



**Artists, Activists,  
and Worldbuilders  
on Decentralised  
Autonomous  
Organisations**

**Conversations about Funding,**

**Self-Organisation, and Reclaiming the Future**

**Interviews and Introduction by Inte Gloerich**



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# INTRODUCTION

By Inte Gloerich

## ON THE NEED TO REIMAGINE, RECLAIM, AND RESTRUCTURE

Barely recovered from the depletion of cultural funding during the Great Recession of more than a decade ago and the more recent difficulties of staying afloat as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, arts and culture currently face dire circumstances yet again. A random sample of articles about arts and cultural funding in various European contexts written in the past year warns that “France slashes its culture budget,” the Finnish “cultural sector will face cuts of millions of euros,” and that “UK spending on culture [is] among the lowest in Europe.” With a flair for the theatrical, the German Culture Council announced that “the golden age for culture is over.” :

: Walfisz, J. ‘As France slashes its culture budget (...)’, *Euronews*, 18 April 2024; ‘Finland: Severe cuts proposed to arts and culture funding,’ *Finnish Institute Benelux*, 13 August 2024; Harris, G. ‘UK Spending on culture among the lowest in Europe (...)’, *The Art Newspaper*, 23 July 2024; Dege, S. ‘Can Germany still pay for arts funding?’ *Deutsche Welle*, 12 July 2024.

These measures are paired with a widespread surge of (extreme) right-wing parties and repressive policies in many places around the world, including Europe. In Hungary, artistic expression is severely restricted as Prime Minister Orbán “wrest[s] control of the arts and cultural sector and refashion[s] it to serve the interests of [his] party’s agenda,” in Austria, the Freedom Party (FPÖ) “is threatening to cut funding for ‘woke’ culture,” and, in The Netherlands and many other places, any arts and culture not deemed “traditional” or “national” is increasingly at risk of losing funding. Moreover, in Germany, artists and cultural organisations showing solidarity with Palestinians during the ongoing genocide in Gaza and protesting the German state’s complicity in it face funding cuts, revoked decisions on prize money, and censorship. :

: Open Letter. Resistance Now: Free Culture,’ *European Theatre*, 2024; Sethi, S., et al., Systematic Suppression: Hungary’s Arts & Culture in Crisis, *Artistic Freedom Initiative*, 2022; Shreidi, Z., ‘German

This context informs the conversations with artists and creative practitioners in this book. Often, their work with and around Decentralised Autonomous Organisations (DAOs) emerges from these very concerns. Does that mean that DAOs are capable of solving the sociopolitical issues of precarity, cuts, and censorship? No. 'Free blockchain money' does not exist. DAOs do not 'magically' make more funding appear, least of all structurally so. And DAOs do not allow artists and cultural practitioners to leave behind their national contexts of austerity and repression and exchange them for some virtual utopia.

However, this does not mean that engaging with DAOs is pointless in the face of these circumstances and limitations. In this publication, I ask practitioners to share their experiences, focussing specifically on the definition of new forms of agency in cultural decision-making, explorations of shared ownership in arts and culture amid widespread logics of private property and extractivism, and the making of prefigurative claims on futures envisioned from the bottom up. None of these practices will be able to replace the structures of state funding or cancel oppressive concentrations of power any time soon, but they do open up space to manoeuvre and create tactical interventions, to find each other and build solidarity, and to regain a sense of futurity together. In other words, to reimagine, reclaim, and restructure shared socio-technical futures.

The six people that I interviewed represent key voices in the countercultural and artistic DAO space. Penny Rafferty is a co-founder of Black Swan – a DAO that pursued horizontal and decentralised approaches to art-making – and she pushes DAO discourse into new directions with critical and imaginative work. Erik Bordeleau is a co-founder of The Sphere – a DAO that explores new ecologies of funding to develop a regenerative commons for the performing arts – and contributes boundary-pushing philosophical and media theoretical perspectives to DAO thought. Ruth Catlow developed CultureStake – a voting system for decentralised cultural decision-making that uses quadratic voting on the blockchain – and has been a central



figure shaping and theorising the intersection between the artworld and DAOs. Yazan Khalili is a co-founder of Dayra – a DAO-based economic model to appreciate and share communal wealth in the absence of money – and a cultural activist who lays bare the depoliticising effects of the crisis economy and aims to reinvigorate trust-based practices. Aude Launay is a co-founder of Decentralised Autonomous Kunstverein – an early art DAO – and their philosophical work pulls the political and intellectual lineages at play in DAO culture into focus. Stacco Troncoso is a co-founder of DisCO – which is not a DAO, but rather a critique of and an alternative to them – and an outspoken proponent of anti-capitalist, decolonial, and intersectionally feminist approaches to work and technology.

## WHY DAOS?

Perhaps it would be expected that I use this introduction to explain in detail what DAOs actually are and how they work. Just like the blockchain technology they make use of, DAOs can be hard to understand, and despite a wealth of online resources going over their functionalities and use cases, this complexity seems to always remain present. Every explainer video or how-to article emphasises a different technological feature and presents different individual and social benefits – from speculative financial practices to community-based organisation. Moreover, blockchain and DAO technology constantly evolve and are used in the context of radically diverse worldviews. As a result, a scholarly glossary of blockchain-related terms writes that “there is neither a formal definition nor a common understanding” : of what ‘blockchain-based technologies’ refers to.

Nevertheless, a bit more detail is provided later in the same glossary, where a DAO is described as “a blockchain-based system that enables people to coordinate and govern themselves mediated by a set of self-executing rules deployed on a public blockchain, and whose governance is decentralised (i.e., independent from central control).” :

: Valiente, M.C., and F. Tschorsch. ‘Blockchain-Based Technologies\_,’ in Ferrari, V., F. et al. (eds), *Log Out\_. A Glossary of Technological Resistance and Decentralization\_.* Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2023.

: Hassan, S., and P. de Filippi. ‘DAO (Decentralized Autonomous Organization)\_,’ in *ibid.*, p.

Now, this might seem very much like a definition, but its authors almost immediately point to the ambiguity inherent in it. They show that, fundamentally, each of the words that make up the name 'DAO' can be interpreted in multiple ways. For example, does decentralisation only refer to the way a DAO is infrastructurally set up, or does it also refer to the decentralisation of power? And if so, does this only refer to the effort to decentralise, or does it refer to actual outcomes? Does the autonomy of a DAO refer to its capacity to execute code without the intervention of humans – i.e., a technical kind of autonomy – or does it refer to the capacity of a group of people to self-determine their rules of engagement and governance models – i.e., a political kind of autonomy? And finally, what qualifies a DAO as organisational? Does the (automated) execution of algorithmic processes – which might be part of a company's or community's activities to facilitate their own organisation – qualify as organisational, or should people – and perhaps even a more-than-human community – continuously remain involved to qualify a DAO as organisational? :

All of these open questions mean that, in practice, technological structures that are referred to as DAOs may turn out to centralise power or to overrule engaged interpersonal negotiations and exchanges about how to live and organise together with others with predefined, self-executing algorithms. Let me be clear: any part of such an outcome is not what interests me about DAOs. It also means that building DAOs that have radically different sociopolitical and cultural implications requires difficult, continuous, and situated work.

It is undeniable that colonial, extractive, and speculative financial practices and the DAO space overlap in many places, : yet it is also undeniable that people who have radically different concerns and interests – ones that could be described with adjectives like anti-capitalist, commons-based, decolonial, feminist and ecological – still engage with DAO technology. Instead of presenting a working definition for the remainder of

109.

