UNFINISHED BUSINESS
PERFORMATIVE INTERVIEWS AS A METHOD FOR EXPRESSING FAILURE IN THE SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART JOB

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KEYWORDS

ABSTRACT

SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART HAS, FOR SOME, BECOME A PROFESSIONALISED, FREELANCE FUNDED FORM OF LABOUR. IT IS WORK THAT INVOLVES EMOTIONAL LABOUR, EMPATHY AND COMPASSION, DEMONSTRATED BY THE TRUST THAT IS OFTEN NEEDED BETWEEN (PAID) ARTISTS AND (UNPAID) PARTICIPANTS IN ORDER FOR PROJECTS TO DEVELOP. IN ORDER TO PRESERVE THE ALREADY PRECARIOUS FUNDING OF THIS INDUSTRY THERE IS A TENDENCY TO PROMOTE THE POSITIVE AND SUCCESSFUL ASPECTS OF THESE PROJECTS. THIS ARTICLE EXPLORES HOW THE IMPERATIVE TO PRESENT THE WORK IN A POSITIVE LIGHT HAS LED TO A CULTURE OF SILENCE AND INDIVIDUALISED ABSORPTION OF FAILURE WHEN THINGS START TO GO WRONG. THROUGH A RE-EXAMINATION OF A SERIES OF *PERFORMATIVE INTERVIEWS*, THE ARTICLE REFLECTS ON THIS PLAYFUL METHOD FOR SPEAKING OUT ABOUT UNFINISHED, CANCELLED OR COMPROMISED SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART JOBS. IN DOING SO, THE THEATRICAL FRAMEWORKS OF BOTH THE SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART JOB AND RESEARCH INTERVIEW ARE BROUGHT INTO FOCUS.

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SOPHIE HOPE IS A LECTURER AT BIRKBECK, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON. HER PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH EXPLORES HISTORIES OF ART AND POLITICS (E.G. MEANWHILE IN AN ABANDONED WAREHOUSE WITH OWEN KELLY AND 1984 DINNERS), COMMISSIONED ART (PERFORMATIVE INTERVIEWS, SOCIAL ART MAPS AND CARDS ON THE TABLE) AND PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS TO WORK (MANUAL LABOURS WITH JENNY RICHARDS). SOPHIE FACILITATES WORKSHOPS ON PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH (CORKSCREW) AND THE ETHICS OF EMPLOYABILITY (E.G. CRITICAL WORK PLACEMENTS).

Introduction

The socially engaged art industry could be seen as a combination of service sector, care work and creative labour. Like any enterprise that wants to succeed, pointing to its failures and mistakes might be seen as an act of self-sabotage. Interrogating the tyranny of suppressed blunders, refusals and misunderstandings, however, might reveal the mechanisms of the industry itself and the kind of labour it requires for it to continue. *Performative Interviews* are a set of ten films I made in 2009 based on a series of interviews with professionals who made a living out of their work as artists, curators, arts development workers or commissioners.[1] In the interviews I asked people to tell me a story of a problematic experience of an art commission. The offer of anonymity (through mask-wearing or re-enacting extracts of interview transcript) resulted in recollections of jobs that had gone wrong, failed, were censored, cancelled or remain unfinished. The *Performative Interviews* introduce the protagonist as a participant negotiating a networked series of contracts and relationships.

Cultural participation, as this journal postulates, can be understood as the ways in which people produce and consume culture, and everything in between. The socially engaged art job sits in this nexus of participation. It has roots in facilitating others to produce their own forms of expression, drawing on legacies of the community arts movement, for example. It might also apply pedagogical methods for mediation of other art forms and practices, influenced by histories of gallery education. As with other areas of cultural participation, ladders and spectrums can be applied to assess the degrees to which people are involved in the process, from consuming to co-owning (64 Million Artists, 2018) or from manipulation to citizen control (Arnstein, 1969). The socially engaged art job could be seen as a microcosm that holds ideals of both cultural democracy and democratisation of culture in its forms and practices. Histories of social justice activism, art history and critical pedagogies jostle in the evolution of a set of practices which has led to a tendency for artists to become the paid professionals in the cultural participation industry, albeit with a multitude of motivations, agendas, methods and ambitions that are driving the practice onward.

