; transforming amethyst or smoky quartz to this yellow goodness in her mantle, this process takes years.

This is the time rich process of real creativity, let ideas sprout and give them space and time to mature.

I don't pressure cook my oxtail if I can avoid it.

I allow my plantain to ripen for several days until it's sweet.

I will forever give my creativity room for growth.
Breathing space.

→ continued from p.56

Things don't always need to be difficult or overcomplicated, sometimes things should be easy! I think we live in this curatorial vacuum, where we try and make everything more than what it needs to be. Sometimes you just need to let things settle in, let things be.

I'm trying to work a minimal amount of days because I'm just working to sustain myself. I'm not trying to do that much anymore. I dream of a place where I can just be by the sea, work three days a week and be happy, looking at the ocean. I've been actively taking myself away from London to be by bodies of water. And when I return, I wonder, why am I taking myself away from where I'm supposed to be?

Now I'm in Japan, every morning when I walk to work, I see the beautiful mountains, the rice fields, the kois swimming and the turtles bathing, I just feel so happy, like there's literally nothing that can piss me off on my walk to work.

I had a realisation that led to a break and working freelance. I was advised to do a PhD, one of those funded positions intended for POC with likely a non-POC supervisor, where the research topics are interesting but often triggering. Then follow with a Postdoctoral and land an assistant curator role in an institution. After a few years, become a curator and after a few more (when I'm closer to 50) become a senior curator. That's when I'm finally supposed to relax?

I didn't want to become a curator to stress! But, it's rare to see people who look like me make it that far without having done ALL of those steps and then some! Seeing POC lose their jobs in recent years and seeing roles suddenly being invented has made me think more about my capacity and the sectors' capacity to truly support me.

My current situation is interesting, because I feel like I'm only able to be a carer because I'm a freelancer and I'm only able to be a freelancer because I'm a carer, it's weirdly entangled. I'm only able to be a freelancer who's not constantly having to chase the next bag because I'm living under a roof where I don't have to pay rent, but as part of that I'm a full time carer which is another whole set of labour that isn't monetised and is hard to talk about. Like it's a bit messy and repetitive to bring up in team meetings. But it has also actually been a gift in so many ways because I've been able to work at a much slower pace and prioritise that aspect of intergenerational life, which has been so rich for my own practice.

I'm thinking about how our bodies react to stress and how city life adds to that. I really do think that somatic awareness, like awareness of our own bodies and what they're telling us, a kind of literacy of our nervous system, is the only way towards personal and collective liberation. It's so necessary for the transformative change that we're trying to move towards, because if we can't read and honour our body's cues – like, oh, my heart's beating really fast because this is new and exciting, or actually because this is weird and threatening – we can't show up fully for ourselves or others.

I wonder what would happen if we could just take a sabbatical, just to figure out what's going on, and it could be like an exercise – maybe by the end of it we'd come out totally different, because maybe the person you are now is a response to being so dysregulated – honestly, a lot of my creative work comes from the fact that I live in a fucked up system.

Yeah, or a model where everyone only works half days, so in the winter time, they actually see the sun and feel the day. And in the second half of the day you do whatever you want, and you don't need to find a way to monetise the things you do for fun because everyone has enough to live well.

