# **We thought we were going to change the world! Socially engaged art as cruel optimism**

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**Introduction**

Despite promises and resources spent on trying to effect change, the precarious service industry of socially engaged art feels stuck tackling the effects of neo-liberal capitalism, while broader structural inequalities persist. In this chapter I take Laurent Berlant’s notions of ‘cruel optimism’ (2011) to navigate an attachment to the belief that socially engaged art holds the potential to create community and effect change. I use this concept to understand better and reconcile the disappointment and potential harm this attachment might cause. As scholars and practitioners of socially engaged art, I want us to reflect on our place in reproducing these inequalities, how our very attachment to the idea of transformation can result in a cruel twist that means we are destined to experience a sense of frustration on repeat, across generations and geographies. How do we live with and thrive, through solidarity, in this predicament?

The basis for this study is a series of dinners I co-hosted with artists and activists in London, Singapore, Melbourne, Johannesburg, and Montevideo between 2011-2015. These recorded conversations asked the dinner guests to reflect on their experiences of art and politics in the year 1984 (Hope, 2011-15). I originally chose the year 1984 because the first half of the 1980s in the UK (where I began the dinners), stood out to me as a period of political schizophrenia, when the Greater London Council was being run as an overtly socialist campaign, while Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister (Hope, 2011). I was interested in how and why artists were involved in left wing politics, and the conditions in which their practices and politics collided and the issues this raised. The spectre of George Orwell’s *1984* (published in 1949) hovered in the background, acting as a backdrop, but not centre stage: his work and the dinners shared an interest in exploring relationships between politics, the state and collective versus individual identity and self-expression.

The method of the dinner format allowed the guests at the table to shape the conversation, with each recall and reflection triggering further reminiscences and ruminations, and as such, garnered different insights from traditional research methodologies such as interviews or focus groups. Indeed, the generative effect of the dinner conversation prompted a rich flow of reference points and experiences. The informality and conviviality of eating and drinking together suggested an encounter which could be considered less formal than a research interview or meeting, although such an arrangement could also be intimidating, with inherent, unspoken rules about table manners that may or may not be shared. The guests reflected on the political, economic, and institutional blockages, disappointments and forgetting that at times grounded and tested their faith in their ways of working. These exercises in oral history were not neutral, but rather imbued with the performance of recollecting that went on around the tables. The dinners became stages for the creation of multiple versions of 1984 from different perspectives, depending on what - and how - the guests chose to recall.

Berlant explores “the ordinary” as “a zone of convergence of many histories, where people manage the incoherence of lives that proceed in the face of threats to the good life they imagine” (2011, pg. 10). Her critique focused on the American dream, a version of the good life which for most people will never come true, hence the cruelty of the promise. It was communities of resistance and notions of empowerment and liberation that informed the futures that people around the dinner tables recalled actively working towards in 1984. These were alternative, anti-capitalist good lives, but the emotional and political attachments to the methods for getting there could still be deemed cruel, as their goals were either never realised or corrupted enroute. What comes through in this chapter are accounts of co-existing attempts at trying to effect change (and the belief that persistence will result in change), but also a realisation that these ambitions were perhaps always doomed to fail – or at least remain stuck in the ‘impasse’ of (under)funded alternatives, rather than as any serious threat to ongoing structural forms of abuse, racism and injustice.

Are those of us practicing socially engaged art today continuing to angrily tread water in a process of attempting change? If treading water is all we can do in the ongoing crises of the present, are we not co-dependent on keeping each other afloat? What are the circumstances and implications of many of us burning out? Berlant quotes Marcuse: “while people comfort themselves with stories about beating the system or being defeated by it, they continue the struggle for existence in painful, costly and obsolete forms” (2011, pg. 10). If drowning or rescue do not come, does our (deluded) treading continue, and at what cost?

After giving a short, partial introduction to the contexts of the sites of the dinners in 1984, this chapter is structured in two parts. In the first part, I present some of the examples of self-organised social arts practices referenced at the dinners, reflect on the double-bind of hope and disappointment wrapped up in these activities and finish with a proposal (inspired by Berlant) of re-emphasising the convivial and conflictual aspects of social art practices today as modes of both living in/with the impasse but also disrupting it. In the second part, I dip into this entangled impasse to explore the historical paradigms of liberation that underpin some of the discussions at the dinners. I refer to examples of liberation that came up in the UK, Australia and Singapore dinners, which have led me to conclude that there is a need to be critical of any promise of empowerment. This is re-enforced by a short reflection on the contradictions implicit in ‘lateral agency’, illustrated by examples of state control dressed as individual freedom.

I invite readers to use the *1984 Dinners* website as an intergenerational pedagogical tool, listen to the audio extracts, make connections, ask questions, write responses, make interventions, and add to the audio archive using your own dinner methods.[[1]](#endnote-1) This is my chosen path through the material, there are many more. I would like to thank all the dinner guests (a full list is available on the website) and co-hosts (Terence Chong, Marnie Badham, Bern Fitzgerald, Gabi Ngcobo, Rangoato Hlasane, James French, Sara Hallatt, Monique Vajifdar, Ana Laura Lopes de la Torre and Gonzalo Vicci) for contributing to a growing cultural history of art and activism. I am indebted to Berlant’s writings, which are helping me keep afloat whilst dealing with the disappointments and frustrations with the practices that I both hold dear and fear.