For this article I am revisiting six of the *Performative Interview* films which focus on disappointing endings. Reflecting on the content of these interviews and the performative interview method itself eleven years after they were made has allowed me to think through the performative aspects of the commissioning process in relation to sociologist Arlie Hochschild's work on emotional labour (1983). Hochschild wrote about the ways in which emotion has become a commodity which is bought, sold and managed. While emotional labour is a term that has been usefully applied to researching many different professions since Hochschild's original publication, it has also been over-used, such as becoming a blanket term for unpaid domestic labour (Beck, 2018). The focus for Hocshchild, and my interpretation of emotional labour for this article is what happens when you are expected to produce certain feelings in other people as part of your job by performing that contagious emotion yourself. In order to express that emotion effectively, however, you might also at times need to suppress other feelings of anxiety, hurt, sadness or guilt, for example. This could then lead to a sense of alienation from that role. The implications of that alienation from a job that might be motivated by wanting to build relationships of care and trust are what I want to explore further.

In this article I explore the socially engaged art job as a form of emotional labour which entails artists and others employed in the process of carrying out what Hochschild refers to as deep acting. Identifying so deeply with the role can mean it is difficult to speak out when things go wrong. While I was doing the interviews, I became as interested in *how* people talk about these failures as I was in what the interviewees were saying. Performative interviewing emerged as a method for creating a critical distance from which to reflect on the conditions of the socially engaged art job itself. I suggest there is agency to be found in being open about the embarrassing, frustrating and misunderstood aspects of the socially engaged art job. How does emotional labour, for example, impact on the ability to critique, undermine and radically intervene into the structures of racial capitalism that form the stage on which socially engaged art as a job is performed? Has the pressure to perform positivity mean it is harder to talk about failure?

I write this from the perspective of a practice-based researcher, drawing on my own experiences and observations of the sector in an attempt to contribute to the critical discourse on the economics and politics of socially engaged art. I am therefore writing from a position of relative security (I am a salaried academic) enabling me to think about failures in socially engaged art jobs from the sidelines without it impacting directly on my income. I also want to acknowledge my own failures in connecting academic research to policy and practice in the context of socially engaged art. The desire to weave these worlds together has, in my experience, been tricky and is something I also experience in the classrooms of the MA in Arts Policy and Management I teach on. There is a push and pull between developing critical thinking and analytical skills (such as unpacking the underlying

ideologies of policy and management decisions and the theoretical and historical trajectories that inform these industries) and the desire to gain the skills to do a good job. This requires a belief in the work one does, as well as a healthy scepticism of the underlying principles of the work itself. What happens, then, to socially engaged critiques of economic, social and political life when one is employed to provide creative solutions to these problems?

Socially engaged art jobs tend to involve a complex, multiplicity of experiences and emotions which do not necessarily comply to pictures of imagined success. Yet, it is often a benign version of events that becomes the official story told in the format of evaluation reports, for example. By accepting socially engaged art as a profession, emotional labour is practiced, honed and delivered efficiently and effectively, to schedule and to budget, at least that is the version often presented. It is the unofficial stories that go untold or undocumented that the performative interviewing method tries to create space for.

Performative interviewing

I took my inspiration for the performative interviewing method from the sociologist Norman K. Denzin, who wrote in 2001 about the "reflexive, dialogic, or performative interview" as a form of radical democratic practice (Denzin, 2001). Methods of ethnodrama (Mienczakowski, 2001, p. 470), mystories (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 905), confessional video-diaries (Renov, 1996), Deavere Smith's re-enactments of American character (in Denzin, 2001, p.33) and the work of Kleines Postfordistisches Drama (2004) are also examples of the performative potential of practice based research that have informed my approach. The performative aspect of the interviews began as a practical solution to offer the interviewees anonymity and became a device to reflect on the performative aspects of the socially engaged art job as well as the interview itself.

Image *Performative Interview: Duck, Frog and Horse on Crater 5 (2009)*

Of the six *Performative Interviews* films I am referring to in this article two involve interviewees wearing masks and four involve actors reciting extracts from interview transcripts. In *Cornflake: Shooting in the dark* two artists make their own masks and recall an experience of being uninvited to take part in an arts festival. In *Duck, Frog and Horse on Crater 5* one person (Duck) takes the role of herself as well as two other people involved in the job: Frog, another artist, and Horse, the commissioner, to explore how the artists risked rewriting a public art brief that steered art away from providing a gateway feature but were shunned by

the commissioner for being too conceptual and ephemeral. *Self-interview: Very disappointing* involves me telling a story to my mother of a job I did with front of house staff of a museum's service that was cancelled half way through, which she then tells back to camera as if it had happened to her. In *It's not all flipping roses!,* two actors read from extracts of a discussion between an interviewer and interviewee about a compromised public art project. In *Learning to say 'no',* a community arts worker's words about the difficulties of working with funders are re-spoken to camera by actors and in *Banging on Doors,* two actors re-read extracts of a conversation between an artist and a local authority community development officer.