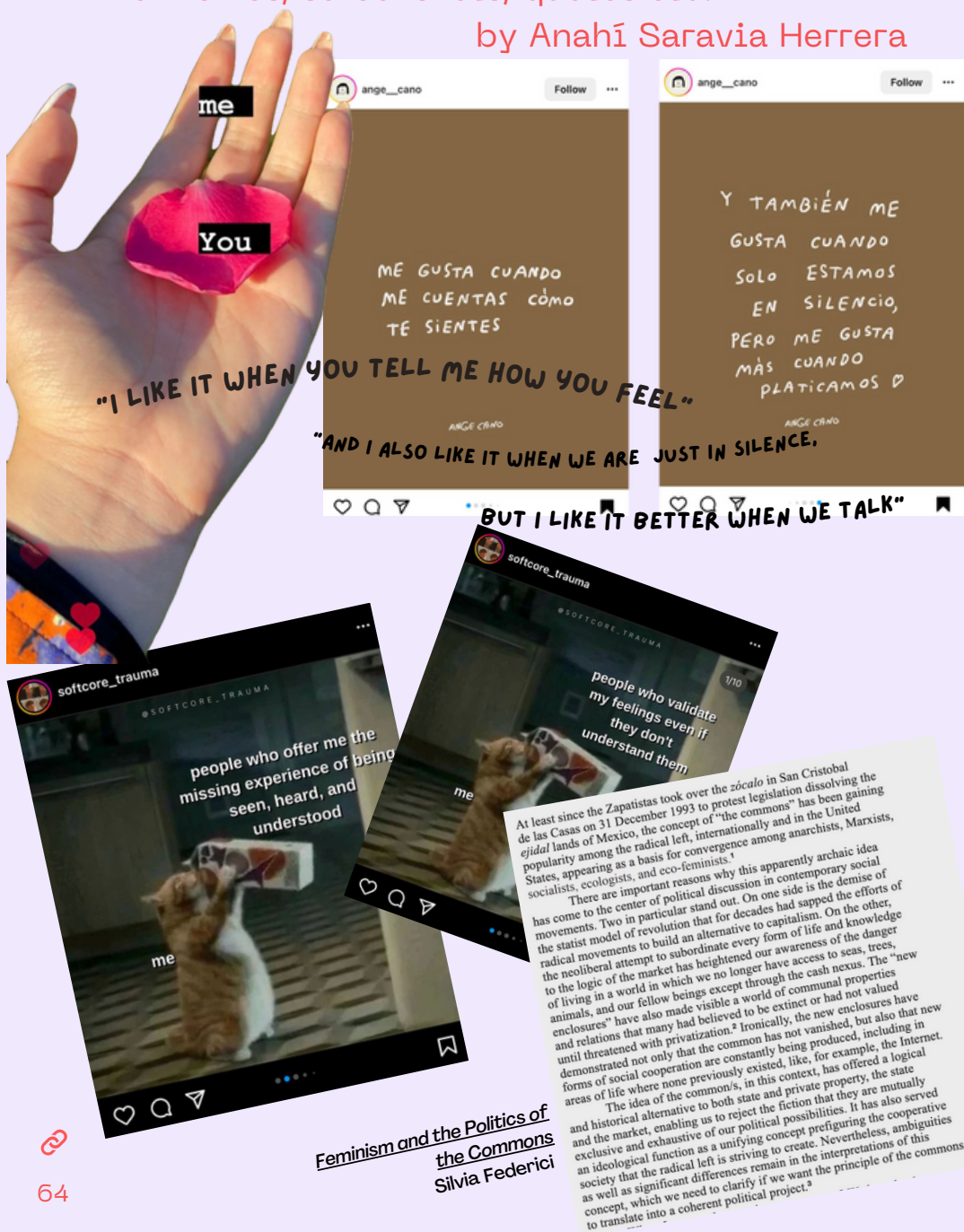
This conversation re-confirms for me that capitalism is the biggest scam that we've ever had to put up with. So much of our time is spent 'at work'. Why can't we all just exist, and build our own houses, have farms and live off of the land – just exist as living beings rather than machines? Because sometimes it feels that way.