**Contexts**

The conversations during the *1984 Dinners* reflected the different positions people took on art’s role in effecting social and political change. These roles included: informing, documenting, educating, commenting, protesting, resisting, empowering, and transforming. For some, art was focused on social relationships, as a process of empowering or consciousness raising. For others, there was also a sense that they should be out there documenting what was going on, using photography, photomontage, super 8, or video. As practice-based scholars of socially engaged art, what can we learn from the ways the guests talked about their different roles in the processes of social change and the kinds of agency they assumed? The memories surfacing through the dinners were fraught with co-existing, conflictual testimony (e.g., between African National Congress and Black Consciousness in Johannesburg, or artists’ positionality as facilitator or as vector of empowerment in London). Similarly, while concerns and fights for social justice were broadly shared, the role the artists themselves played in that desire for transformation or transition, as much as their cultural practices, varied across and among geographies. For instance, there were obvious connections between Australia and the UK in 1984: you could be funded for developing community arts and participatory workshops that at least intended to be politically progressive (e.g., anti-corporate developer). Conversely, in Uruguay, Singapore or South Africa you could be censored, arrested, beaten up (or worse) for overt criticism and direct (or indeed indirect) political action. As such, the complex socio-political historical trajectories of each of the contexts cannot be sufficiently explored within this text and instead I will provide a very brief overview of the political situation in each country.

1984 was an important year in Uruguay as it marked the transition from the dictatorship to democracy, with elections held on 25 November (won by Julio Maria Sanguinetti of the Partido Colorado, part of the liberal right wing). The civic-military dictatorship in Uruguay had begun in 1973 following a coup d’état, and it targeted, arrested and tortured anyone with left wing, communist ideas or affiliations, or opposed to the right-wing governments participating in Operation Condor (a United States-backed campaign of political repression and state terror, responsible for tens of thousands of deaths across South America, starting in 1975). The National School of Fine Arts (ENBA) was shut down by the dictatorship from 1973-1985. In March 1984, Liber Seregni (the leader of Frente Amplio, a coalition of left wing groups) was released from prison. At the same time, Alfredo Zitarrosa (a popular folk singer and left wing ex-military man who was exiled in Spain) returned to Uruguay, welcomed by crowds of fans. His arrival was symbolic of the slow return of artists and intellectuals throughout 1984.

During the 1980s in London, there were contradictory policies and approaches to arts funding being carried out simultaneously. Margaret Thatcher was elected in 1979 and re-elected again in 1983, following the Falklands War. The increasing conservatism of an official, national cultural policy throughout the 1980s appears to be at odds with the Labour-controlled Greater London Council (as well as other regional local authorities) which were able, seemingly, over five years (1981-86), to support relatively radical, anti-racist, socialist, politicised art practices and campaigns before the eventual abolition of Metropolitan Councils by the Conservative Government in 1986. This was also the period of the miners’ strike from 1984 to 1985 by the National Union of Mineworkers, triggered by the closure of the coal mines. Equally, the Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp - set up in 1981 to protest against a nuclear weapons base being set up in Berkshire - was still occupied in 1984, despite mass evictions. It was also the year *Into the Open*, one of the first major exhibitions by a municipal gallery of contemporary work by black artists opened in Sheffield and the Arts Council published *The Glory of the Garden* report on the inequitable distribution of funds for the arts beyond London. The dinner guests remarked on how at that time, arts education still consisted of male-dominated teaching and formalist, modernist notions of art and artists, where “Greenberg was God” (Hope, London Dinner, 2011).

In Singapore, the People’s Action Party (PAP) won the election again in 1984 (they had been in power since 1959). The party held a tight grip on leftist movements to keep communism out of Singapore. In 1984 Kuo Pao Kun wrote the play *The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole* which engaged with the absurdity of bureaucracy. The theatre group Third Stage, established in 1983, wrote and performed plays based on socio-political issues. While their work was subsidised by the Ministry of Community Development, in 1987, four of the ten members of Third Stage were arrested as part of the government’s Internal Security Act’s Operation Spectrum for being involved in a so-called Marxist conspiracy (two of those arrested were present at *1984 Dinners* – Wong Souk Yee, and Chng Suan Tze). The alleged leader of this conspiracy was Tan Wah Piow, living in exile in London since 1976.

Meanwhile, Australia had a Labour government. Prime Minister Bob Hawke had been elected in March 1983. It was during the previous Labour government led by Gough Whitlam (1972-75), however, that the Australia Council established a Community Arts Programme. By 1984, organised, funded community arts programmes were well-established. Gay Hawkins, in her account of community art, *From Nimbin to Mardi Gras: Constructing Community Arts* (1993), critiqued Left accounts of community arts as ‘romanticised’ and ‘stultifying’. She felt they were too simplistic in their accounts of ‘ordinary people’ against the capitalist state. Instead, she focused on the official invention of community arts and a framework of analysis based on the historical and institutional context of the development of a democratic cultural policy in Australia, marked by the setting up of a separate Community Art Program in 1973. Also in 1984, Aboriginal voting and enrolling became compulsory, and Cabinet considered a submission by Aboriginal Affairs Minister Clyde Holding about strategies to achieve consistent national Aboriginal land rights.

1984 was still a very oppressive period in South Africa, eight years on from the Soweto uprising and a State of Emergency declared the following year. While it was obvious who the enemy was, there were also ideological differences between the Black Consciousness movement, aligned with the Pan African Congress (PAC) and the African National Congress (ANC), which also played out in cultural movements at the time. 1984 was also the year of the opening of the Carnegie Commission exhibition of photography, *South Africa: The Cordoned Heart*. Two years previously, the *Culture and Resistance Festival* in Gaborone, Botswana brought together South African exiled cultural workers in the struggle against apartheid. It was organised by Medu Arts Ensemble (supported by the ANC) who formed in the aftermath of the Soweto Uprisings. Members Thami Mnyele, Mike Hamlyn, George and Lindi Phahle were among those killed by the South African Defence Force in 1985. In that year, the South African government passed a new constitution in which there were to be three separate houses for ‘Whites, Coloureds and Indians’, with only limited representation of the latter two. Blacks were expected to have their own parliament. This new constitution resulted in a new surge of violent uprisings nationwide.