All interviews are performative in that they have the potential to re-enforce, shape and subvert subjectivities. As Denzin suggests, "the act of speech, the act of being interviewed, becomes a performance itself" (Denzin, 2001, p. 27). Telling, sharing, re-telling, editing, performing and re-sharing are processes that open up the research process to multiple interpretations, drawing attention to the mode of research itself and the fallibility of the interview process as a staple research tool. Sociologist Barbara Sherman Heyl, for example, remarks on the problematic power relations of the interview: "for some respondents, the research interview may not be an appropriate place to 'tell all'" (Heyl, 2001, p. 376).This performative aspect playfully deconstructs the interview format itself as a fact-finding exercise and offers a new way of reworking the anecdotal evidence by the interviewees disguising themselves in masks or re-playing extracts of interviews with actors. Denzin writes about how the "performative sensibility turns interviews into performance texts, into poetic monologues" (Denzin, 2001, p. 25). Both the socially engaged art job and the interview are constructed sites through which identities are formed, re-enforced, excluded and nourished. The interview is performative because it re-iterates these gestures, reflects on them, repeats and exaggerates them (through masks and re-enactments of transcripts). Erving Goffman's influential book The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life (1959) explores the ways in which people use props, settings, their appearance and mannerisms to project certain versions of themselves in different contexts. As Judith Butler has also explored, one's subjectivity and agency are created through these performative acts, drawing attention to the different possibilities of interaction and interpretations of the interview format itself as a site where the subject performs itself into being (Butler, 1997).

As forms of emotional labour based on social encounters, the socially engaged art job involves complex exchanges of subjectivities which are constantly in formation. Acknowledging and drawing attention to the performative aspects of research (e.g. through the interview) and practice (e.g. through the socially engaged art job) permits the interviewer and interviewee to playfully interrogate the parameters and conventions of these aspects of their lives. I suggest there is agency to be found in disrupting the affirmative speech acts found in and about the socially engaged art job by pronouncing the often muffled experiences of failure through the platform of the performative interview. The interviewees are re-iterating experiences and breaking a silence of failure that the normative conditions of the socially engaged art job cannot typically accommodate. Through the masks and re-enactments, the interview process draws attention to the very real issue of going public with these sensitive stories that could jeopardise careers, reputations and funding. Being prepared to take this risk and compromise one's professional status, however, is perhaps the ultimate consequence of a critical practice that seeks to draw attention to the inequalities and inadequacies of a system that frames one's very practice. This may allow us to create and produce new ways of interpreting and discussing these experiences alongside evaluations and documentation, contributing to archival evidence for future research into socially engaged art practices.

A theme that runs through the *Performative Interviews* is the premature cancellation of a project part way through. This failure is often about conflicting agendas, misunderstandings and differences in opinion that were not communicated at the time. Because of the investment made by those involved, however, and the deep acting it requires, there is an understandable reluctance to publicly focus on this failure due to the need to move on to the next gig and avoid jeopardising reputations in the process. The embodied aspect of the practice and its connection to an artist's identity, I argue, means it might be harder to see the framing of the project as a job. For Hochschild, the theatre frames the illusion: we know it is false, we appreciate the art of deep acting. Goffman also uses a dramaturgical metaphor for social interaction where the context is the stage on which people perform (Goffman, 1959). Socially engaged art does not have an obvious stage, but, I would argue, the frame is just less visible. The masked interviewees in *Cornflake: Shooting in the dark,* for example, stress how the lack of structure, parameters and opportunities to discuss ideas with the commissioner made the project impossible. In the theatre of the socially engaged art job there are different scripts circulating, being read, ignored or misread by the numerous people involved, so it comes as no surprise that sometimes the show just cannot go on, or it might go on, just without you.

The *Performative Interview* films tell experiences of miscommunication and crossed wires between artists and commissioners that develop out of a lack of dialogue. While the briefs may not have been clear from the outset, the artists found in the end that they were participating in the contractual relationship in the wrong way. As the framework of the commission starts to falter, so does the veracity of the interview. The format of these interviews also makes us question the validity of the voices; who is speaking for whom? The interviews were an attempt to get behind the scenes of the socially engaged art job and in doing so the "apparatus" and "means of production" of the interview as research tool are also exposed (Denzin, 2001, p. 33). There are slippages as the woman sitting in front of the fire addresses the camera as if it is not her who this had happened to (*Self-interview: Very disappointing*); two actors speak the words of someone absent (*It's not all flipping roses!*); the artists in their handmade disguises become cartoon-like as they retell an experience they had to walk away from (*Cornflake: Shooting in the dark*) and one voice wearing different masks performs three perspectives on the same event (*Duck, Frog and Horse on Crater 5*). How do we know which one is real or are they all contrived? The performative aspect exaggerates the ways in which the protagonists have to perform expected roles in the contracts they enter into and highlights the moments when performances are not good enough and expectations are not met.