I don't think that that's how life should be. I shouldn't always be about – 'how can I get to this next thing?' It's as if we're only allowed to rest when we're old and retired, which doesn't make any sense to me. Why do my 20s have to be dedicated to churning out all of this stuff? And for who? I'm absolutely fed up with it. I don't want my 20s to be like that anymore.

~~~~~> continued on p.66

a collage of thoughts on  
commo(u)ning:  
via memes, screenshots, quotes etc.

by Anahí Saravia Herrera





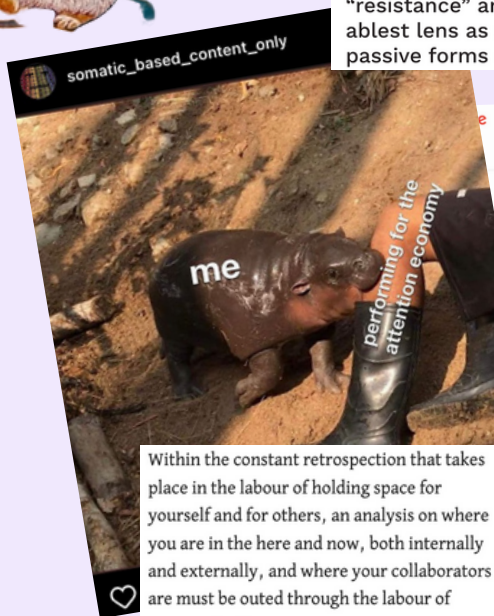
# ART WORK IS WORK

& WE DON'T HAVE TO WORK ALONE

Radical Softness as a Boundless Form of Resistance

Be Oakley, GenderFail

"Radical Softness as a Boundless Form of Resistance" articulates a form of resistance that speaks to an alternative public, one that proliferates through a more hidden mode of radical communication. Thus I hope to challenge the way terms such as "radical" and "resistance" are often viewed through an ablest lens as active, as against ostensibly passive forms of softness or emotiveness.



Within the constant retrospection that takes place in the labour of holding space for yourself and for others, an analysis on where you are in the here and now, both internally and externally, and where your collaborators are must be outed through the labour of communication.

Communicating these thoughts and sensations, understanding the gaps between the internal. the external. the perceived and the imagined is vital for a collective to survive and thrive.

Holding Space  
Syowia Kyambi

when do you stop being an emerging artist

Q All

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<https://www.devotedanddisgruntled.com/blog/at-when...>

**At what age do you stop qualifying as an emerging artist?**

11 Feb 2020 — Does visibility, becoming apparent or prominent, breaking out of our cocoons, stop at 25, 30? If so why? If not why do so many of us feel ...

<https://www.devotedanddisgruntled.com/blog/when...>

**When does emerging artist start and end, and is there a ...**

23 Mar 2018 — to be titled 'emerging artist' are making popular work with value? Third Angle give a different perspective, saying after 17 years of working ...

People also ask

How long are you an emerging artist?

What classifies an emerging artist?

Is 30 too old to become an artist?

How many years does it take to become a professional artist?

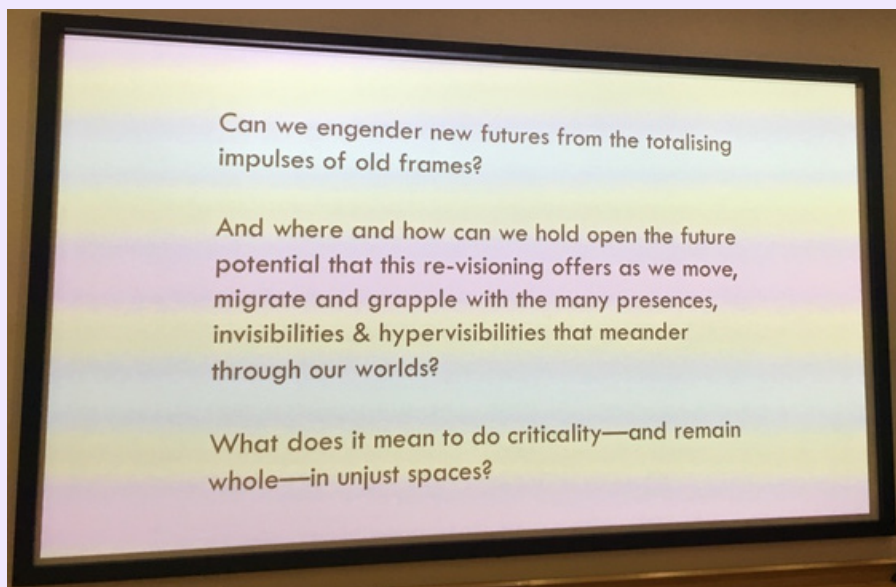


When I think about a good life and what work would look like, it looks like a bunch of conversations and just the joy of sharing interests together, connecting to it and caring about it so much. If curation does exist in a good life, it's only in that format to me.

Even if we might not be able to kind of like dismantle the entirety of capitalism, I think about creating our own little paradises within our conversations, our interpersonal relationships, and within the projects that we are actually part of... being that safety for another person or being able to speak and be heard.