**Part 1: Intimate sociality in the ordinary impasse**

If current experiences of neoliberal arts education are characterised by marketization, privatisation and precarious professionalisation, talk around the dinner tables about the year 1984 focused on informal, social aspects of meeting, talking, partying and working together (perhaps also evoked by the dinner format itself). Across all the dinners, guests referred to informal, collective, workshop-based, cross-artform collaborations in contexts where formal arts education was non-existent, inaccessible, or unsatisfactory. These convivial examples of self and collective forms of knowledge production and consciousness raising could be heard in the recollections of tea parties in Johannesburg, where banned books were shared, travelling to radical theatre workshops in Manilla or risking arrest riding around on a horse drawn cart selling ceramics in Montevideo. As Berlant wrote: “intimate sociality [is] another name for the desire for the political” (2011, pg. 227). In this section I firstly share examples of self-organised social arts practices referenced at the dinners before introducing the inner contradictions of hope and disappointment wrapped up in these activities and finish with a proposal to think through the social aspects of social art practices today as modes of both living in/with the impasse but also disrupting it.

insert Fig 1 here (Montevideo, Uruguay Dinner)  
Caption: *1984 Dinner: Montevideo* (2015), Sophie Hope with Ana Laura Lopes de la Torre, Gonzalo and guests: Javier Alonso, Claudia Anselmi, Hector Bardanca, Beatriz Battione, Pepi Goncalvez, Diana Mines, , Esteban Schroeder, Carlos Seveso, Santiago Tavella and Vicci Alfredo Torres. Credit: Sophie Hope

At the dinner in London, Sonia Boyce referred to how there was “a lot of stuff happening amongst black artists”, and artists were self-organising, such as Lubaina Himid’s Unrecorded Truths at the Elbow Room (Diaspora Artists, 2014 and Hope, London Dinner, 2011). Similarly, at the dinner in Montevideo, many of the guests referred to the collectives they worked with during this period. Claudia Anselmi remembered how “it was an era of workshops” (Hope, Montevideo Dinner, 2015). Esteban Schroeder referred to his work at the Centre for Audio-visual Media (CEMA, a co-operative founded in 1981): “We were self-taught, so we were always learning, educating ourselves, we were conscious of our lack of knowledge” (Hope, Montevideo Dinner, 2015). Carlos Seveso recalled his work with Ediciones de Uno (a group of poets initiated in the early 1980s): “We started working in a collective way… I was quite wary of the ‘monolingualism’ of the visual arts – to be in contact with a group of friends that did something different: they were poets, editors, and they worked collaboratively” (Hope, Montevideo Dinner, 2015). Alfredo Torres recalled how he “studied in a theatre school, so I couldn’t stand to see visual artists working alone” (Hope, Montevideo Dinner, 2015), which inspired him to form the group Axioma (Puchet, 2014). Pepi Goncalvez told stories of the bars she would frequent such as El Lobizón (“I had my own table with a nail where I did macramé…”) and Sorocabana bar, “but no-one ever knew who in the bar was a cop” (Hope, Montevideo Dinner, 2015). She continued: “I have no idea what I was doing artistically, but politically I was a sponge” (Hope, Montevideo Dinner, 2015). Javier Alonso talked about his involvement in Cerámica del Carrito**,** which he set up with colleagues from the closed art school**:** “I never was a solo artist. I was always involved in groups” (Hope, Montevideo Dinner, 2015). He remembered that year they went around selling ceramics on a horse-drawn cart and “were frequently sent to jail” (Hope, Montevideo Dinner, 2015). He recalled their contact with the organization of university and high school students who helped family members of imprisoned [people], and that “when there were protests, we got beaten up every day” (Hope, Montevideo Dinner, 2015). He defined the activities that they were carrying out as “resistance and resilience.” From his point of view “it was a heroic thing. We joined every student protest” (Hope, Montevideo Dinner, 2015). Beatriz Battione recalled how, during the dictatorship years,Club de Grabado[Engraving Club] (Fossati, 1966), was “very important to all of the people who remained part of it. It kept us together, united – rather than each of us being alone in our own houses” (Hope, Montevideo Dinner, 2015). The club started making connections with other groups, breaking “traditional moulds of engraving, photography, painting” (Hope, Montevideo Dinner, 2015). Alfredo also remembered how the club“united people from different fields” (Hope, Montevideo Dinner, 2015). Claudia Anselmi joined it in 1980 and recalled how they “shared opinions and grew as a result… there weren’t many places where people could express their opinions freely, without feeling persecuted” (Hope, Montevideo Dinner, 2015).