: Ibid. Additionally, for a more detailed discussion on the term decentralisation, see Bodó, B., J.K. Brekke, and J.H. Hoepman. 'Decentralisation: A Multidisciplinary Perspective.' *Internet Policy Review* 10.2, 2021, pp. 1–21, <https://www.eco.nstor.eu/handle/10419/235966>.

: I have detailed some of these overlaps, particularly their colonial and extractive dimensions, in previous work, such as Gloerich, I. *Reimagining the Truth Machine: Blockchain Imaginaries between the Rational and the More-than-Rational*, PhD diss., Utrecht University, 2025.

this book – which will inevitably age badly – I have chosen instead to ask each person that I interviewed what *they* understand DAOs to be and why *they* find them interesting. What are their motivations to engage with the technology, and what is their understanding of the practices and social relations that the technology can facilitate, especially in the context of the funding cuts and repressive measures described above? You can find their answers at the start of and sprinkled throughout each interview.

## ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIES RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF COMMUNITIES AND PREFIGURING REIMAGINED FUTURES

As a preview, I have distilled three overarching themes that emerge from the interviews. First, the interviewees share a commitment to working towards a different – e.g., more inclusive, resilient, commons-based, or self-organised – economy for arts and culture. Frustrated with top-down funding decisions, widespread precarity, and ideological demands on arts and culture, interviewees express this commitment in terms of the rethinking the notions of value and wealth, : the proposal of practical alternatives to grant-writing procedures and more inclusive art markets, : and the making of explicit socio-political demands with regards to anti-capitalist and decolonial relations and environmentally sustainable systems. : Ultimately, many participants see DAOs as a way to turn the economy from an abstract hyperobject that ‘regular people’ do not (feel they) have any agency over : into designable prototypes that people can experience, play-test, and tweak. While they are not able to undo the power of capitalism in the near future, artistic and activist experiments with DAOs and similar sociotechnical systems can reinvigorate an economic and political awareness that is necessary for people to start building alternatives to extractive and oppressive structures and power relations.

Second, the interviewees also share a commitment to responding to the needs of specific communities. They share an attitude that can be summarised through Penny Rafferty’s

: See e.g., Yazan Khalili and Stacco Troncoso.

: See e.g., Erik Bordeleau and Aude Launay

: See e.g., Ruth Catlow and Stacco Troncoso.

: Morton, Timothy.  
Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

phrase “culture before structure.” : Rather than departing from the technology and searching for a use case – examples of which abound in blockchain culture – the DAOs of the interviewees are used only to support communities with regards to the actual needs and concerns they encounter. Communities are actively involved in the process of defining the rules of engagement that make up a DAO and continue to contribute through proposals and voting throughout the lifetime of a DAO. In such community-based processes, setting up a DAO raises questions about how to live together with others and the values according to which to organise this relational space. As such, these DAOs are changeable entities that only persist through the continued involvement of engaged members. : While DAOs are often thought of in terms of *immutability* – they log information onto a blockchain, which is virtually impossible to tamper with – the opposite also applies: people that organise together are able to *mutate* the DAO structure that supports them to suit their changing needs. :

Finally, a commitment to imagining and building futures together with others traverses the interviews. Amid increasing precarity, frequent and violent political ruptures, and the growing tangibility of environmental collapse, the idea of ‘the future’ has, for many, turned from a promise into a threat. : Moreover, dominant narratives about the future present technologies as deterministic solutions that seem to exist outside of politics and, in the process, limit people’s ability to have a say in the kinds of futures they want to see. Many artistic-activist DAO experiments can be understood as an attempt to reclaim a capacity to imagine oneself in a future free from the limitations and predetermined frameworks that powerful societal actors offer. They are a way to self-organise the structures that allow one to experiment with and start to experience what different future sociotechnical constellations might feel like. Often, DAO experiments use Live Action Role Playing (LARP) : and other playful methods because, as Erik Bordeleau explains, “Play is absolutely fundamental” to engage people in developing future ecosystems and economies together. Working with DAOs can easily slip into becoming

: See Penny Rafferty’s interview.

: See Aude Launay’s interview about the efforts it takes to maintain a DAO.

: Penny Rafferty discusses (im)mutability during her interview.

: Komporozos-Athanasiou, Aris. *Speculative Communities: Living With Uncertainty in a Financialized World*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2022. Turn to my interview with Yazan Khalili to read about the crisis economy that emerges in the context of these predicaments.

: [https://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](https://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Main_Page).

procedural or administrative, but building futures together – which many of the DAOs mentioned in this book attempt – should be energising and exciting! :

: Besides the interview with Erik Bordeleau, LARPs and playfulness came up in my conversations with Penny Rafferty, Ruth Catlow, and Stacco Troncoso.

## RISKS: COMPLEXITY, TOKENISATION, AND FINANCIALISATION

Artistic-activist DAO experimentation also faces hurdles and limitations. For example, as mentioned above, blockchain technology is perceived as complex and difficult to grasp by many. This means that, even though there are low-tech forms of engagement with DAOs, many people might never find their way in. Not everyone has the skills necessary to untangle the technological logics at play in DAOs, limiting their insight into the technology's potentially negative sociopolitical implications. Using DAO templates could be a way to engage people, but it is important to be cautious of lingering worldviews that inform preselected processes and structures defined by those that are more tech-savvy. Moreover, maintaining technological systems and updating them to do justice to future circumstances is a costly activity that represents another hurdle, especially in the context of depleted funds. :

: See for more on these hurdles and limitations e.g., my interviews with Penny Rafferty, Ruth Catlow, and Aude Launay.

: Dive deeper into these issues by reading e.g. my interviews with Erik Bordeleau, Yazan Khalili, Stacco Troncoso.

: See the interview with Ruth Catlow.

Additionally, interviewees warn that not everything in life can or should be captured by tokens and smart contracts as their inflexibility risks doing damage to the communities and cultures around them. : Neither should DAOs focus solely on those elements that can be represented in technological processes. Such inattention to the frictions, vibes, playfulness, and messiness that makes up community practices could just as well damage them through potentially ill-fitting algorithmic decisions that continue unfolding. As Ruth Catlow reminds us: “disagreements, tensions, or conflicts [are] just part of life!” : and DAOs that care about the plurality of existence and fostering real engagement among their members would do right to celebrate those moments that cannot be structured and categorised. Moreover, it is important to note that blockchain-based data is particularly at risk of financialisation because of the wider context of speculation that characterises the

blockchain space. Building DAOs that support alternative economies – anti-capitalist, commons-based... – also requires critical engagement with these forces.

## FOLLOWING THREADS: GLOSSARY AND SYLLABUS

Besides interviews, this publication contains a glossary and syllabus, both of which are the result of contributions by the interviewees. I asked the interviewees to describe a term that they felt was relevant to (their) DAO work in the context of arts and culture or the themes that came up during their interview. The result consists of two socio-economic concepts, a description of a technical feature, a cultural phenomenon, and a creative practice, and provides a glimpse into the interdisciplinary space that artistic-activist DAO experimentation is. As such, the glossary should not be mistaken for a place to find information about fundamental concepts at play in DAOs or blockchain technology in general. I have listed the terms anonymously and in the order they were submitted to me, although a keen reader will likely be able to match terms to interviews.