I was thinking of suggesting, as an option, to use the excuse of a Future Commons meeting to actually just leave work for an hour and a half and lie down in the park or something. No need to actually join the meeting. Like, what do you actually need? And how could this group be useful in other ways?

It's really toxic when directors have the mentality of 'we struggled to get to where we are, so you should be willing to struggle too.' It's not ok, it's very anti-Black, and to not see things in an intersectional way is just not acceptable. It really needs to change.

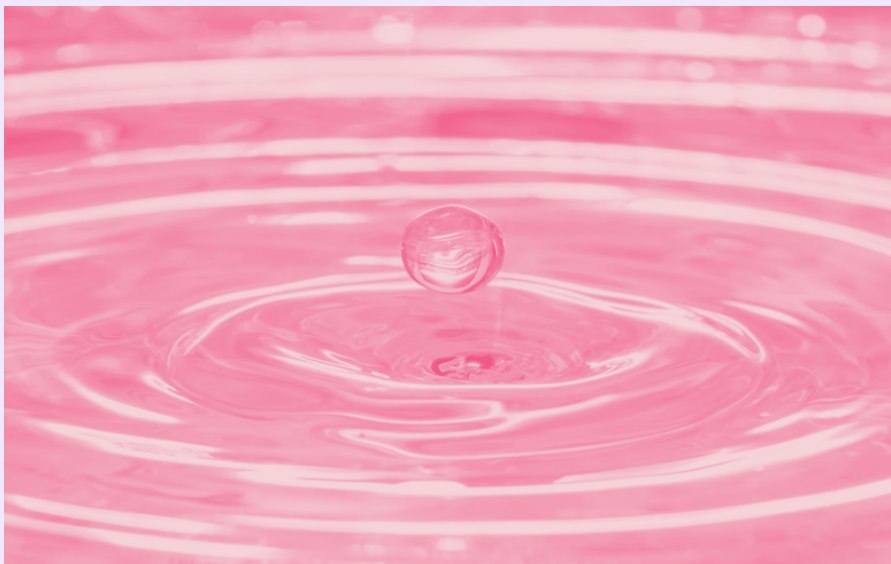


📷 a photo of the presentation screen during Dr Karen Salt's keynote entitled '[Praxis Interrupts: Doing Criticality within Unjust Spaces](#)' for the Creating Interference Conference (June 2018)



# Reflections on Water

by Jessica Lowe-Mbirimi



## Water

noun



1. A colourless, transparent, odourless liquid that forms the seas, lakes, rivers, and rain and is the basis of the fluids of living organisms.

verb

1. Pour or sprinkle water over (a plant or area) in order to encourage growth.

When thinking about the shape or shapes Future Commons has taken, I kept going back to water. Water is fluid and intrinsically nurturing, it echoes the dynamic of our group beautifully.

In our conversations, we often referred to the serenity we felt when near the water or how the sea was like an escape we wished we could infinitely grasp. I would see wistful gazes across the screen dreaming of a future by the water...

Thus, I found myself thinking often about how water moves. From the Fela Kuti song 'Water No Get Enemy',  to Bruce Lee's conversation about being formless like  water, to Toni Morrison's description of the floods in Song of Solomon. "All Water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was".

Water flows where it wants to and has the power to be calm or heard. That's what our collective has felt like for me. A coming together of people from separate institutions (or outside of them entirely) who aligned and created a space to speak and be heard.

I imagine Future Commons as ripples in an ocean. Once propelled by external forces, those ripples became alive. Emboldened by their agency and potential they expanded towards spaces we may or may not have envisioned.



# Us

**Anahí Saravia Herrera** is probably listening to Boleros or Reggaeton and trying to find people who want to dance with her.

**Amber Li** is always searching for the perfect place to curl up with a book.

**Amina Jama** is a lover of herbal teas, plantain and injera. Love and care are the centre of everything for her, and whenever she can will shout out bell hooks and James Baldwin for being everything.

**Jessica Lowe-Mbirimi** is a part time flexitarian and a full time hot spring enthusiast. She dreams of getting 8 hours of sleep each day, enjoys strawberry picking and can't live without matcha.

**Kinnari Saraiya's** words are a retelling of the stories she heard from her grandmother while she dried mango on our rooftop to churn to pickle the next day.

**Tammi Bello** is a foodie and sun worshipper. She feels most at home on a beach with a piña colada in hand, being fed lobster.

**Tobi Alexandra Falade** is a vessel of water living on a sphere revolving around the sun within outer space.

**Nikita Gill** wants to write more love letters to her friends.

**Priya Jay** is still in awe at the fact that a fig is an inverted flower.

You can get in touch at [futurecommons@iniva.org](mailto:futurecommons@iniva.org)