Insert Fig 2 (Singapore dinner)  
Caption: *1984 Dinner: Singapore* (2014), Sophie Hope with Terence Chong and guests: Russell Heng, Jian Hong, Heng Leun, Alfian Sa’at, Sasi Thiunalan, Suan Tze and Souk Yee. Credit: Sophie Hope

Over in Singapore, Wong Souk Lee, a founding member of the Third Stage, talked about her informal theatre training. In 1982, she went to Manila to take part in a 6 week training course run by the Philippine Educational Theatre Association (PETA), where she learnt about people’s theatre: “I didn't have any professional training, any formal training in the theatre. And my influence came from a very radical group called PETA, I mean radical by Singapore government's standards” (Hope, Singapore Dinner, 2014). She explained how they taught them how to work in groups: “they get oriented to… a particular theme, or concern that you want as a group, then they teach you basic theatre skills to express them, which is the artistic part. The third part, which is most important is how to organise yourself” (Hope, Singapore Dinner, 2014). PETA were informed by Augusto Boal’s forum theatre which they adapted to develop their Basic Integrated Theatre Arts workshop (PETA, n.d.).

insert Fig 3 here (Johannesburg Dinner)  
Caption: *1984 Dinner: Johannesburg* (2014), Sophie Hope with Gabi Ngcobo, Rangoato Hlasane, The Bag Factory (James French and Sara Hallatt) and guests: Firdoze Bulbulia, Anton Harber, Faith Isiakpere, David Koloane, Santu Mofokeng, Pat Motlau, Aura G Msimang, Molefe Pheto, Malcolm Purkey, Brett Pyper, Joachim Schonfeldt and Monique Vajifdar. Credit: Sophie Hope

At the dinner in Johannesburg, Pat Motlau listed several arts and educational groups mainly run by and for Black artists that were active at the time, including the Johanesburg Art Foundation, Federated Union of Black Artists (FUBA), Mofolo Arts Centre, Meadowlands, United States Information Service Library and Rorke’s Drift. He recalled how TV 2 and 3, two ‘black channels’, had just started at the South African Broadcasting Corporation, where he worked in a separate black graphics department. David Koloane talked about the Thupelo workshops which brought artists together (he organised the first workshop in Johannesburg in 1985, with Bill Ainsle): “the idea of the workshop was to have people, irrespective of race, colour, creed, but a common interest of working as artists and forgetting about these divisions about politics... we used to choose a space which is out of town where you can all sit together and work together as artists” (Hope, Johannesburg Dinner, 2014). Pat also recalled how “there were things like poetry readings. There were very informal gatherings, whereby, … we used to converge… And yeah, and the nice thing was that you'd find, you know, a group like, like us, musician, poet, theatre people, a full-time drinker... [laughter]… So, you get a training by just travelling…” (Hope, Johannesburg Dinner, 2014). Firdoze Bulbulia said: “So you kind of grew up with those little bits of poetry, little bits of theatre. And then we took it, we made our own, and in some way started to use that, really very much to educate our own community” (Hope, Johannesburg Dinner, 2014). As was the case in Uruguay “you had to be careful about where you walked, who you were with, who you were seen [with]” (Hope, Johannesburg Dinner, 2014). She referred to her own political awakening, and like Pepi in Montevideo, would go to a lot of parties “but they were always very specific. It was always a very particular narrative and dialogue and community of people that you were interacting with, because politically, you were educating yourself” (Hope, Johannesburg Dinner, 2014). She remembered meeting surreptitiously with other women (Firdoze refered to the Federation of South African Women and Federation of Transvaal Women, formed in 1984), to discuss issues, organise campaigns (such as an anti-rape campaign) and share banned books on black consciousness:

“So, it seems very, kind of on the surface, very superficial, because you were having a tea party, but the kind of conversations that were happening, [were] really changing the way that we began to see ourselves and our role in this new South Africa, in the South Africa of the day” (Hope, Johannesburg Dinner, 2014).

These formative experiences of ‘intimate sociality’ recalled around the dinner tables reflected a range of motives expressing a need to share, learn and in some cases organise and campaign. Berlant referred to “*the political* as that which magnetises a desire for intimacy, sociality, affective solidarity, and happiness’ as distinct from (but entwined with) *politics* which is ‘a scene of antagonism’” (2011, pg. 252, emphasis original). The ‘political’ desire for sociality is perhaps also echoed in contemporary approaches to socially engaged arts practices, which are sometimes also bound to a desire to do ‘politics’. Jon Hawkes, at the Melbourne dinner, remarked how: “you make political decisions about the sort of art that you do” (Hope, Melbourne Dinner, 2014). Uncle Larry Walsh responded: “Yeah, art, it was political. It was, but it was also social. It got people together, and it got people going. Yay. Okay, I got the message. But I like the way they do it” ” (Hope, Melbourne Dinner, 2014). The dinner conversations reflected on these different decisions they were making about the role their work played at the time and the importance of relationships and coming together, despite the difficulties of doing so (due to exile or arrest, for example).

insert Fig 4 here (Melbourne Dinner)  
Caption: *1984 Dinner: Melbourne* (2014), Sophie Hope with Marnie Badham and Bern Fitzgerald and guests: Jon Hawkes,  Robin Laurie, Uncle Larry Walsh, Heather Horrocks and Fotis Kapetopoulos. Credit: Sophie Hope

Berlant referred to how an attachment to optimism can be cruel when the “object/scene of desire is itself an obstacle to fulfilling the very wants people bring to it: but its life organising status can trump interfering with the damage it provokes” (2011, pg. 227). What if some of the romance attached to these informal tactics of gathering recalled through the dinners also block the changes they wanted to see happen? Are these ‘intimate publics’ enough? Or even a distraction (ibid., pp. 226-7)? The political, ideological dreams and desires expressed by the guests could be the very thing that became an obstacle to them “flourishing” (ibid., pg. 1). Is there a cruel optimism in the attachment to the forms of practice such as collective, community arts and theatre methods and workshops? Cruel optimism reflects a double bind of hope and despair. The dinner format has the potential to re-enforce heroic accounts protest, but they also relive the attentive, in some cases misunderstood accumulations and chaos of the experiences they have lived through. As messy conversations they can contradict and spill over, playing with the convivial informality provoked by eating and drinking with old and new friends whilst being restrained by the performance of manners that a recorded dinner party as research enquiry implies. At the dinner in Melbourne, Jon Hawkes suggested a dialectic reading of art: “the fascinating thing about art is that it is both destructive and constructive. It is both conservative and innovative… art is possibly one of the most effective ways of maintaining the status quo. It is also one of the most effective ways of destroying it” (Hope, Melbourne Dinner, 2014). A similar bind follows through to current socially engaged practices that might be characterised by a desire to bring people together. Yet how do the conditions of these gatherings prevent or distract from further action and to what extent can they, through “collective mediation… provide some routes out of the impasse and the struggle for the present” (Berlant, 2011, pg. 226)?