Although not necessarily conventional for interviews, references have been added throughout the book to allow readers to follow interesting trains of thought and to learn more about the concepts and examples that are mentioned. To provide an overview and expansion of such resources, the book also includes a Syllabus, which was assembled by asking interviewees to share podcasts, articles, books, or videos that they thought would provide readers of this book with key entry-points to learn more about artworld DAOs. I added some of my own resources as well. The result is a diverse list that spans alternative economies, the artworld and its market, the intersections of activism and technology, DAOs technology, and blockchain criticism. It includes optimistic takes *and* very critical ones, speculative artistic work *and* practical discussions of systems of governance and social organisation. I hope this combination will inspire people to dive deeper into these materials and develop their own perspective.

: For such information, I point anyone to various lemmas in Ferrari, V., F. Idelberger, A. Leiter, M. Mannan, M.C. Valiente, and B. Bodó (eds), *Log Out\_. A Glossary of Technological Resistance and Decentralization\_*, Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2023.

Finally, the syllabus is not meant to convince anyone to enter the DAO space or to provide a how-to guide for doing so – whether this is useful or interesting is entirely up to each individual case and I can in fact think of many occasions in which it would be neither. Rather it is meant to be a messy but rich collection of resources that invite readers into the important and exciting space of artistic-activist reflection on, critique of, engagement with, and (re)imagination of these (and other) complex technologies. The same, I think, holds true for the interviews in the pages that follow. I hope you enjoy following the threads and connecting the dots throughout the rest of this book!





# GLOSSARY

With contributions by all interviewees.

**Real Game Play** was coined by the OMSK Social Club in 2017. The practice focuses on creating transitional states that can be perceived as either fiction and/or reality, allowing participants to engage with the gaming experience on a deeper level. Players can “bleed” into their characters through this approach, integrating personal elements into their character development and the overall setting. Real Game Play represents an innovative and immersive form of interactive storytelling. It challenges conventional notions of role-playing and blurs the lines between reality and fiction, encouraging participants to explore complex themes and ideas in a unique and transformative manner.

**Liquidity Pools** and their corollary, automated market makers, are key innovations coming from the Decentralised Finance (DeFi) ecosystem. They are designed to incentivize users to stake, i.e. to lock funding in a digital asset pool governed by smart contracts, in exchange for a reward. By integrating liquidity pools with DAO frameworks, communities can democratically manage pooled assets, aligning incentives for contributors while fostering decentralized decision-making.

**Mutualism** is a socioeconomic model that emphasises cooperation, mutual aid, and collective support over competition and individualism, articulated by Sara Horowitz. : Mutualism involves people working collaboratively through cooperatives, unions, and community organisations to address shared needs. It advocates for decentralised, transparent, and sustainable systems prioritising community self-determination and long-term benefits. Leadership and resources are structured to serve future generations, fostering resilience and equity within interconnected social and economic frameworks.

**Communal debt** is not a credit or a debit, it is not a financial

: Horowitz, S. *Mutualism: Building the Next Economy from the Ground Up*, New York: Random House, 2021.

value. Rather, it is a shared understanding between certain community members that they need each other and support each other in different ways to exist and survive in this world. Communal debt is a shared asset that lives within the community through different sectors and across different generations. It is a recognition of interdependency and trust, a system to pay forward dependency and to strengthen a society's ability to go through hardships and stay prosperous against all odds.

**Commons** are often defined as any shared resource that is tended to or maintained by a community and is used subject to agreements or rules established by the same community. Public libraries and Community Supported Agriculture are examples of commons. As such, commons are living systems informed by the cultural, human, and environmental realities of their participants, as well as the environments where commoning takes place. :

**Egregores** became the talk of the DAO town in the summer of 2021. An egregore is an esoteric notion describing a distinct non-physical entity that arises from a collective group of people driven by a common goal. It is the group spirit that stems from decentralised collective intelligence. The whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. In Ancient Greece, egregores were summoned to watch over city states, but the concept spans many other religious and spiritual traditions as well, including Islam, Buddhism and the Hermeticists. Some consider Satoshi Nakamoto, Dogecoin, and some other cryptocurrencies egregores. : NFT collections around egregores have been launched, and it is possible that egregores themselves have become crypto memes.

: For a deeper dive, see Bollier, D., and S. Helfrich. *Free, Fair, and Alive: The Insurgent Power of the Commons*, Gabriola Island, CA: New Society Publishers, 2019.

: de Filippi, P., M. Mannan, W. Reijers. 'The Rise of Blockchain Egregores,' in *Defining Web3: A Guide to the New Cultural Economy*, Volume 89, Leeds: Emerald Publishing, 2014.

# PENNY RAFFERTY

Interviewed by Inte Gloerich on 22 October 2024

## PUTTING THE SOCIAL FIRST: TOWARD A THIRD WAVE OF DAOS

: <https://blackswan.support.v/>.

: Catlow, Ruth, and Penny Rafferty (eds). *Radical Friends: Decentralised Autonomous Organisations and the Arts*. Liverpool: Torque Editions, 2022.

*Penny Rafferty is a writer, critic, and visual theorist. Departing from her research and thinking, she has initiated and co-founded Black Swan, a Berlin-based collective pursuing horizontal and decentralised approaches to art-making through experimentation with the organisational form of a DAO. : Together with Ruth Catlow, she leads the Blockchain Lab at Serpentine Galleries in London, and, in 2022, edited Radical Friends: Decentralised Autonomous Organisations and the Arts. : The publication gathers diverse voices at the forefront of artistic and activist DAO experimentation. In our interview, Penny discussed key parts of DAO history and argued for the establishment of what she calls a third wave of DAOs in which the needs of communities and their situated perspectives are put first. Together with others, she is developing a protocol called Syn towards this goal. Additionally, we discussed the socio-political context in which artworld DAOs emerged, such as the precarity and austerity that characterise cultural sectors. Through years of disenfranchisement, people have lost access to the practical and imaginative tools to define their own realities. Penny shows that DAOs offer a way to practice alternative organisational forms, to explore collective practices, and to world new worlds together.*

### THE MANY THINGS A DAO CAN BE

**Inte Gloerich** As someone who has been thinking and working in the blockchain and DAO space myself, I often have to explain what a DAO is. This is not an easy thing, and I am curious how you go about this, for example, which metaphors you find useful.

**Penny Rafferty** I think a DAO, a decentralised autonomous organisation, is still being defined in terms of what it is, and that is also what drew me to them. It is a technology, a methodology, and a social, fluid structure.

I usually explain what a DAO is through a set of bullet points that go a little something like this:

- DAOs are blockchain-based code that implements the governance of an organisation;
- DAOs are tools that let us codify our value systems;
- DAOs are places to stake your resources for change and growth;
- DAOs are software frameworks that allow groups to make decisions and typically share or hold resources more horizontally;
- DAOs are alternate world-making devices;
- DAOs are micro-governance entities that come from connections between like-minded nodes.

And a few quotes from inspirational DAO-defining peers... :

- Ruth Catlow, “we can think of DAOs as peer-designed organisations built in code on blockchains and which are managed and operated by their members.”
- Rhea Myers, “DAOs are collaboration between code, capital, and community.”
- Kei Kreutler, “DAOs are executable manifestos.”

