

open forum on cooperative, collective and collaborative structures in arts institutions

3 November 2025, argos

Transcription of the conversation by Laura Tack

Guests: One Field Fallow (Zoe, Emma, Lau), Bare Minimum (Christie, Christine), Tim Bryon, Maryam K. Hedayat and Katia Rossini

Introduction

(Inge Coolsaet shares a few words on the overall context)

Last night we had a wonderful performance by Carla Adra. In September, Carla spent one week in the building of argos to gather testimonies of people who are working in the cultural sector. These pretty intimate, challenging conversations, often referring to negative experiences, but also voicing challenges or positive observations, were transformed into last night's performance and into an audiovisual installation, which is now on display at argos and will stay on until the 22nd of December.

This forum is the first chapter of the Tabula Rasa programme.

The programme as a whole is meant as a 'check-in'. It is the result of an art institution that decides to check in with itself. The central questions are: How do we work in the cultural sector? How can we imagine other ways to work? And more precisely: Why do we do the things we do? How do we do these? And for whom?

To tackle these questions, we organise three sessions: the first part of the programme is on collaborative work. The second part deals with archival practices. The third part of the programme focuses on the community of audiovisual artists and the networks they are part of.

The audience can participate by scanning the QR code that will guide them to a platform on which they can share their questions.

The goal of this event is note-taking. We want to collect all of today's input in an upcoming publication, build on these exchanges and efforts, and share them again with the sector so that we can move forward.

After the lecture, there is a workshop that will be guided by the Bare Minimum collective.

Presentation of the conversation partners

- Maryam K. Hedayat (argos / collective of female film directors WANDA / Studio Sarab)
- Katia Rossini (argos / Cinema Nova).
- the Bare Minimum (BM) collective is a queer interdisciplinary art collective that is interested in the topic of work in the service of each other and art making that is founded in relation.
 - Christie is a PhD Researcher and Affiliated Lecturer at the University of Cambridge in Art History

- Christine is a trainee art conservator and artist with a practice focused on interconnectedness and collaborative working.
- One Field Fallow (OFF) is a queer run social cultural project in Brussels with a space in the centre of Brussels, in which they host their activities and open up to other organisations. They operate horizontally through a three-field system, which will be explained later.
 - Zoe is a musician and seasonal worker
 - Emma is a PhD researcher in the history of feminism
 - Lau is a filmmaker and cultural worker
- Tim Bryon combines two projects: the artist collective 019 and Kunsthall Gent.

First challenge: How do you deal with accountability in a collective?

Christine (BM): How do you hold someone accountable if they are not doing their tasks? Accountability is a problem we struggle with a lot. Most of our members have a disability or suffer from a chronic illness. We work with an accountability document that was first developed by Sisters Uncut, an anti-domestic violence action group.

The document contains a series of procedures that are based on care. We start from an assumption of generosity: if someone is not doing the work they are supposed to do, it is probably because they are dealing with other problems and reasons other than that they are callous or not invested in the project. We always have fluctuating capacities for the amount of work we can do at a given moment.

Christie (BM): We base our principles for the collective on the politics of anti-carceral feminism.

We deliberately counter this carceral instinct to punish, to surveil or to reprimand, which is only one way to think about accountability and discipline when working in groups. Instead, mutual aid and mutual care are essential places to come from when it comes to accountability.

Christine (BM): Central to our practice is the idea that taking care of each other in the rest of our lives is creative work and really important. The commitment to each other, our relationship and our well-being is more important than the work we are creating. Sometimes this means that we need to stop doing something or say no to commissions.

Tim: After years of working together, we still do not have clear procedures to deal with accountability. It has often been our approach to cover the problems, figuratively speaking, with the cloak of love – de mantel der liefde in Dutch – or to start from a position of loving permissiveness – liefdevolle toegeeflijkheid. We realised that this approach was often insufficient in the long term and that we had to put up questions about how far this loving, permissiveness and patience could stretch. We still do not fall back on fixed procedures to address accountability issues, but we have now found the vocabulary to talk about the issues and to vocalise some warning lights, if matters risk getting out of hand.

Lau (OFF): One Field Fallow has a three-field system in which three fields separate different levels of tasks. First, there is the Disown (sic?) team, with future tasks creating the framework for the organisation. Then there is Harvesting production communication task. Following field, which you can enter when you would not like to have any tasks on your shoulders for the upcoming months. Each person decides in which field they want to step.