Emotional labour and the socially engaged art job

If emotional labour involves being paid to make other people feel a particular way, in the case of the socially engaged art job, the emotion to be transmitted (for example, from paid artist to unpaid participant) is often assumed to be a positive and happy one. In this section I argue that this form of labour involves what Hochschild refers to as deep acting (Hochschild, 1983). Artists and others supported by this industry are often transmitting feelings drawn from their convictions, politics and identities. They often believe in what they do (beyond doing it for the money). What happens, then, when a job (which is often so much more than a job) is cut short or undermined in some way? Hochschild focuses on the emotional labour of flight attendants in her book *The Managed Heart* (1983) which went on to influence many other studies of emotional labour. Researchers have since applied it to social workers, Disneyland ride operators, waitresses, personal trainers, midwives, insurance salesmen, hairstylists and many other workforces. As far as I am aware, it has not often been connected to the socially engaged art job, but it might offer us a way of understanding this service industry as part of the care and creative economies.[2]

I take the socially engaged art job as a framing device which incorporates sequences of encounters, inter-relations, colliding and often incompatible agendas. I am using the word job rather than the more vague terms project or practice to highlight the contractual, financial underpinnings of this profession. Typically, the socially engaged art job comes in the form of intermittent short-term contracts for artists, a written brief outlining terms and conditions, specific groups of people and, or locations to engage, a set budget and specific timeframe (usually based on when the money needs to be spent by). One could argue that socially engaged art, which emerges from complex histories of community arts, political activism, conceptual art and performance art, is interested in combating the alienating effects of capitalism by focusing on the social interactions and intersubjective relationships between people and environments (Kester, 2004). As the practice has become professionalised and turned into a job, however, there has been a commodification of emotions and the cycle of alienation resumes.

Hochschild defines emotion *work* as the management and presentation of emotions in the private sphere amongst friends and family and emotion *labour* as the commercialisation of feelings and emotions (for example, the artist packages and sells their passions for a fee). Hochschild writes: "[emotional labour] requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (1983, p. 7). As your emotions become commodified, one can start to feel detached from them in a process of self-estrangement (Hochschild, 1983). This is complicated further by the self-employed nature of socially engaged art work. The contract might extend into unpaid time and move between professional public relations into private lives where people become friends. These working conditions (including the emotional labour involved) are worth reflecting on if we are to consider the possibilities of how honest, critical dialogue can take place and with whom.

Artists, participants, facilitators and others involved in the process of a socially engaged art job perform certain contagious emotions (empathy, diplomacy, a sense of commitment). Smiling enthusiasm is supposed to be contagious; success might be measured in terms of the amount of happy people at the end of a project. But what happens when negative, inappropriate

emotions and reactions are suppressed in order to maintain efficacy and positive stories of participation? Chantel Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau's work on radical democracy (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) discusses the idea of agonistic pluralism where 'friendly enemies' can express radical negativity as a necessary part of any society. Mouffe identifies an agonistic struggle as one where principles are agreed but interpretations of them differ and coexist (Mouffe, 2013). As a political theory, it rejects the idea of one, consensual, harmonious society and instead, radical democracy should supply the space for confrontation and conflict.

I relate the practice of agonism to intersubjectivity as it involves empathy towards and respect of the other (recognising different subjectivities) as well as acknowledging that it is these differences rather than the need to overcome them that constitutes democratic society. I, alongside many other practice-based researchers, such as Anthony Schrag and Evi Tselika, have found the conflictual consensus concept speaks to our lived experiences. As demonstrated in the *Performative Interviews*, for example, not all emotions are positive and there is not one consensual version of events. Schrag draws on Mouffe's concept of agonistic pluralism in his PhD to explore the role of conflict as a source of agency in institutionally commissioned participatory art projects (Schrag, 2015). Tselika applies the notion of conflict transformation art to her PhD practice-based research into urban segregation in Nicosia, Cyprus as distinct to conflict resolution art which focuses on peace-building (Tselika, 2015). Alongside Schrag and Tselika, I have found the need to acknowledge and express the wide variety of conflicting emotions and experiences of socially engaged art and resist pressures to tell one (positive) side of the story. The emotional labour of social engagement, however, often implies an affirmative emotional transference, meaning it can be hard to be negative or point out the hurt and harm felt at moments of disconnect, misunderstanding and injustice. And yet those of us who have been involved in socially engaged art jobs know that they are often teeming with critical voices.