# The money

With continued interest in that which is made visible and that which is invisible, we want to share the rough budget outline we worked with from November 2021 to January 2023. We share this with the understanding that there will always be information that is missing or unquantifiable.

£10,400 per year was allocated – from iniva's budget for the three-year Future Collect project – towards the coordination of a curatorial network. Priya Jay was paid a freelance fee of £140/day to develop and coordinate this work. She has been working up to 2 days a week since February 2021, excluding three periods of bereavement when she was not able to work.

In addition, the group had £8,000 which was allocated to:

- Hospitality: refreshments for in-person meetings and occasional group lunches and dinners
- Travel & accommodation: Travel and accommodation to visit exhibitions, artists or to participate in a programme
- Cultural engagement: Exhibition and event tickets
- Artist & curator engagement: Inviting guest mentors for crits, paying for artist's time for studio visits

- Workshops: Inviting someone to deliver a workshop for creative/professional development
- Publication production: paying contributors, printers, launching and distributing
- Mutual aid: Sharing with someone who needs it \*
- Other: Anything else, for example, getting headshots taken, collectively investing in artworks, experimental programming \*

\* Included in initial budget but not in the final spend, this time.

🔗 We recommend Jack Ky Tan's 'Budget Commission' in performingborders e-journal no.2 Rallying the Commons in which he asks "What is a budget? How does it skew reality? How does it create world? Am I a budget?!"

Funds allocated to Future Commons come from the wider Future Collect project budget. Future Collect is funded by Arts Council England, Art Fund and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation.

## Other networks we love

Other networks offering supportive space that the group has direct experience of includes Black

🔗 Curators Collective, Black Blossoms and Black  
 🔗 Curatorial.



What does the future feel like?      When do you feel heard?      When do you feel most seen?      How do we enter spaces that ask us to bear our wounds?      Where is the power in my role?      Who am I in relation to? How am I in relation to them?      How am I accountable to all my relations?      Who is gathered by your invitation?      What do we have in common?      What is a commons?      What can we share?      What is abundant?      How can we help each other ask for more?      How can we help each other be more audacious?      What could liberation feel like?      What does it feel like to give care?      What does it feel like to receive care?

"Governance cannot know what might be shared,  
what might be mutual, what might be common."

— The Undercommons, p. 66