*1984 Dinners* captured memories of the good life fantasies that were alive in the 1980s – around anti-apartheid, social justice, democracy; yet, I detected a sense of disappointment in the voices, that there was work still to be done. A cacophony of places and politics reflected a jumble of ways they were able to work at the time: did they want to just make art (but got wrapped up in the politics of the situation?), did they try to use their art to flag/address change? Did their art making become a means to meet people and create spaces of resistance, whilst treading water together? Berlant explored “the dissolution of optimistic objects /scenarios that once held the space open for the good-life fantasy” (Berlant, 2011, pg. 3). The guests referenced how there was more activism then, more discussion on the issues and collective ways of working. At the Singapore dinner, Russell Heng suggested that “People were a lot more active in those days than nowadays” (Hope, Singapore Dinner, 2014). In Montevideo, one of the dinner guests remarked how: “What we had in 1984 and we don’t have now is collective discussions. We are much more isolated” (Hope, Montevideo Dinner, 2015).

Berlant referred to the sense of the present as that of an “impasse” -- “a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic” (2011, pg. 4). Rather than being a point at which the good life had been achieved, Berlant focused on surviving in ongoing crisis and loss (ibid., pg. 5). The recollections of the necessity to cling together in adversity raised at the dinners, might also be read as a means of living on, in the thick of things, as a way of joining forces in states of insecurity. The dinners themselves offered another temporary raft to cling on to. These intimate events became communal spaces for the restorative work of nourishing, reflecting, laughing, and crying. The cultural examples Berlant shared in her book “interfere” with the “pattern of treading water in the impasse” (ibid., pg. 249). Similarly, the examples of collective, self-organised education given by the dinner guests were also interferences and interruptions in the contexts they were living through, albeit fraught with power-relations and potential misrecognitions. I imagine these instances in the impasse as people treading water, but with some playful, synchronised legwork going on beneath the surface.

Berlant wrote about “Impasses in zones of intimacy that hold out the often cruel promise of reciprocity and belonging to the people who seek them – who need them – in scenes of labour, of love, and of the political” (ibid., pg. 21). She asked: “Is the best one can hope for realistically a stubborn collective refusal to give out, wear out, or admit defeat? In that case optimism might not be cruel at all, but the bare minimum evidence of not having given up on social change as such” (ibid., pg. 259). Given the significance of affective relations to the processes discussed at the dinners, echoes of which can be heard in current practices of socially engaged art, it might be worth re-considering the value of talking, sharing, making and eating together as an embodied politics for the sake of living life. Rather than “imagining the pragmatics of a consensual community” (ibid., pg. 260), can socially engaged arts practices be reconsidered as co-dependent modes of solidarity and processes of belonging? Might this perhaps offer a break away from the attachment to promises of transformation that inevitably hold the potential for failure?

**Part 2: Lateral agency in the impasse**

What happens in the impasse of the continual crisis? What are the political and economic conditions of being together and the uncomfortable experiences of exclusion that this entails? While the power of self-organising to the guests was apparent in listening back to the dinners, the stereotype of the socially engaged artist as one who can empower other people endures. Despite many compelling arguments that the will to empower can re-enforce rather than disrupt power-relations (Cruikshank, 1999; Braden 1978), the attachment to the idea that artists have something special to offer – such as a promise of improved citizenship - is still powerfully seductive (particularly in funding bids, evaluation reports and commissioning briefs). As a corrective to this, I refer to Berlant’s idea of “hesitancy and recessiveness in ordinary being” (2011, pg. 124). Rather than a heroic gesture of repair, Berlant’s lateral, anti-heroic notion of agency involves spreading out rather than projecting forward as “a relief, a reprieve” (ibid., pg. 117), as “small vacations from the will itself” (ibid., pg. 116). This is a model of agency without intention: “coasting consciousness within the ordinary that helps people survive the stress on their sensorium that comes from the difficulty of reproducing contemporary life” (ibid., pg. 18). I relate this to the tentative, collaborative approaches to empowerment and agency referred to around the dinner tables. These collective workshops and gatherings may have offered a temporary, imaginary exit from of the impasse in the form of ‘lateral agency’.

In this section, I explore two different Christian historical paradigms of liberation that underpin some of the discussions at the dinners: one is based on British colonial civilising, philanthropic approach to empowerment and the other developed in Latin America, based on oppressed people challenging capitalist structures to effect change. I explore references to empowerment at the dinners in the UK, Australia and Singapore, which leads me to conclude that there is a need to be critical of any promise of liberation. This is re-enforced by a short reflection on the contradictions implicit in lateral agency, illustrated by examples of semblances of freedoms in contexts of self-censorship, surveillance and control.