Deep acting

So where do these critical voices go? Hochschild distinguishes between surface and deep acting. Surface acting involves disguising what we really feel by pretending to feel what we do not (Hochschild 1983, p. 33). "The box of clues is hidden but not changed" she writes. Surface acting is about deceiving others: "the body rather than the soul is the main tool of the trade" (p. 37). Deep acting on the other hand involves deceiving oneself as much as deceiving others. As Franco Beradi (2009) has written about, in contemporary forms of immaterial labour, it is the soul that is often put to work. Deep acting involves "pretending deeply", going, as Hochschild puts it: "beyond the smile that's just 'painted on'". She writes about how method acting is a form of deep acting. Here, the actor taps into a memory connected to a particular emotion that enables them to have an emotional response on stage (for example, rather than trying to be sad, think of the thing that makes you sad). In *Banging on doors*, for example, the actor playing the artist tells us how he considers all aspects of the process as part of the art ("I consider going for a cup of tea as a piece of the art"), and that in a residency he has at a school, he performs the artist role, "putting on a flat cap and pretending he is a character that lives in the attic". This suggests that while art is embedded in all aspects of the process, the artist can slip into character, with the right props and costume at certain moments, combining both deep and surface acting in the process.

By referring to emotional labour and deep acting I am able to discern the socially engaged art experience as a job that frames and commodifies social interaction. Resistance to the framing of this practice as a job perhaps indicates how deep emotional identification with the work goes. Hochschild sees a problem with identifying wholeheartedly with work as it can lead to experiences of stress and burnout. This is something that those of us in the socially engaged art business might recognise in ourselves and colleagues. While the negative effects of performing this emotional labour might include fatigue, exhaustion, frustration, anxiety, insecurity and individualised shame, positive effects might include: love, passion and joy of work, self-identifying with and owning your work. These are all positive traits that keep us interested and committed to the work which we draw on to perform deep acting in these roles. How much have we convinced ourselves and others (funders, participants, colleagues, parents, friends, children) that we believe in the work we do, that it is part of us, it is connected to our personalities demonstrated in the enthusiasm we have for our practices? In *Duck, Frog and Horse on Crater 5*, for example, Frog explains how she had put a lot of work into the proposal (that was eventually rejected), spending more time on it than she was paid for.

Similarly in *Learning to say 'no'*, the protagonist tells us how an organisation will come along with,

> "a fantastic idea and you think right, we really morally we have to do this, it's just too good not to do, it's going to provide too many benefits to the young people that we work with, but you're already working a 40 hour week or 45 hour week or 50 hour week in some cases, so when do you deliver it? So, those are challenges."

Emotional attachment to the work is often a prerequisite and substitute for a fair wage. Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt ask: "what role does affect play in generating consent (or even passion) for working lives that, without this emotional and symbolic sheen, might appear arduous, tiring and exploitative?" (Gill & Pratt, 2008, p. 25) Pleasure, they write, can become a disciplinary technology (Gill & Pratt, 2008). There might be pressure to *look* like you are enjoying the work. As Hochschild observes: "Seeming to 'love the job' becomes part of the job" (1983, p. 6) and "Cheerfulness in the line of duty becomes something different from *ordinary* good cheer" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 189). The controlling and managing of emotions is meant to be effortless, indeed you love this work, you enjoy it, but "to show that the enjoyment takes effort is to do the job poorly" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 8). Does the pressure to maintain a positive attitude and feel-good approach to the socially engaged art job distract and/or prevent artists and participants from revealing the cracks in the smiles and the realisation that things might not be as they seem? One of the ways to guard against burnout, Hochschild suggests, is to develop a "healthy estrangement, a clear separation between self and role" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 188). If the acting is so deep, how can a critical distance be cracked open so that the internalised experiences of failure are expressed and the structure of the job comes into focus? Might the *Performative Interviews* be a tactic for creating that critical distance where the framing (and therefore conditions) of the commissioning process and the ways we research failure can come into focus?

The show must go on

Conflicting agendas can be based on the injustices felt at not being heard or understood. The open brief is often lauded as good practice, and yet in the socially engaged art job at least, there is no such thing, just unclear or underprepared briefs (pre-decided but not communicated as expressed in *Duck, Frog and Horse on Crater 5*). In the cases retold in the *Performative Interviews* it is often the commissioned artists who absorb the failure and move on (or compromise) while the commissioner stands resolute and business continues as normal, while deep acting continues to be performed from all those working on the job. The interviews reveal the hierarchical aspects of the job and expectations reflected in the roles (of artist, curator, commissioner, participant). When there is a rupture in proceedings, the conditions and conventions of the job come into focus allowing for a critical evaluation of the process.