Many of those bullet points have been activated in the artworld or thought through in arts and technology settings. In part, this has to do with the emergence of new generations of art workers raised on intersectional feminist, queer, anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and anti-colonial critiques of the historical workplace they have inherited. In part, it also has to do with the need to survive in an unregulated market and a playing field in which the vast majority of workers are destined to remain precarious or pushed down by resource holders who do not see the relevance of their creative language, whether that is argued

: R. Catlow and R. Myers in Trouillot, T. et al. ‘What Can DAOs Do For You?’ *Frieze*, 13 November 2022, <https://www.frieze.com/article/what-can-daos-do-for-you>. See for more of Kei Kreutler’s descriptions Kreutler, K. ‘Eight Qualities of Decentralised Autonomous Organisations,’ in R. Catlow and P. Rafferty (eds), *Radical Friends: Decentralised Autonomous Organisations and the Arts*, Liverpool: Torque Editions, 2022, pp. 94–101.

through the lens of taste or socio-political alignment. In recent years, we have seen an explosion of political and social work that is now done in the arts – I do not wholeheartedly agree this is the right place for this work to be done, but I think it had to find shelter here due to a failing social system.

In essence, there are a million reasons why the worlds of art and culture have emerged as key protagonists in the story of DAO-thinking and making. This is also where I operate within my own research. My initial steps were through a project called Black Swan, which was conceived over many years of practising in the Berlin artworld, and through a strong discursive group of peers who criticised the infrastructure we operated within.

But before we discuss the specifics of Black Swan, it is also important to mention that we are now in the second wave of DAOs. The first wave was characterised by the genesis DAO model, called The DAO. All subsequent DAOs spawned from this initial experiment, although things have not remained the same over time. The DAO was originally meant to operate as a venture capital fund for crypto. In the eyes of its founders and the groups around them, the lack of centralised authority was a way to reduce costs and provide more control and access for the investors. In essence, they created a pool of money that could fund different projects from participating parties. Within this logic, there is already an understanding that you can do more together than alone. For example, pooling resources together with others reduces your personal risk. Plus, you get to collaborate with like-minded individuals in a space where people's dreams, purposes, and desires interact and contend with structural necessities. These are some of the core elements that second-wave DAOs experiment with, and that are visible in artworld DAOs as well.

Another important note to make is that DAOs can have many different outcomes, and they swing both ways politically, left to right, commercial to commons. This space is very complex and over the years of working with DAOs, I have found that they have as many pros as cons. For example, take the lack of

: For more on the historical lineages at play in DAO culture, see Kreutler, Kei. 'A Prehistory of DAOs: Cooperatives, Gaming Guilds, and the Networks to Come.' *Gnosis Guild*, 21 July 2021, [https://gnosisguild.mirror.xyz/t4F5rltMw4-mjpl\\_Zf5JQhElbDfQ2JR.VKAzEpanyxWIQ](https://gnosisguild.mirror.xyz/t4F5rltMw4-mjpl_Zf5JQhElbDfQ2JR.VKAzEpanyxWIQ).

centralised authority. This could mean a deregulated free market and the idealised model of an economic system without the intervention of a government or external authorities. Yet, the lack of centralised authority could also mean a grassroots, leftist community organisation that holds and distributes resources that have been pooled outside the reach of a fascist regime or in the absence of a functioning government. In both cases, blockchain ensures that a transaction will go through as long as all the set criteria are met. It is censorship-resistant in that sense. It ensures that no government or organisation can influence or alter transactions on the blockchain regardless of the amount of power they wield. This is radical for every political position.

## ARTWORLD DAOS

**IG** You immediately touched on many things that are so interesting. And maybe the first thing to dive deeper into is the connection between DAOs and the artworld. Artworld DAOs have a particular sort of positionality or reason to be within this socio-political history that you sketched. So what are artworld DAOs, and why is DAO experimentation important in the context of the artworld?

**PR** Artworld DAOs are exactly what they say they are: they are DAOs that have been manifested within the arts and technology sector or the cultural sector. What differentiates them from what usually comes out of the decentralised finance space is that, often, artworld DAOs try to bring about an environment that is conducive to placing culture before structure. They aim to implement a participatory design space, not just to perform a set of equations for voting and fund allocation, but also to perform situated research as art workers on questions regarding how work relations and funding processes in art and culture could be organised differently. This includes inquiries that span from the individual art worker or their local community to their broader networked, translocal, and international community, and it speaks to the tiered spaces of resources that come from the market, patrons, institutions,

etc. The terms and conditions of artworld DAOs reflect and feed into a lot of the cultural decision-making in this complex space.

Together with Ruth Catlow, I have been addressing similar questions at the Blockchain Lab of the Serpentine Galleries in London. Specifically, we are interested in understanding what the praxis of radical friends would be in terms of artworld DAOs. In my view, the technology is still not there to create a minimum viable living agenda for all the members connected to a DAO.

**IG** Why is that? What are you still missing, what is still up for further negotiation or experimentation?

**PR** Access to code is one crucial aspect. If you do not have access to code and coding skills, you can use a template with a set of rules that is already in place, or else you need the amount of wealth necessary to pay somebody to program, maintain, and upgrade a bespoke DAO continually. These participation conditions are why it is so difficult for people to get their hands on DAO technology and to begin to see how and for whom it works.

## TENSIONS BETWEEN DAOS AND THEIR SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXTS

**IG** What you are pointing to, I think, is the wider context of a socio-political reality that structures so much in life and then DAOs as an opportunity to create some cracks or to design something else, even if just temporarily. The tension between the conditions that are not easy to change or even capable of being changed from the bottom up and the potential for some sort of imaginative or prefigurative moment, a place to practice difference.

**PR** Yeah, definitely. It is important for people working with DAOs to recognise this particular moment in time as well. When *Radical Friends* came out, the world was a very different place.

In a certain sense, the artworld missed the moment to broker, invest, test, and distribute this technology for now. 2023 was the last moment when we could really have the energy to sit with these technologies – since then, so many urgencies have called our attention that there was no time left to tinker with a nascent technology. On top of that, budget cuts have created deficits that make it increasingly difficult to even begin to onboard people.

The arts sector has increasingly mobilised itself in recent years. There have been boycotts and protests not only regarding funding sources and working conditions but also concerning broader socio-political narratives. We need to recognise more broadly in all civic sectors that these global narratives are shifting alarmingly toward the right. Even when we do not have a far-right government in power – half the voters think we should – this is not a win, it is a divided community.

This shift not only leads to cuts in governmental funding for the arts but also structurally deteriorates the world – more than just art is at stake here, and cultural workers seem to understand this very well. Just yesterday, there was a strike in Berlin due to these funding cuts, and it has become almost a weekly occurrence across different sectors. There have been numerous cuts and instances of censorship; people have even lost their awards and jobs here in Germany because of petitions they have signed in support of Gaza. : This continual move to the right has fostered greater scarcity, precarity, and biased behavior, making the arts in many countries around the world extremely vulnerable to censorship both in public and private.

Currently, the only business model that appears to have survived these cuts is the market model, which shows little interest in the radical care and innovative work that was previously emerging in the art world. Right now, people lack the energy and time to conceptualise new systems for community organizing and participatory practices with civic goals. They are too busy fighting for the little that remains. Artists, I believe, desire to work within a different framework in which their own

: Brown, Rivkah. 'Germany Ties Cultural Funding to Israel Allegiance.' *Novara Media*, 7 November 2024, <https://novaramedia.com/2024/11/07/germany-ties-cultural-funding-to-israel-allegiance/>.



protocols and autonomy remain intact. They reject austerity policies and censorship. However, it is challenging to continue to have faith that such futures can materialise. That said, I consider myself an optimist. I firmly believe that the pushback we see today is a sign that the progressive left is gaining traction. We find ourselves in literal and cultural war zones, underscoring the critical need to prioritize social concerns. It is essential to focus not only on tools but also on laws, civics, and ethics.