Emma (OFF): Each month, you can change fields. If you do not conclude all your tasks in one field, they move to the next month, and you can leave them to another person or to another time. It remains a challenge, however, not to endlessly postpone tasks.

Question from the audience: Do you find it harder or easier to make your fellow collective members accountable when they are also your friends?

Lau (OFF): One Field Fallow started out as a friend group, but then grew into a larger collective.

Emma (OFF): I think the question is not so much a matter of being easier or harder. It is just another sort of communication. Also, because we are friends, we know each other better, and it is sometimes easier because we know how to relate to each other emotionally.

Christie (BM): When you are friends, you also know how to step up for one another. Knowing each other's capacities and abilities, knowing when you have to step up for someone. Also, we are moving the idea of shame around failure. We try to express that worth is not related to the ability to produce or to labour. We are trying to be self-compassionate.

Katia: I do not think working with friends makes it easier. It can make communication more complicated because of other sorts of responsibilities. The responsibility to try to solve a problem can be hard on your friendship. It is difficult to communicate to friends that they are causing a problem within the team or the organisation.

Tim: There are systems of management that have very clear, fixed and theoretical levels that regulate everyone's performance. But in a collective, with friends or not with friends, you learn how to evolve with strengths and weaknesses. It is nice not to have it too crystallised but to let it grow organically. You always need moments, though, to evaluate and reset the settings in any group situation. You need to do this exercise collectively at regular intervals to avoid frustration. The biggest challenge for us is finding the time to do this. If you want to do it right, it should be with everyone in the collective and thoroughly, whether they are friends or not.

Katia: At Cinema Nova we also have this process of evaluation. We do it once per year. There is a very large group of volunteers, then there is a core group, and there are job positions that help coordinate the volunteers. These jobs can last many years. But for each one of these jobs, there is a list of tasks that have to be performed. If a person does not perform their task, it falls on everyone else. The question is maybe rather: why is this person not able to do their job? We have a board to discuss this, and they come together once a month. Next, there are also weekly meetings to discuss the distribution of accountability and visibility across the different functions.

Christie (BM): For harm reduction, you need accountability procedures. Disagreement or conflict is inherently bad, and in a collaborative dynamic, you may feel you need to get rid of that. But we need to argue and disagree because only in that you generate certain conversations that are very fruitful.

Christine (BM): Yes, conflict has helped us address things we would hardly address. And this is a very important thing for our collective.

Tim: When we started as a very young organisation, but with a few experienced people in the field. A head start for us was not to learn everything by doing, but by listening to everyone's experience and to depart from that. Some of this experience dealt exactly with conflict and gave us suggestions on how to address it.

We have a user's manual with the main principles of our organisation in it. Some of the principles mentioned are: Things come alive when there is friction, follow lead follow, you do not always have to lead or follow, or vulnerability is something to be aware of and encouraged.

Second challenge: Horizontal versus accountable. Where are we with this? A well-considered dose of hierarchy is a tool, a means to have the necessary accountability when it gets difficult, messy, or personal. Not everyone wants to share in making the tough decisions. Better prepare for when it happens. Is hierarchy a way to deal with the complexity of accountability?

Tim: It is difficult not to have a director and do something completely horizontally. Now and then, some people don't want to take certain tasks or responsibilities. At some point, there has to be a group of people making the decisions that not everyone wants to make. We say hierarchy is a dirty word, but many times it is a tool to deal with complex situations that involve a lot of people.

Katia: I do not believe in total horizontality. People take different responsibilities, and that might have a lot of different causes. But how do we share the task of decision-making? At Cinema Nova we have a predefined organigram, at the top of which is the board. We have a board, which is composed of people who are from the original organisation and who are also not. Sometimes we need people who are outside the board to make decisions. Next to the board, there are other decision-making bodies, such as the weekly meeting or the monthly programming meeting and the technical meeting. These different groups of people each have their own mandate to make decisions.

Christine (BM): We are 'aspirationally' not hierarchical: all of the decisions that we make have to be by consensus, and everyone has to agree. We want to be horizontal. But at the same time, we are very aware that power relationships infuse every interaction that we have, even if this is not explicit. We cannot get around the fact that there are differences between each of the members of our collective (e.g. class differences, disabilities, ...) and that our interrelationships are infused with a differential power relation. Not acknowledging the presence of these existing power dynamics in a collective means that you cannot grapple with them or lessen the impact of these unequal power dynamics in our working

relationships within the collective. Even though we aspire to equality, we cannot ignore that inequalities are manifest everywhere in our daily lives, and we have to take that into account.