In *Duck, Frog and Horse on Crater 5*, for example (where one of the artists plays all three characters), we hear how the commissioner, Horse, was very disappointed with the artists' proposals which she thought were "too arty and ephemeral". While she admits she was interested in getting the community involved, ultimately she asked them to "come up with a shopping list and instead they came up with some very, very difficult art pieces that frankly, Crater 5 just aren't ready for". Horse was not prepared to stand up and fight for something that "no one understands what it means" as she has a "reputation to uphold". She also refers to how the artists embarrassed her in a meeting because they had not taken on board the suggestions she had made ("I told them it wasn't good enough"). In *Banging on doors* the artist and local authority community development officer reflect on the expectation or license given to an artist to do "something completely different" and yet, the community development officer jokes that the commissioners do not really want artists to do something completely different and in fact the artist can often be used more as a scapegoat: "we can blame him when he's gone".

These contradictions might prevent someone from confronting and addressing experiences of failure on an internal project-basis let alone in public. Under pressure to present the job in a good light, with one strong script, failures are often absorbed on an individual level. For example, Hochschild refers to how for flight attendants "part of the job is to disguise fatigue and irritation, for otherwise the labour would show in an unseemly way, and the product - passenger contentment - would be damaged" (1983, p. 8). In *Self-interview: Very disappointing*, the protagonist reflects that it would perhaps have been a good idea to involve the management in the process earlier and that perhaps it was her fault that things went wrong.

In *Cornflake: Shooting in the dark*, the artists' proposed performance was supposed to be a caricature and parody of how Cornflake (the code name for the commissioning organisation) work. They thought the commissioning organisation would relish this intervention: "for an organisation that prides itself on being antagonistic, that should have been an interesting discussion". The lack of communication the artists had with the organisation in the run up to the festival, however, was far from satisfactory as there were no opportunities to have a conversation and no clear parameters: "everything was a complete mystery". They felt as if they were "shooting in the dark". They had a five-minute phone call with someone from Cornflake and a simple, "no thanks". One of the protagonists uses the analogies of feeling like the "square peg in the hole" and "the new kids in school" and that they did not relish being in that role again. Similarly, in *Duck, Frog and Horse on Crater 5* the artists felt that the commissioner had a strong idea of what she wanted and that the outcomes had been pre-decided but not communicated: "our part in it was like a fly in the ointment that was then brushed under the carpet," comments Frog. These examples raise the question of how failures are internalised and absorbed by the workers rather than being addressed at an organisational, policy or broader structural level.

Image *Performative Interview: Cornflake: Shooting in the dark (2009)*

Finding ways to talk about failure and the deep acting that lead people to cover-up these glitches can reveal the performance for what it is: a complex set of interrelating agendas, scripts, power-plays and expectations which are not always obvious from the outset and can point to the broader structural conditions in which the job is situated. For example, in *Banging on doors* the artist and local authority community development officer talk about how a process-based, discursive way of working often slows processes down through this form of engagement and this puts local authorities off as they have to spend budgets by a certain deadline. Timescales, they say, are a real problem as often the time it takes to reach agreement on whether a project should happen or not means there is not much time left to actually do it. This results in compromised projects which have no depth, "We'll be back to skimming the surface because together we can't commit the time that that project needs to dig beneath the thing because they'll still want the 20 days' worth of whatever activities so we won't be able to root out or spend time rooting it out because it'll be compacted".

They go on to discuss the issue of a reluctance to change the culture in the local authority itself, which often has the attitude

towards these projects as just being about "bums on seats". Referring to the local authority, the actor playing the community development officer states: "They're expecting the community to change but they're not willing to change". They discuss how projects that involve people in developing ownership over ideas takes time and is not something that can happen in two weeks. The community development worker tries to get people to understand the decision making processes so people know how to contribute and then it is a process of "banging on doors" to make sure decision-makers are actually listening. Her work has involved opening doors to the right people and getting access for members of the community to sit on committees to "question people who sit in their ivory towers and are guarded by other people". For her, this process of change is not just focused on the community but changing how the process works in the Council too, "otherwise it'll just continue to be like this and we'll be wasting our time" but that usually it is "one or two people refusing to change". "You do have to wonder" she says, "about people's commitments to change in this community and what they really want from it personally, their own personal agenda". Do the silences around moments of mishap at a project level point to failures in an entire industry to address the inequalities it purports to alleviate, potentially causing more harm than good in the process?

Speaking out: who, where, when, why?

My research supports some of the initial findings of the *Cultural Participation: stories of success, histories of failure* research project which point to how talking about failure can be liberating and empowering (Cultural Participation, n.d.). This was also the case for my interviewees where the humorous aspects of disguise and role play offered a playfulness from which to reflect on difficult experiences. In response to their research data, project co-lead Leila Jancovich states that they are finding that: "the more middle class successful artists have more of a problem of talking about failure than less established artists from more diverse backgrounds, who almost wear their failures as a badge of honour..." (Jancovich, 2020). While I did not collect information about their class backgrounds, my interviewees expressed varying experiences of being able to talk about failure, with some finding agency in the act of speaking out, but that this very much depended on the context in which they were speaking. For example, one interviewee presented at a conference where there were funders and commissioners and felt it was important to tell them that the project "wasn't all flipping roses" but that a critical text in a book about the same project distributed to local residents was removed as it was felt it might jeopardise the residents' sense of pride over the project.