**IG** The way you oscillate between critique and optimism connects with my own trajectory as well. A lot of my research is on the more mainstream blockchain applications and narratives, and I write critically about many things that are happening there. I spent years diving into them and it is easy to get jaded. But taking the time to look into the artworld DAO scene gave me hope. Occupying the space between knowing that things are very bad and, at the same time, also finding moments to connect and do things together is really important.

**PR** And it is so important to take time to delve into that mainstream space as well. When I first came into contact with DAOs and blockchain, they were considered a fringe, weird, cryptic, outlier space. Many people I spoke to over those initial years did not believe that this space would ever create structural change in society. It is a continual problem that we do not give ourselves the time and space to be involved in these emergent conversations as they are happening. It is so critically important to involve oneself in these uncomfortable moments when technologies are developing and failing.

I recently read Naomi Klein's new book, *Doppelganger*, in which she uses the term shadowlands to refer to those parts of our personal and collective selves that operate and profit outside of full view. I do not mean to say that we work in the shadowlands, but many crypto, blockchain, and DAO models are developed in a particular shadow of everyday infrastructures. However, what is in the shadows is not necessarily less powerful than an already existing civic governance

: Klein, Naomi.  
*Doppelganger: A Trip into  
the Mirror World*. New  
York: Farrar, Straus and  
Giroux, 2023.

infrastructure, especially at a moment when faith in those traditional structures is waning, and it becomes increasingly clear that they can be influenced based on the whims and desires of the powerful. Simultaneously, it is clear how inspiring these new technologies can be to those in power. Take for example the Russian government, which is exploring the idea of a digital ruble – a central bank digital currency (CBDC). Such a currency is distinct from cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin and Ethereum because its control and infrastructures are centralised. The digital ruble is designed to be a state-backed electronic money, issued and managed by the Russian Central Bank.

## THE FUTURE OF DAOS

**IG** What is your vision for the future of DAOs? Are they tactical, momentary, small spaces that are situated and that allow people to practice different ways of being but only last for however long they last, or are they tools for working on infrastructural and broader societal changes?

**PR** This is a good question that me and Ruth have been battling with since publishing *Radical Friends* – what is our hope for DAOs? – and some months feel more fruitful than others. Together, we have been developing a protocol or a process called Syn, which, in a sense, encapsulates our hope for what DAOs will become. We hope that a kind of third wave of decentralised autonomous organisation can be created that has a ‘social first’ focus within the process of tool development. A new type of DAO that explicitly serves and respects the needs of physical spaces and communities as they are situated in a particular place. In a sense, we are starting to imagine DAOs as techno-social tooling. With Syn, we are working on a methodology borrowed and remixed from artist collective Omsk Social Club called Real Game Play : to test and accelerate the potential of alternative cycles of engagement with DAO principles.

Through Real Game Play, we endeavour to test a new

: Omsk Social Club  
presentation about Real  
Game Play at The  
Influencers festival 2018:  
<https://www.cccb.org/en/activities/file/the-influencers-2018/229575>.

translocal, interdependent model of art-making. Our goal is to create greater autonomy in cultural decision-making and to generate livelihoods for practitioners. Instead of focusing solely on visual commodities within the realm of visual art, we seek to develop experimental social care, encourage radical dialogues, and establish interdisciplinary infrastructures and governance models. We believe the artworld is an ideal environment to explore these ideas with diverse audiences that challenge norms, ask difficult questions, and provide meaningful critiques. Ultimately, the objective is to create models that transcend the boundaries of the artworld and extend into civic and community spaces more broadly. In this context, Syn serves as a handbook or playbook that has a social component: it aims to establish a minimum viable living agenda for all its members. It acts as a guide for bringing together communities and addressing their challenges. It is a callback to the concept of *Radical Friends* and serves as a proposition for future collaboration.

## WORLD-MAKING STORIES

**IG** I have heard members of Black Swan describe its processes as “blockchain thinking without the technology” or paper prototyping a DAO. : Is Syn also like that? Trying to think through the logics of the technology without actually building the technical systems themselves?

**PR** Black Swan had to take a paper prototyping approach very early on because of the way Black Swan was initially incubated through Kunst-Werke, which is an Institute for Contemporary Art here in Berlin. : In 2018, they commissioned me to write a proposition of how resources could be distributed to art workers in a different way from how they have always been distributed. They offered the medium of an essay for this proposition, and so, rather than programming a DAO or roleplaying its method, this was the medium through which I wrote Black Swan DAO.

To a certain extent, paper prototyping is about arguing that you can think through the processes of these new and emerging

: See e.g., Black Swan.  
'CTM 2022: Prototyping  
Sonic Institutions.'  
*YouTube video*. 30  
January 2022, <https://youtu.be/DKb9za47twU?t=685>.

: Rafferty, Penny. 'A  
Speculative White Paper  
on the Aesthetics of a  
Black Swan World.'  
*REALTY*, Berlin: KW  
Institute for Contemporary  
Art, 2018, [https://www.kw-berlin.de/files/REALTY\\_Penny\\_Rafferty\\_EN.pdf](https://www.kw-berlin.de/files/REALTY_Penny_Rafferty_EN.pdf).

technologies like DAOs without necessarily using the technology. It is about play: is the way that a child plays and uses a children's kitchen unit to fry eggs, chop vegetables, etc. any less authentic to the experiences of an adult in front of an oven frying an egg? Yes, the materiality is different, but they learn similar skills and reflections. And what myself and Ruth have tried to broker is that with DAOs you do not have to have access to the black box to begin to think through the technology's logics.

**IG** How do play and practices like Live Action Role Playing (LARPing) and storytelling connect to DAOs and the reimagination of what the social realities around us could be like?

**PR** They relate to how disenfranchised people often use folklore as a medium to archive their own political, personal stories as manifestations for their future generations. Having grown up in the UK during and after the Thatcher government shapes my view on this. This government continually disenfranchised people, particularly working-class people, and white and Black migrant communities. It continually told them that they could not believe, could not envisage, could not tell other stories. At the end of the day, reality is a story that is told to us. Reality is a position that we inherit, it is a position that is written and upheld by authorities who then also remove from marginalised communities the tools to write their own realities. They squeeze out the time, energy, and desire it takes to get involved in writing reality. For me, what makes DAOs exciting tools for worlding practices is that a DAO is like a micro-society where governance structures and social structures are lore. DAOs allow people in closed, private spaces to determine their wants and desires and to recognise in an accelerated way what their decisions do and create.

This is something that is often missing in larger society. Take, for example, the Brexit referendum, which was the result of a governance structure that created a moment in which the whole of society could vote on a world-changing narrative. This

narrative took years and years to take shape, but it all culminated in this one vote. Now that I think of it, maybe the Brexit referendum is a good metaphor for voting in DAOs as you asked me at the beginning of this interview. During the run-up to the referendum, you saw people who had social or cultural clout that would weigh in and try to sway the vote. The referendum was not just about a topic on an agenda that people voted for. There were all these subsequent forces that were trying to play the game, play the model, break it, and push it into a different direction. It became a hyperobject at a certain moment, so big that it is never visible in its entirety and takes on its own agenda. :

: For more on hyperobjects, see Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

**IG** Brexit as a metaphor for DAO voting! It has all the elements like the world-building narratives, the governance structures, the social moment of the vote...