Historical paradigms of liberation coalesced when I was listening back to the dinners. There were echoes of British colonial Victorian, Christian morality and pedagogy used to civilise the working classes through educational reform where the ‘deformed subject’ was transformed into a good citizen, ideally a property-owning, Christian, middle-class taxpayer (Kester, 2004). There were also direct references to liberation theology from a Latin American Catholic perspective that were more aligned with anti-capitalism and struggles for social justice from the position of the oppressed. The bind many socially engaged artists face today, in semi-professionalised, precarious contexts, is that the civilising model of top-down commissioning processes underpins the funding framework, despite artists, activists and community groups perhaps being more aligned with the grass-roots approaches advocated by Friere and Boal and liberation theology, for example. To some extent, artists in the UK and Australia have become (poorly paid) reformers or missionaries, out to improve, connect-up, rescue and ‘harvest’ the working classes by working with “a given subject who is defined a priori as in need of empowerment or access to creative/expressive skills” (Kester, 2004, pg.137). There are often cultural, social and economic differences between the artist and their ‘subjects’ and in most cases the artist does not live in the same area as their “subjects to be transformed” (Braden, 1978, pg. 80).

According to Friere it is not for the ‘oppressors’ to lead the oppressed on a path to liberation, in fact, “it would be a contradiction in terms if the oppressors not only defended but actually implemented a liberating education” (Freire 1972, pg. 30). Why and how are socially engaged arts practitioners attached (uncomfortably, unwillingly, optimistically) to the notion of liberation, emancipation and liberation? What are some of the issues (cruelty) this might lead to? Elizabeth Ellsworth, for example, refers to the empowering aspect of critical pedagogy as “treat[ing] the symptoms but leav[ing] the disease unnamed and untouched” (Ellsworth, 1989, pg. 307), and Becky Flores has described empowerment as “endors[ing] a hidden curriculum that reinforces the status quo it seeks to interrogate” (Flores, 2004, n.p.). Why are we attached to ideals that are not ideal for everyone? Flores goes on to remind us that, “empowerment is trapped within its own ideological framework where the only question that is begging is empowerment on whose terms?” (ibid., 2004, n.p.).

insert Fig 5 here (London Dinner)  
Caption: *1984 Dinner: London* (2011), Sophie Hope with Loraine Leeson, Sonia Boyce, Stephen Lobb, Flick Allen, Leila Galloway, Shirley Cameron and Roland Miller. Credit: Sophie Hope

At the London Dinner, Stephen Lobb recalled how “one of the things we were always talking about was empowering: Do you remember empowering, empowering, empowering?” (Hope, London Dinner, 2014). Critical debates about the positionality of the artist as someone who can empower, educate, and enable others were already taking place in the UK and Australia, where funding for this work had been in place for some time (Braden, 1978; Kelly, 1984; Hawkins, 1993). These broader questions on authorship, positionality and power-relations between artists and the people they were working with was played out in Lobb’s description of a dilemma they faced in their poster workshops in London at the time:

“Our brief was that when we were making posters… the people made the posters. And eventually, that got to be seen to be quite stupid, because the people didn't want to make posters, they wanted us to make the posters, because it was simply a waste of time to tell them all the technology. And eventually we would make the posters to their brief, and they would… be our, as it were, employers … they wanted us to be the artists” (Hope, London Dinner, 2011).

Loraine Leeson responded to this, saying that “…I felt, we were never proper community artists, because we didn't do that anyway, we didn't do the enabling thing.” She described the importance of everyone using their skills:

“So you don't [put] down your own skills. You don't pretend you don't have them. You use them to their best, but you work with other people because of the knowledge and skills that they've got… The key and the trick to being the facilitator is that you don't let people fall on skills they don't have” (Hope, London Dinner, 2011).

In a similar exchange during the Melbourne dinner Jon Hawkes reflected on the way that funding for community arts at that time was focused on the model of “I’m a community artist, I will fly in on my angel wings… I mean that was all there was so that's what we supported…” (Hope, Melbourne Dinner, 2014). For Fotis Kapetopoulos “those were the ones [artists] we didn't like” (Hope, Melbourne Dinner, 2014). Robin Laurie interjected: “I reject that definition of work that I've done with various people, Mr Hawkes” (Hope, Melbourne Dinner, 2014). Jon backtracked and defended his position, saying,

“No. You're different because, because there was a deeper connection both politically and emotionally with the people that you worked with. Far deeper connection than simply ‘this is another gig.’ That's, that's critical, you know, there's no way you would work for somebody unless you were connected. What you said, family, it's all about family” (Hope, Melbourne Dinner, 2014).

Transformational characteristics of cultural production were also voiced at the dinner in Singapore. For Wong Souk Lee, theatre “offers the opportunity to… comment about social phenomena” and Suan Tze recalled how People’s Theatre was a method of “theatre to liberate people” (Hope, Singapore Dinner, 2014). PETA, where SuanTze and Wong Souk Lee trained, was associated with liberation theology, a religious movement connected to Roman Catholicism that developed in Latin America in the late 1960s and advocated active political struggle against the structures of oppression and inequalities. Vincent Cheng, who was also arrested in 1987 (whilst working as the Justice and Peace Commission for the Catholic Church), along with Tze and Souk Lee, was also associated with liberation theology. This movement was also mentioned by Robin Laurie at the dinner in Melbourne. Robin told us about working with a company called Sidetrack Theatre, on a piece called *Adios cha cha cha*(Burvill, 1985) that was about liberation theology, and remembered going to hear the liberation theologist priest, Brian Gore, give a speech after his arrest in the Philippines: “One of the things that really influenced me was the Filipinos who came here in the 80s. And I went back and worked in Mindanao with the Mindanao community theatre people” (Hope, Melbourne Dinner, 2014). Robin recalled the way they defined themselves as Actors, Teachers, Organisers, and Researchers (ATORs), a description also used by PETA, inspired by the Brazillian educator Paolo Friere and theatre maker Agosto Boal: “And that made sense to me… because I'd always had these multiple… role[s]” (Hope, Melbourne Dinner, 2014). The theatre methods used by Third Stage and Robin were influenced by these broader political movements.