Christie (BM): Power is active in every relationship we have. It is less about whether or not people can take the lead, but more about agency. Everybody needs to know that their voice matters and that there are no assumptions about what people can or cannot do. In our collective, the function of the board does not really exist. Instead, we use mediation. This means that someone from outside our collective comes in to give their perspective on the complex issue between members. Just like disagreement and conflict can be a good thing, mediation is also a good thing.

Christine (BM): The kind of mediation we are talking about is mediation that comes from a tradition of abolitionist politics. To have a third person there means that whatever power dynamics are going on can be managed by this third person, who can hold that and manage it with us.

It is also a question with this idea of equality compared to liberation. We are striving towards equality, but do we all have to be the same? Do we all need and want the same things? Liberation is about the freedom to have all of our needs met and the ability to be able to give and take our power when we would like to do that, because this power is ours. More interested in acknowledging these power differentials and have them exist as part of a liberatory space for relation rather than striving towards equality and sameness.

OFF: We also aspire to be horizontal. We very much rely on the three-field systems. Every month, we have a check-in moment where we ask: What is your capacity for this month? Which field do you want to be in this month (could be following: resting). This allows for everyone to have a time to be active or not. It is liberating to know that you can take a step back and that the collective will continue to exist.

Decision-making happens with the people who are present during the meetings. How do we ensure that we involve everyone, also those not present during the meeting?

Another challenge is when money comes into play (funding, residencies, subsidies), which can go to salaries. Organically, the money ties to the people who have more time and energy, which results in those people having a bigger impact in decision making than the other. This adds a difficulty.

Tim: When we first started, it was possible to switch roles, and that was nice, but when things professionalise, it gets harder to maintain this. In Kunsthal we felt pressure from around, our most important stakeholders, people on the board, the city and other organisations. These people distrusted our choice not to have a director and expected us to go along with the standard of having a director. In these instances it is very easy to flow towards hierarchy after some time, and what we do to not go there are the following things: switch roles at meetings, every meeting is led by someone else, also because it is nice for people to experience being in the lead, easier for them to voice their concerns. We also use the principle that decisions have to be made by the people it impacts the most (e.g., people working on technical stuff can decide on their areas). We realised also that one day, consensus was not working for us anymore as a concept, and we opted for the concept of consent instead. It is okay for people to have a different opinion, but that should not keep

decisions from being made, hence the consent. We install guardrails and checks to ensure that decisions are made by the whole team.

Question from someone in the audience: When one gets to a professional level of functioning in a collective, I was wondering whether it is still possible to have a real horizontal professional collective or institute, or whether it is never really possible in the end. I heard that at some point, when one gets to that professional level, it is just not doable anymore (for instance, consensus) and that you need a bit of hierarchy.

BM: This idea of professionalism is something that has just come upon us. We still do not consider ourselves to be professional artists. From the outset, we have wanted our collective to be a space for being playful, for experimenting and to build this aspirational utopian micro world, where we can still take care of each other and play. Right from the start, however, we have very unexpectedly had people who wanted to give us money to do things seriously, but all the people who work with us usually have read our manifesto in which we clearly state that the only ethical relationship we can have with the institution is to steal from it, so we can pass that on to other people. For example, we want the money raised for something to end up in the pocket of someone outside of the institutional art world, so that they can do whatever they want to do with it.

It is important to us that we do not need Bare Minimum. We could also end things tomorrow; it would be fine. We are not trying to live through this collective.

We met at Cambridge, one of the most horrifying elite universities in the world. We all have to interact with this kind of institution. We all have to live. Bare minimum is a way to escape from that. We are trying to not get sucked into this idea of success and what this means. We are open to not being taken that seriously. We do not need to be hierarchical because we do not need to succeed as a professional collective.

Christie: Let us define professionalism: what does it imply? What has it meant historically? Who has this concept excluded? Who is this usually applied to? What is it trying to get us to do?