**PR** Yeah, and with DAO voting, you fill in about 20 characters of text, but everyone reading those 20 characters imagines a different 'Brexit' based on that.

To zoom out a bit, I think these are all skills that we have to learn regarding participatory design and alternate reality games. Even people with the best intentions can mess up entirely surrounding a proposition – not that Brexit falls into this category. Conversely, a terrible idea can also come up against such forceful pressure that it has to remodel itself to become more ethical, for example. By putting these things into the decision-making agenda of a DAO, and going through cycles of feedback, the moments when reality is being made collectively become more tangible.

## BLACK SWAN DAO AS A TRAVELLING FRAMEWORK

**IG** Could you take me into the reality of Black Swan? What is it like to participate in this DAO?

**PR** Well, Black Swan officially ended in 2023. I think the next moment of Black Swan would have been to commit to code

instead of remaining a purely speculative design model, but unfortunately, the economic footholds to be able to do that fell away.

**IG** In terms of financing projects, where did value come from in Black Swan when it was still running?

**PR** Every project was commissioned by a cultural institution. Each artwork was basically a module with its own budget and with specific people working on it. I was there from the beginning to the end, but other people stuck around for a couple of years and moved on. I am still working with several people, like Laura Lotti and Cem Dagdelen, who also play a big role in Syn, and many other people who I met along the journey.

What Black Swan managed to do over the years was to make apparent the many things a DAO could be, like the list of bullet points I shared at the beginning. At some point, these visions of what Black Swan could be started to diverge between the main stewards of the project. I can only speak to my perspective, of course. What I was interested in with Black Swan was understanding whether a DAO could really be a fully decentralised and autonomous organisation. I was interested in creating a horizontal organisation where authority and leadership could be continually dissolved and reinstated. My central question was: would it be possible for Black Swan to be entirely passed over to another community – to remove the generational hierarchy between projects? Or would it always need to be maintained and held by one of those original core stewards?

**IG** So as a sort of framework that could work in different contexts?

**PR** Yeah, exactly.

I cut my teeth within political cooperatives, solidarity groups, and so forth. So I was very aware of of particular players holding power and of power hierarchies existing, even if such a

power hierarchy is given shape as part of a cooperative spirit. So the question is, can such a powerful player remove itself and can the community maintain its robust manifesto, its ethics, its drive, its network? I have always been fascinated with the communal experience in relation to charismatic leadership. Can charismatic leadership be dissolved into a shared community ideology, or does it always have to be held and maintained by a charismatic leader, even if that leader is acting in support of the community?

**IG** So within your vision for Black Swan – in which it would travel to other communities – how would it deal with the potential that these communities have other needs or other value systems? Would certain values remain stable or could they change for each community?

**PR** For me the love of DAOs, the love of chaos, the love of change, is that they should be mutable, not just to different communities, but also over time. : Different times need different forms of energy put into the community. There are moments where you can draw back and begin to tinker with the spreadsheet of community organisation, and then there are moments where you have to be on the street, with a sign of what that community means, expects, and demands.

What Black Swan taught me towards that end is my own mortality as a community actor. It became very apparent to me that I was in the wrong room. And sometimes, one does not have the energy to redecorate that room. Because other people also make decisions about the interior. There is a limit to the amount of time, energy, and hope you can put into it. You have to let it go sometimes, and that ages you because you see something being born and die. But then you also get to make the journey to other rooms.

## MUTABILITY AND IMMUTABILITY

**IG** I always find it interesting to hear the word mutable being applied to DAOs. On the one hand, I completely understand why

: For more on Penny's thoughts on chaos and mutability in relation to DAOs, see Rafferty, Penny. 'The Reappropriation of Life and the Living – A Cosmic Battleground,' in *Radical Friends: Decentralised Autonomous Organisations and the Arts*, Liverpool: Torque Editions, 2022, pp. 102-114.

it is used in the context of community processes that are always changing and need to stay flexible, but on the other hand, blockchain itself is often talked about as *immutable*. That is an interesting tension. What is it about DAOs that makes you use the word 'mutability' specifically?

**PR** Yes, there is this seeming contradiction between blockchain and DAOs in terms of immutability and mutability. I would like to address this in relation to people's participation in communities. There are certain things that you are mutable about, but then there are also certain things that are immutable in your very core. Blockchain is the immutable part of you that you will not change regardless of what is happening around you. This part contains your beliefs, your very essence. No matter what is politically, economically, or socially happening around you, you will not stop the transactions of your beliefs. The mutable part is the part that you can change based on what is happening around you. For example, I think it is really important to celebrate when people change their minds. We tend to think about that in terms of winning and losing. If you change somebody's mind, it is considered a win. But actually, if you change somebody's mind, you have opened up their horizon, and they have allowed you to do so. It is vulnerability, it is extremely brave, it is welcoming. And for me, that is why DAOs are mutable. You can set off in one course of action, and through material and social developments, that course of action can change. It can turn into a forked course of action, or it can strengthen and gain complexity, or it can turn into an exit or ending – which is what happened in the case of Black Swan – all of which are important chapters.

**IG** Socially, there is such a need to allow ourselves to be mutable, to welcome mutability. This was one of the themes that is addressed in *Radical Friends* that gave me hope. That we can try and we can try together. We can learn and get somewhere together. Maybe it is not where we intended to go, but it is a process, it is change, and it keeps going and bringing us to new places.



I see that we're almost at the end of our time, and I wanted to ask if there is anything that you wanted to add before we wrap up.

**PR** I am thinking of this quote from The Invisible Committee's book called *Now*. Perhaps The Invisible Committee would think it is almost a bastardisation to use it in the context of DAOs, but it speaks to being present with others at a particular moment and a particular place. For instance, when you are in a protest and you look to the person to your left and the person to your right, you recognise the shared company you are in. There is something that occurs in your body and in your mind and you feel fulfilled and vulnerable – a kind of vulnerability that can rely on the understanding of a shared belief. So this is where I strive to find myself at the moment. A translocal emotional space that is also place-based and community-based – my hope is it will be found in the third wave of DAOs.

“The organized riot is capable of producing what this society cannot create: lively and irreversible bonds. Those who dwell on images of violence miss everything that’s involved in the fact of taking the risk together of breaking, of tagging, of confronting the cops. One never comes out of one’s first riot unchanged. It’s this positivity of the riot that the spectators prefer not to see and that frightens them more deeply than the damage, the charges and counter-charges. In the riot there is a production and affirmation of *friendships*, a focused configuration of the world, clear possibilities of action, means close at hand. The situation has a form and one can move within it.” :

: The Invisible Committee.  
2017. *Now*. Cambridge,  
MA: MIT Press. p. 14.



# ERIK BORDELEAU

Interviewed by Inte Glerich on 24 October 2024

## DREAMING IS, AFTER ALL, ANOTHER FORM OF PLANNING

: <https://beedao.zku-berlin.org/>.

: <https://www.thesphere.as/>.