In the UK, Roland Miller in 1984 was artist in residence in a community centre in Sheffield (funded by Sheffield Council) working with young unemployed people. He talked about working with them to make improvised performances by using their bodies and minds to react to the situations they found themselves in, making their minds up on the spot, interacting with the architecture and spaces around them. While this approach was connected to theatre, he said, it wasn’t about acting a part that someone else had written out or repeating performances. Roland did not mention PETA, liberation theology, Boal or Friere, yet liberatory, participatory pedagogical and performative methods overlap with Miller’s description of his process. While in the Australian and British contexts this was a relatively harmless process of solidarity building and political education, for the Third Stage, this was a more dangerous movement to be associated with, resulting in their arrest.

Whether performed from the bottom-up or top-down, promises of liberation need to be approached with caution. Rather, liberation could be understood as a process of being constantly in relation and negotiation with others, rather than an end goal that is fully achievable. This forever compromised, co-dependent and contradictory aspect of liberation can be found in the critical reflections made at the dinners. For example, David Koloane and Macolm Pukey reflected on their being allowed to cross the border to Botswana for the *Medu Culture and Resistance Festival* in 1982. Malcolm spoke about why they were allowed to cross the border, saying that “we know more now than we did then perhaps” (Hope, Johannesburg Dinner, 2014). The festival was funded by the ANC in Exile, and what they now know is that, at the time, “a set of secret negotiations” were beginning between the ANC and the apartheid state: “we were part of that conversation, although we didn't understand it, just the fact that we were allowed to go” (Hope, Johannesburg Dinner, 2014).

The dinners in Australia, Singapore and London involved discussions on the effects of funding on the ability to be political. During the dinner in Singapore, for example, Jian Hong remembered something her father, the playwright, director and activist, Kuo Pao Kun

said: “During revolution, politicians and artists work together and then when victory comes, politicians will start suppressing the artists” (Hope, Singapore Dinner, 2014). Sasi Thiunalan also reminded us that the Third Stage plays that were eventually used against them, were also funded by the state. In each case there was a relationship to the state that dictated or framed the form and content of their work and the way they worked. With funding and professionalism, came increased (but internalised) control. Heng Leun and Alfian Sa’at, of the younger generation of theatre practitioners around the table, wanted to know more about the older generation’s experience of activism, as it was an alien concept to them. Whilst being an amateur, “there was no stake”, when you are a professional, making a living from your art, “who wants to risk that?” (Hope, Singapore Dinner, 2014) They discussed whether it was possible to do that kind of political theatre today; that getting state approval meant the work was not political enough. Jian Hong reflected on how “they are conquering us differently now,” through a process of self-censorship where they ask each theatre company to do their own content assessment, and if they do not comply they can fine you or take away your license: “it’s outsourcing of censorship, but you’re internalising the censorship; you are self-censoring – I’d rather you do it and I fight you, rather than I fight myself, why would I want to do your dirty job?” (Hope, Singapore Dinner, 2014).

A similar conversation played out in Melbourne, where questions were raised about the effect of funding on the ability to be critical. Jon suggested that organisations and individuals who were dependent on arts funding now “are unprepared to be openly critical of the ways in which that funding is distributed, far more now, scared to do that than they used to be” (Hope, Melbourne Dinner, 2014). He thought that in the 1980s, even when they had government money, they felt they “had nothing to lose. So that, if we didn't like what either the government was doing, or what the funding authorities were doing, we would say so publicly and loudly over and over and over again” (Hope, Melbourne Dinner, 2014). He remarked that “in our day, we didn't give a fuck whether we lost a job or not because there was another one around the corner” (Hope, Melbourne Dinner, 2014). What he noticed now, is that that critical questioning is not happening. Robin suggested the “stifling of diversity of opinion” is happening on a social and political level too: “if anybody disagrees with anything, they're abused, and the argument is dismissed in the most frivolous and abusive terms” (Hope, Melbourne Dinner, 2014).

By 1984 in the UK and Australia, ‘community-art’ was already a dirty word – its radical and political roots had been lost. Sonia remarked how the community-based, socially engaged work that was happening during this period had been “made provincial by the establishment... to kind of pull the rug from [under] it” (Hope, London Dinner, 2011). This marginalisation could also be understood as a process of depoliticising. Other critics thought the top-down prescription of community arts by the Arts Council was missing a vital ingredient, the communities themselves. Eight years prior, in 1976, for example, Penny McPhilips, of North West Arts in a letter to Elizabeth Thomas (Chairman of Community Arts Community, Arts Council) argued that while the Arts Council’s Community Arts Committee had “stimulated academic interest among journalists, arts administrators, professional artists, community and social workers it had not directly influenced communities themselves, chiefly because it is too remote” (McPhilips, 1976, pg.1). Echoes of this defanging of community arts can be heard by Loraine Leeson at the London dinner, who said that by the 1990s, “we never mentioned the C word” (Hope, London Dinner, 2011). If invited to a conference to talk about community arts she would say “I just don't use this term”, she felt it was “too dangerous… you were just a bad mural artist” (Hope, London Dinner, 2011). Similarly, in Melbourne, Fotis explained that by 1986 he was “real ensconced in theatre and political activism and art, and my passion was to destroy all vestiges of what was called community art because community art to me meant (and usually was at that time…) really bad art, generally. Just everyone was unrehearsed, poorly paid” (Hope, Melbourne Dinner, 2014).