Level of experience also had an impact on how the interviewees approached the question of failure. In the case of more experienced artists, curators and commissioners, it becomes a matter of refusing to compromise and therefore saying no, allowing things to fail or removing the obstacles in order to plough on and get things done anyway. In *Duck, Frog and Horse on Crater 5* the more experienced artist, Frog, had worked with Horse before and was determined this time not to compromise her practice. She walked away from the project which she found quite traumatic and frustrating ("I invested a lot of time and it was thrown back in my face"), while Duck continued to work on a section of the project that she had developed and that while she was "continuing with trepidation", the only way she could continue to work with Horse was to not directly address the situation and just move on. Duck remarks how she learnt a lot from Frog who had more experience, and that it gave her more confidence to "stick to my guns and to know what it is I want to get out of something".

The interviewees reflect on how perhaps there was not the time, space (or inclination) to unpick what was expected of them and that in these situations it is important to listen to yourself and ask what is going wrong: "maybe it's having the bravery, foresight and financial reserves to say no to something" as the Frog on Crater 5 remarks. In *Learning to say 'no'* we hear how someone has found the strength and foresight to say 'no' to working with organisations that do not reflect their ethos and way of working. She has learnt to refuse to work with those organisations or groups that come to her with predefined outcomes and just want to outsource their creative work to her and her organisation, which works more on a grass roots level with young people. There is a glimmer of hope in someone being self-empowered to say 'no' to organisations, commissioners or funders that demand too much or make irrelevant requests. Developing ways of communicating agendas and ambitions before contracts are issued is potentially a way forward for all parties involved. Co-developing contracts, agreements and rules of engagement together might also be a way for artists, participants and commissioning organisations to make more transparent the hierarchies and conditions of the job. Reflecting on the meaning and experience of the 'invitation' to participate (paid, unpaid, formal,

informal), the power-relations this establishes from the initial encounter and the diversity of agendas around the table is paramount. Adequate resources and a support structure that acknowledges the different kinds of work that the socially engaged art job entails are also necessary. Artist Loraine Leeson reflects on the significance of her conflict resolution training to her 'socially situated practice' (Leeson, 2017, p. 79). She explains the process of questioning she carries out at the beginning of any project in order to "uncover what each party most wants or needs from the proposed work" (Leeson, 2017, p. 79). Acknowledging the different scripts and characters in the game, emphasised through the performative interview method, might also allow some distance from which to understand the agendas and power-plays that create the conditions for these jobs.

Conclusions

The reasons for conflicts in the commissioning process are complex and multifaceted and the *Performative Interviews* only tell one side of the story. So deep is the acting that the pain felt of being misunderstood, misinterpreted, used and/or rejected is often hidden and internalised on an individual level. The examples in the *Performative Interviews* involve an interruption of a process, which either changes the direction of travel or halts proceedings altogether. This involves a power-game between actors that those holding the purse strings tend to win. The friction caused by these acts of rejection is often not highlighted or considered of merit and is usually brushed under the carpet as embarrassing mistakes. It is in these frustrating compromises or acts of participating in the wrong way, being un-invited, de-commissioned or removed from the projects, that I suggest one can find a sense of agency. The frame of the commission comes sharply into focus and forces one to reconsider one's critical relationship to it.

The ruptures described through the interviews are not contrived but emerged through negotiable and contested experiences of the commissioning process. Performative interviewing as a method becomes a site for people to reconfigure and express these critical dilemmas after the fact. The masks or re-enacted interview transcripts are used to elicit reflection offering new perspectives that, rather than being reconciliatory, aim to maintain the tensions inherent in the framing of commissioned culture allowing the conflictual elements to come to the fore. Rather than brush these mistakes under the carpet or resort to suggesting a model of best practice, these reframed ruptures raise awareness of familiar situations. The interviewees critically reflect on their mis- or wrong-participation, allowing for the contradictions to emerge between expectations and frameworks of the commissioning process and the way it played out in practice.

By releasing the pressure valve, the *Performative Interview* as a confessional process aims to provide a space for critiquing the relationships people have to the work they do. It is a method that offers a site for critical reflection on the performances involved in the socially engaged art job, but also the possibility of strategic action. The method could be adopted and adapted by artists, institutions and participants, providing their ears are open to the possibility of issues being raised that they may prefer not to hear. These are stories of how people identify and negotiate a contract on the point of collapse as the theatre of the job is reflected in the theatre of the interview. During these tense moments the performativity of the industry comes into focus as do artists' and commissioners' implicated role in constructing, replicating and subverting it. If actively listened to, practices, structures and approaches may change or cease to exist.