*Erik Bordeleau is a philosopher, fugitive planner, curator, and media theorist. He is a researcher at NOVA University in Lisbon and an affiliated researcher at the Art, Business, and Culture Center of Stockholm School of Economics. He contributed to the Beeholders / BeeDAO project : by the Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik in Berlin (presented at Documenta 15) as a web3 and speculative designer. In collaboration with Saloranta & DeVlyder, he co-founded The Sphere, : a web3 research-creation project that explores new ecologies of funding to develop a regenerative commons for the performing arts. In our conversation, we discussed how blockchain opened up money and accounting as spaces for creativity and imagination. With The Sphere, DAO technology becomes a way to bring together the audience and the creators into new choreographies of value, experimenting with the idea of digital self-collecting as live art. He emphasises how DAOs involve affective swirls or 'vibes' that cannot be fully expressed through governance tools like tokens and smart contracts. Finally, he shares his experiences with LARPs, which he thinks are a great way to reclaim the capacity to imagine the kind of futures we want.*

### “THE MOST SACRED ART IS THE MAKING OF A TREASURY”

**Inte Glerich** What a blockchain or a DAO is can be difficult to explain. How do you go about doing that. Do you use metaphors or examples?

**Erik Bordeleau** The blockchain and DAO space attracts commoners of different kinds, but also (and mostly) libertarians and hypercapitalists. All these people are interested in forming

translocal, digital tribes that can be facilitated through the technology. It is an interesting coming together of different forces in the name of greater autonomy and the decentralisation of the power currently held in platform capitalism. In that sense, I like the expression “web3” because it conveys a self-organising intent. The story goes: web2 has been co-opted by platform capitalism, and web3 is an attempt at reclaiming part of the cypherpunk dream of the internet culture of the late 90s. Web3 conveys that autonomist vibe, and I guess that is always a good place from which to start.

Yet, I feel the expression ‘DAO’ focuses too much on the technological or infrastructural aspect of organising, especially so when it comes to art collectives. With the Sphere, our research-creation experiment to explore new ecologies of funding and build regenerative commons for the performing arts, we like to think in terms of a ‘digital soul.’ : A soul here is, among many things, an organisational principle. It harbours *recursive* powers, i.e. a certain kind of consistency through self-reflexivity, but also *precursive* powers, i.e. a certain sense of shared potentiality, of what becomes possible when we risk and speculate together. All in all, I like the definition suggested by Nathan Schneider, from the Platform coop movement: a DAO is “an operating system for the next generation of human institutions.” :

**IG** With all these different ideologies being attracted to and acting within this space, how do you protect your own use of DAO technology from being pulled in directions that you do not agree with?

**EB** Early on, people used to talk about ‘the internet of value’ to describe blockchain. This is quite a literal description: blockchain indeed allows for new forms of value to be defined, exchanged, and circulated. Its invention opened up a whole new era for monetary experimentation. I do not think we can do much to prevent people we disagree with to make use of the technology. If anything, I wish the traditional left had more of an appetite for the infrastructuring of digital commons.

: See *Digital Soul-Searching: The Sphere Book*, freely available on The Sphere’s *Anarchiving Game* Decentralised Application: <https://anarchiving.thesphere.as/?fragment=37>.

: Schneider, Nathan. ‘Foreword: Practice Upwards,’ in R. Catlow and P. Rafferty (eds), *Radical Friends: Decentralised Autonomous Organisations and the Arts*, Liverpool: Torque Editions, 2022, p. 23.

Concretely speaking, a DAO is a way to create an online treasury with maximum flexibility in terms of defining the rules of governance. In that vein, I like to think of DAOs as experiments in the art of building treasuries. A treasury is not a bank just yet; it is a smaller yet consequent pooling of resources. Last year, Catharine Cary, performance artist and The Sphere's beloved venture philanthropist, sent me a picture from a castle somewhere in France. It said (in Latin): "The most sacred art is the making of a treasury." That became a stepping stone of my intervention for the event I co-organised with Andrea Leiter from the Sovereign Nature Initiative : called *Treasuries for Planetary Survival*, which took place in Amsterdam and you also contributed to. : I love how conceiving of the making of a treasury as a somehow sacred activity brings about a new dignity to the necessary but often overlooked art of accounting.

: <http://sovereignnature.com/>.

: <https://ias.uva.nl/content/events/2023/11/workshop-treasuries-for-planetary-survival.html>.

## TRANSFORMING THE GRANT-WRITING GAME

**EB** These days, in Europe especially, we live under a 'grant capitalism' regime. Academics, artists, non-profit organisations, everyone writes grants! That is the way that we can access capital in Europe. Exploring the DAO space has made me more conscious of the actual conditions by which we engage with capital. Good old Marxist theory of value talks in general terms about capitalism, but it is too comfortable with the critical superiority it has established for itself (in academic circles, at least) and too vague about how to proceed otherwise. And so, early on in my engagement with the DAO space, and as a tongue-in-cheek way to highlight the peculiar challenge of dealing with treasuries, accounting, and money in a new way, I started to say that, after trying to *save the common of communism* (which is the title of a book I published in 2014), : perhaps we should start trying to *save capital from capitalism!*

: Bordeleau, Erik. *Comment Sauver le Commun du Communisme?* Montréal: Le Quartanier, 2024.

**IG** In an article about The Sphere in *Radical Friends*, you wrote: "At the speculative end of the day, [The Sphere's creators] just got tired of writing endless grants and working for peanuts. So they decided, alongside many, many other people, to re-write

the inner code of capital, and to initiate new ecologies of funding for the arts.” : Could you make this a little bit more concrete? How can DAOs contribute to the move beyond this grant-writing mill that we are all stuck in?

**EB** The whole blockchain experiment forces one to deal with the multi-faceted question of accounting, which carries a peculiar form of collective self-responsibility. There is this saying that “there are two things that are certain in life: you die, and you pay taxes.” One way to read it is to say that society is, at least in part, held together by accounting structures. What is so interesting about blockchain is that we can define new forms of accounting. This ‘accounting otherwise’ means that you value things differently and that you create the infrastructure for holding value differently.

With regard to grant writing *per se*, The Sphere was funded to explore new modes of funding for the arts through a grant from the European Union. It is kind of paradoxical, but it also shows that the State is looking for ways to renew its own mode of functioning. Strategically speaking, writing grants is a memetic, predatory game. To be successful, one needs to at least partly “see like a state,” as the anarchist anthropologist James C. Scott would put it. : You need to read the codes and the desires of the funding body you are addressing.

With The Sphere, we gradually started playing with the German idea of *Staatskunst*, which means art that is funded by the state and but can also refer to the art of statecraft. For us, the idea of *Staatskunst* became a rallying point to dare to change the rules of funding allocation as a whole. This rapidly translated into a question of ecosystem design. It might sound very utopian, but I believe it is the only way to go when it comes to “re-writing the code of capital.” You need to change the actual rules of the game in order to challenge the way capitalism flattens all types of value into the singular money form we know today.

**IG** The way you got funded by the EU to transform funding

: “I AM A DIGITAL SOUL: The Sphere for Artworld DAOs,” in Ruth Catlow and Penny Rafferty (eds), *Radical Friends: Decentralised Autonomous Organisations and the Arts*, Liverpool: Torque Editions, 2022, pp. 291–92.

: Scott, James C. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

itself reminds me of something I heard recently, where a funder told their grant recipients: “We are empowering you to seek financial independence from us.” This phrasing is so perfectly neoliberal! In the context of repeated budget cuts, these funders are finding themselves in trouble as well, and they are keen to offload certain responsibilities, which reinforces individualising logics and widespread precarity in the cultural sector.

**EB** Absolutely. We got that grant because we read their dream of offloading responsibility very well, and we said, “Hey, we’re going to create a system that allows you to do just that.” Bureaucracies dream as well, as David Graeber puts it in *The Utopia of Rules* (laughs). :

: Graeber, David. *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*, New York: Melville House, 2015.