Tim: In Kunsthal, we are allergic to the term institution. There are enough voices in our team and structure that keep us from institutionalising. The way I see it, we still do things with our friends, and because there is money, we can do more things that we like together. So, when does your group of friends become an institution? Are the rules there and the hierarchy there to serve the people and to make things function? Or do they get more important than the people/the things that are happening? Once you follow the procedures simply because you have the tradition of following them and people are afraid to question it, then you are an institution, in my opinion. In this situation, you can end up with the negative side effects of hierarchy. If you are mindful, are aware and do not let procedures become too important, this could be a way to combat that slippery slope.

Question from the audience: how did you decide who in your collective is a part of the coordination group that manages Kunsthal and did that discussion create tension?

Tim: The coordination group mainly consists of the people who started Kunsthal and who are more experienced. One of the scenarios we considered at the beginning was to create an empty seat in this coordination group that could be rotated, so that everyone could be given

a chance to gain experience and get a voice. I consider it one of our flaws that we decided not to. Unwillingly, we created a structure that seems a bit too fixed for me. We also chose to have a different pay grade for the coordination group. This is difficult to change now, even though the difference in pay is small, it was to honour the difference in effort made. Status symbols are to be avoided. Nomenclatures, such as titles, that put people in a hierarchy, we chose not to use.

Challenge: How to be polyvocal in a collective? What do we consider as polyvocality? Different voices and opinions, who decides what and when? Different needs, privileges, types of thinking, and processing. Other skills and knowledge?

OFF: Polyvocality is part of our value framework. It encompasses what it means to be a collective. You try to be something together, do something together as a group. We are still struggling with methodologies or scripts for making decisions, if you are, e.g. running a group of 10 people or more. Also, people are wired differently and think in different ways: e.g., during meetings. It is the more outgoing people who tend to voice their opinions more easily. Regarding the different skills and knowledge, we aim to have every role rotated and taken up by someone else. This requires that everyone knows at least a little bit how to do everything. This is a challenge because it requires making space and time to hand things over. A lot of time goes to meetings and talking about the work when switching fields.

Katia: The first [thing that] comes to mind is: what can be said to avoid chaos in polyvocality? To be able to involve different voices, you need to have a clear house/space to involve everyone, without losing the focus. Here, at argos, we are trying to redesign the house. As we felt that the house was not clear enough, we needed to re-establish its foundations.

OFF: We try to embrace chaos and do not see it as something to avoid. A lack of clarity in what we are and in what we try to do can be a weakness, but can also be a strength, because it creates a lot of space to do things differently and to invite other projects in. We are transparent about [the fact that] that our collective is about playing around. We have been talking a lot about who is doing what and is better at certain tasks than others, but no one cannot be good at trying to play.

I don't think for us it's about trying to get out of the chaos per se but I do feel that to some extent we rely on some scripts: we do kind of have a structured house, have a frame in which you can play.

Tim: A O19, we went through a process. We started very open. People kept asking: "What do you do?" We have a very open mind about what we do. We follow the interests of the artists in our collective, so it can go in different directions according to what they think is interesting. But when we had to apply for subsidies, we had to make this formal and write texts to prove that you are worthy of that money to do more things. We had to explain what our mission is and where we see the collective in x years, include a detailed plan of what we are going to do this year, etc. Someone said: "Our mission is to not have a mission". Having not enough room for chaos to follow the interests of the artists in the group was dangerous for us. We have a structure, a way of working, but I do not think that professionalising and

growing need to be opposite to chaos. So, I am wondering, where is the chaos at argos, which is such an established institution, where is the room to play?

argos: There is still a huge difference between what is possible and how much chaos and playfulness are possible when you are not funded by the government. When you have that freedom, you can play so much more easily. I feel this freedom from the chaos when I work with my other collectives. While in argos, I feel the responsibility towards my colleagues and certainly also towards our audience and to the promises we made to the government. That is always in the back of my head. This causes a different dynamic.

Katia: I agree that we have the responsibility to deal with the heritage that is at argos, the archive that is here, and the history of the space. It does not mean that we cannot experiment. Within the chaos, we can experiment with unexpected ideas. You can allow new ideas to come in, to erupt in your house, and this polyvocality can exist in terms of how you open this house. For example, in the second part of this program, we want to work on the gaps we have in the archive and how we can fill the gaps of some underrepresented communities and to ask ourselves also why they are not represented right now.