I found that the *Performative Interviews* provided a critique of the structures of administration and production of commissioned art as well as the process of gathering such anecdotal evidence and critiquing the format of the interview itself as an alternative form of evaluation. Exploring the implications of deep acting in the socially engaged art job through the performative space of the interview allowed interviewees and interviewer to find a way to address the embarrassing, negative or irresolute aspects of a process. Voicing, performing, narrating and reflecting on honest encounters with failure and compromise might be one way forward to galvanise solidarity and support among peers. The question remains how best to do this? *Performative Interviews* might offer one way forward, but the encounter privileges a single view point and their public distribution remains underdeveloped. To be able to see a project from 360 degrees, I have since turned to facilitating workshops in order to generate nuanced timelines from different people involved in the same project (Donini & Hope, 2016; Druiff & Hope, 2015) and am co-developing a card game called Cards on the Table which takes the meeting as a site for critical reflection on the underlying assumptions and agendas around the table.[3] These are attempts at creating safe spaces to reflect collectively on

positions, concerns, questions and uncertainties from the different perspectives. These experimental methods that aim to crack open a space to speak candidly with others are of course also imbued with power-dynamics and performances of the self, but they also potentially allow a moment of collective critical reflection as the dynamics and roles we play are made more visible.

Despite the political programme of austerity during the years since the original series of *Performative Interviews*, the socially engaged art industry seems to have expanded and become more researched and acknowledged as a sector. Despite this, there is still a need to understand better the implications of this as work, particularly as it often floats between the interconnected worlds of activism, care work and critical art practice. The questions asked of community arts in the 1970s as to its potential to exacerbate social inequalities rather than overcome them, still need to be asked of socially engaged art jobs today. The current COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing climate crisis and systemic racial injustice all raise questions about what roles we take on and the conditions of participation the socially engaged art job creates. What are the shared principles we aim to live by and what changes do we want to see? How can these principles provide the foundations for allegiances, collaborations and support structures?

Acknowledging the estrangement that occurs as the work becomes labour sold for a wage might offer a playful space for critique. For Hochschild's cabin crew, there is a "war of smiles" played out by workers who respond to the demand to smile with more sincerity by smiling "less broadly, with a quick release and no sparkle in the eyes" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 127). For Paul Brook this "can be seen as a breach in the wall of commodity fetishism that allows class consciousness to emerge" (Brook, 2009, p. 23). Rather than assume art's role in giving voice and empowering people into a state of class consciousness, how can these jobs incur a responsibility to examine and possibly disrupt the normative orthodoxes that this art job is a part? Recognising the (self) managed heart within socially engaged art as a form of labour and reclaiming that managed heart might mean gaining a sense of control and perspective over the conditions of our working lives. The *Performative Interview* method might also point to the tragedy of not speaking openly and honestly at the time failure is unfolding. Hochschild ends her book with the question: what do I *really* feel? I would also ask myself, what do *we* and the people we work with really *want*? We need to keep an eye on the broader, longer term political, social changes we want to see in the world and recognising our own agency in working towards these. These questions can inform decisions on what to say yes to and when to say no and walk away.

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Endnotes

1 I carried out 27 interviews in London, Belfast and Vienna as part of my PhD research (Hope, 2011), 10 of which I edited into short Performative Interview films. The interviewees responded to a call out I did via my email list at the time and contacts via the University of Ulster and other projects I was doing in London and Vienna for my PhD. These were included on a DVD as part of my PhD submission and I have shown a selection of them at a conference in Melbourne 2014. I have not made publicly available the films but use them in workshop and conference settings as a tool for further critical reflection.

2 Belfiore has explored how the most precarious cultural workers subsidise publicly funded socially engaged practice "via their poorly or unpaid work, their invisible and unacknowledged emotional labour, and by the bearing of the hidden but significant psychological costs of duty of care towards project participants" (Belfiore, 2018). During the Spectres of Evaluation Conference: Rethinking Art, Community, Value (6-7 February, Melbourne 2014) I presented a keynote titled: *Behind the Happy Faces: How does the emotional labour of contemporary arts practice inhibit approaches to evaluation?* which I draw on for this article.

3 I am in the process of developing a card game called Cards on the Table (with Ania Bas, Sian Hunter-Dodsworth, Sophie Mallet and Henry Mulhall) to reflect on the language used in project meetings and the assumptions behind each other's roles and agendas. Based on quotes from interviews, the card game creates an intervention into a project meeting that allows a period of critical reflection amongst people working on the same project before, during and after the process of working together.