Berlant referred to the concept of misrecognition, which “describes the psychic process by which fantasy recalibrates what we encounter so that we can imagine that something or someone can fulfil our desire: its operation is central to the state of cruel optimism” (2011, pg. 122). I understand this as a process of duping or bullshitting ourselves and each other (also rife in evaluation reports) that we imagine and fantasise that what we are doing really matters – that it has really made a difference (Belfiore, 2009). These misrecognitions are inevitable, I would argue, given the way the socially engaged art industry operates and markets itself to promote its value. But how does this misrecognition also result in taking our eyes off the bigger picture? Sasi Thiunalan at the Singapore dinner reflected on how he regretted being ‘blindsided’ by being so focused on “fighting an authoritarian undemocratic regime when really the threat was somewhere else” (Hope, Singapore Dinner, 2014). While PAP were “the sharp edge of the spear – behind it was the superstructure of capitalism… income disparity increased, poverty increased, discrimination was disguised” (Hope, Singapore Dinner, 2014). He expressed regret over losing that idealist edge and the ability not just to see the enemy in front of you but what’s coming behind. Sasi also reflected on how as artists we “become part of the superstructure, part of the furniture… that frightens me” and how “dissent became a style – it became co-opted” and asked, “how do you get that radical edge again?” (Hope, Singapore Dinner, 2014).

**Conclusions**

The dinners reflected experiences of what seem to be support for ‘liberation’ (through freedom to travel, edit, budget), but were instead fraught with political compromise and manipulation. There are always agendas at play. Through this analysis I do not want to undermine the drive for political change, rather it is about developing critical relationships to our hopes and dreams whilst we are in the thick of living in the crisis-ridden present, multitasking whilst trying to keep afloat. These types of non-heroic agency do not start (or end) with personal or political dramatic ambitions of empowerment and change rather they are about living through things, whilst imagining otherwise. The dinner voices are reminders of these struggles – they are forever unfinished, fraught with compromise, power relations, disappointments and friendships forged and lost on the way. Inhabiting agency otherwise might involve acknowledging co-dependency rather than independency. Could this be helpful to socially engaged practices, as an alternative to perpetuating the entrepreneurial, individualistic, positive success narratives that tend to underpin funding and training infrastructures in this sector?

These stories remind us that it is how/who/why the conversation is being framed that is significant: who invites who, who is paying? The food for the dinners was paid for by me and/or the organisations where we held the dinners (Museo Nacional de Artes Visuales in Montevideo, Footscray Community Arts Centre in Melbourne, Substation in Singapore and The Bag Factory in Johannesburg), and relied on the time and expertise of my co-hosts and guests. Without any external funding, do they remain on the fringes of archival research practice and production? To what extent does this self-organised approach to making and intervening into networks of social and cultural history allow different types of conversation to occur? The data is out there and online, creative commons licensed, free to use and adapt. With or without funding, however, questions of who lays the table, decides on who to invite and not invite, sets the questions, presses record and uses the results, all remain pertinent. These testimonials still point to the intergenerational forgetting, blocking and misunderstandings that can often occur with these uncertain relationships to the past playing out around the dinner tables. Reflecting on the meaning of sitting together in these configurations in these different times and places, it was felt by many of those present that this was a rare opportunity or the first time they had discussed some of these experiences together. At the end of the dinner in Johannesburg, for example, Faith Isiakpere asked “Why has it taken some English lass to get us talking to each other?” and Aura G Msimang stated that “Us the elders, we have work to do… we know, but we don’t share; we are the ones who failed…” (Hope, Johannesburg Dinner, 2014). Firdoze Bulbulia responded by saying that it is happening, that people are doing this, just in different ways. In Uruguay, Gonzalo Vicci stated that “We still don't talk much about the 1980's. This year [2015] it's 30 years [since the end of the dictatorship], but we don't talk much about it” (Hope, Montevideo Dinner, 2015). Pepi said she feels like “a cadaver of the 1980's. I have the trauma of the 80's. I went to thousands of therapies and never talked of the dictatorship. Only recently with a new kind of therapy I started talking about it. Our city has a facility in doing myths” (Hope, Montevideo Dinner, 2015). In Singapore, it was remarked on that this was the “first time we’ve had a chance to talk like this – we have been too silent for too long” (Hope, Singapore Dinner, 2014). In London, Flick Allen mentioned during the first dinner how this exercise acted as “reiterative inspiration” in terms of reflecting where we are now, in relation to our previous histories (Hope, London Dinner, 2011).

As a practice-based research method *1984 Dinners* encouraged us to look and listen sideways and experience agency laterally by slowing down, eating together, listening, recollecting and reflecting on the drives and disappointments of striving for a good, socially just life. *1984 Dinners* focused on the relational but with renewed engagement, political education, and critical awareness in the broader ideologies in the oceans we are treading water in, stretching out across time and space to support each other in acts of solidarity for survival. Getting to know the parts we play (and playing with them), is perhaps a step towards understanding the attachment to the ideas and people we hold on to and the cruelty in realising things are more complicated and compromised than we perhaps originally thought. Acknowledging the cruelty in the optimism held in our practices and sharing this openly and honestly is perhaps one way of living through, and with, the inevitable failures and disappointments our practices are tangled up in.

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1. See https://1984dinners.sophiehope.org.uk [↑](#endnote-ref-1)