BM: How do we maintain our anti-work ethic as a collective? Our responsibility is towards each other and not so much towards an audience or an institution.

Marx criticised wage work, but stated that labour can also be non-alienating or exploitative. We uphold a politics of refusal towards wage labour and at the same time commit towards each other and the labour that we do towards each other as creative work.

Sophie Lewis recently wrote about the privatisation of care and described how the government in the UK has privatised care to the area of the family instead of the state. This is often too much for families to hold.

Since our collective functions as a family, also for us this care was sometimes too much to hold. Considering our collective, therefore, as a space in which play, pleasure and curiosity can exist was liberating, and this is precisely what our anti-work ethic consists of.

Part of what we do is also to push each other via self-organised workshops. Through play, we try on these different voices or roles and try to encourage that into each other. We try to push and provide opportunities to find other voices.

Question from the audience: If the work you produce as a collective is less important than the relationship you have with each other, how do you communicate that to the world?

BM: It does not matter that much to us whether the world gets what we are doing. It is an outrageous claim for us to make that the relationship amongst each other is the art work. But we don't focus on being intelligible to everyone.

Question from the audience: How do you manage authorship in your collectives?

OFF: It is a challenge. Since polyvocality is at the core, there is not one author, but multiple. For me, I enjoy having no authorship. I constantly have to let go of it, and it challenges my perfectionist soul: it touches [on] some things that are difficult, but that make me grow. There is a lot of beauty in withdrawing and letting space for others. That thing is floating between all of us, and it does not belong to one or another, but to everyone.

Tim : Same, it is also an ongoing question for years. The main answer would be collective authorship: every time someone claims authorship, it is not fun for others anymore. When you work collectively, and you mean it, you cannot. The way we do it is to try to be as generous as possible. Maybe that person only gave two ideas, or just did one thing, but in the end, they were 100% part of the process, and they get the same.

Katia: For Cinema Nova, at the beginning, there were only 2 to 3 people curating, and that was a question that popped up early. It was challenging, because you must accept making the step because your name will not be visible because it is a collective process. It took some time to get used to that idea, and now the result is that the programs are never signed. At the back of the paper program, you have the list of everybody who is part of the collective.

There is this question going on in argos as well, we come from a one person-curation to how it is done currently, and the question is : how do we envision the curatorial work at argos? But it is very clear that we want to move away from what was happening before.

BM: Being able to have collective authorship is incredibly free. There are things I say with BM that I would not be able to say by myself, and that is wonderful. Our relationship is what shaped each other, so when we make work, even if not everyone actively took part, it is still a chorus of our voices. We share our values because we co-create each other. It is an acknowledgement of all the time spent together, and resisting the idea of being consumable and being an independent genius.

Question: What tools can be used to fluctuate energies and capacities between members?

OFF: The rotation between fields also takes into account the capacity typical of each field. We find it important not to do things when it is almost too late (to avoid burnout).

Myriam: How can one stay true to the principle of equality when someone needs rest and the workload falls upon other people's shoulders?

Tim: I think it is also about avoiding those situations of resentment. Check in with everyone, make room for that every once and a while, make sure that people do not burn out. Burnout is something that builds up. So if you check regularly, you can prevent people from burning out. Spot it on time, turn it into a topic, and also ask who has room to take this or that task on. Look out for each other.

BM: If this happens too much, we just do not do it anymore. Sometimes people want to help so much and do not realise they do not actually have this capacity. One of the answers is to know yourself and set clear boundaries. It is not about doing an equal amount of work, but also about being there for each other. We try to make our collective a place where we feel like we can create and be in conversation with one another. It is not a bad thing to fail, it is also not our fault.

Question: How do you handle horizontality while working with volunteers?

Tim: The time and attention that goes into this project, working for 9 people, is already a lot and time-consuming. When you work horizontally, you spend so much time making sure everybody is on the same page. We are already so invested in making this work for 9, so we struggle to do this as well for the people outside. We consider this our flaw. Getting everyone up there is impossible for us, time-wise.

Katia: At Cinema Nova, everybody volunteers. There is one person who is paid to communicate with the volunteers. There is a difference between a core group and the volunteers who are less invested. There is also a desire to care about people, e.g., by organising dinners where everyone can gather and talk, and this offers a bridge moment during which the boundaries are less clear.

Tim: We also really try to listen to people when we get feedback. You should really honour their feedback.