Whatever may happen in the future in the crypto space, blockchain made people aware of what it takes to play the money game. To challenge finance, you need to propose new types of attractors for new collective behaviours. Oftentimes, DAOs just declare that they are going to be horizontal and transparent. But then what? People spend endless amounts of time on Discord channels or on Telegram, but if there is no clear sense of the type of future you are aiming for together, it quickly becomes very noisy and swampy.

## **BETWEEN DESIGNING INCENTIVES AND ACCOUNTING FOR VIBES**

**IG** There is a balancing act at stake here. On the one hand, you can design for certain uses, nudge people, and incentivise them to perform certain behaviours. On the other hand, you want to imagine futures together with a group of people and debate and iterate on these shared visions in detail. You can only do this well with a limited amount of people. This means that there is a tension between doing the hard work of imagining and creating shared commitment to particular visions of the future versus trying to code particular rules of engagement and incentives that attract certain behaviours so that a system can work on a bigger scale. If we want to achieve that sort of scale, what

happens to the transformative imaginative power of working together, in close relationship with others, on these systems?

**EB** This is super relevant. In the beginning of The Sphere, we had a small group of people who strategised and imagined another funding ecology. We called this core team 'the inner sphere.' Creating and nurturing this kind of affinity is very important in a project like this. We then brought in the larger community of circus aficionados – The Sphere worked with circus artists specifically for its initial karmic funding cycle – and we created a quadratic voting system in which the community performs a process of collective curation. To keep things exciting and relevant for them, they were brought in at specific moments in the general process. I like to think of this post-capitalist participatory design as a kind of *choreography of value*.

There is a lot of wishful thinking when it comes to decentralisation and making things transparent with blockchain technology. I believe that governance for the sake of governance is a total dead end. It is not an appealing prospect for most people. At the beginning of the DAO craze, there was a lot of enthusiasm for the idea that we could govern ourselves differently, but as David Rudder, a famous singer from Trinidad, sings: "How we vote is not how we party!" This is fundamental because many DAOs pride themselves on the degree of participation and engagement of their members. But engagement and participation do not only boil down to voting. And this is why I am really proud of what we did with The Sphere. Working with artists, you get to appreciate what does not get formalised into code, into voting procedures, into all these things that make up official governance. You get to appreciate the conditions of collective emergence, shared metastability, the 'vibe' or sense of collective momentum that makes it all worth it. Vibes are not fully translatable into metrics of engagement, as we well know. And humans seem, to this day, very good at escaping these metrics. What I learned from building DAOs is that the line of flight really should come first. Accounting and formalised structures are necessary but always



need to be kept to a certain functional minimum instead of becoming the main focus.

**IG** Can a DAO be designed to allow space for the things that cannot be captured in a token or a protocol?

**EB** Yes, I think DAOs can be designed for that. It is a matter of valorising processes rather than finished products. Above all, processes of co-learning need to be valorised. Co-learning happens in all kinds of ways. When you create favourable conditions for co-learning in a DAO, you already solve a large part of the issue of how to align people together.

And on a more zoomed-out level, blockchain reveals the whole question of funding in a new light. For instance, normally, you keep art and money separate. You get money to do something that expresses itself beyond money. With blockchain, it is as if we turn money into an expressive medium itself. This is a peculiar ad-venture, a peculiar wager, but it reveals what I like to call with Felix Guattari the 'positive unconscious' that people carry when it comes to funding, finance, and money. Fundamentally, money is a technology for coordination at scale. Experimenting with blockchain as a medium made me more aware of the way society is holding on to financial structures and protocols that we may not want anymore.

## **THE SPHERE DAO: NEW FUNDING ECOLOGIES FOR LIVE ART**

**IG** You already started talking a little bit about The Sphere, and maybe now is a good moment to describe it in a bit more detail.

**EB** Fundamentally, The Sphere is a research-creation project that addresses the problem of precarity in the arts within the late neoliberal context in which there is ever less funding for the arts while there are ever more artists. I like to describe what we are doing in terms of 'the weirding of art and value flows,' meaning that it is not just about getting more money for making more art but about redefining our relation to funding in

itself. Funding as an art form, so to speak.

It has been quite a crazy adventure. We had the opportunity to work with an already existing network of circus artists, which is an immense privilege and fits particularly well with what web3 is about. In Silicon Valley's platform capitalism model, there is this mantra: 'Build it and they will come.' It is a quote from the movie *Field of Dreams* from 1989, in which a farmer from Wisconsin, played by Kevin Costner, receives a vision in his dream to build a whole baseball field in the middle of nowhere. It is a perfect tale of how one needs to believe in one's dreams... "Build it and they will come" works for platform capitalism because you need to spend time and money building an infrastructure capable of dealing with millions of people before there is even one customer at the gate. But things are quite different with web3. Things need to be able to scale, sure, but something else is at play as well. In the case of the circus artists, they did not necessarily need a DAO to organise themselves; they were already doing that. But what if we could augment the powers of this already existing collective? This is the spirit in which we approached the whole thing.

The circus world is a tight-knit network of people. Because of the type of risk the performance of circus acts involves, you need to be able to rely on one another. However, even though physical, existential risk is the bread and butter of these artists, the artists themselves do not talk about circus acts as risk-taking practices. Rather, they envisage it as a practice based on *trust*. I love to think of the slow weaving of these highly qualified relations of trust as an art of *mutual encryption*. Circus and the arts more generally, grow at the speed of trust. You cannot outsource that component to a trustless blockchain. What matters most is how to make sure trust-building practices are nurtured and sheltered.

By introducing blockchain and DAO technology to this space, a different type of risk-taking and speculating together was manifested. This combination of bodies and code is super interesting to me. This is where the weirding of art and value

flows happen.

**IG** How does The Sphere support what these circus artists are doing or what they need?

**EB** The grant proposal we wrote promised that we would create a new platform that would protect intellectual property better through blockchain technology. The first question we had to deal with was what intellectual property is when it comes to circus or performing arts. With other arts, like music or literature, this is easier to pinpoint. But when it comes to gestures and choreographies, it becomes kind of tricky. Long story short, the terms of the problem changed fundamentally when we started to try to solve the problem. We evolved to a point where, instead of protecting existing works, we aim to generate a nurturing ecosystem in which to facilitate the creation of derivative lineages, i.e. versions of works related to one another. We wanted to protect – and, to a certain extent, explicate – the entanglement of artworks with one another rather than protect one original artwork *per se*. We called the whole process the karmic funding cycle.

We were inspired by Primavera de Filippi, who created a blockchain artwork called Plantoid. The artwork collects Bitcoin donations, and when it reaches a certain funding threshold, it ‘automatically’ commissions another artist to make a new version of itself. We basically adapted this model for live performances. The general idea is that each time The Sphere’s common pool reaches 10.000 EUR, it triggers an open call to finance a new performance.

As part of the karmic funding cycle, we ended up incubating five performances in total (two seed performances and three derivatives). More than 500 people participated in the two rounds of quadratic voting to determine which performances would be selected as seed performances, and which versioning propositions would be financed with the money we collected during the karmic funding campaign. This whole funding cycle is moved by a spirit of self-organisation and powered by an ethos

of speculative generosity. Ideally, this mode of production offers a way to reduce bureaucracy. Bureaucracy proliferates where trust is eliminated from the system. Less trust means more bureaucracy. And more bureaucracy means that there is less money for art. We do not pretend to replace the whole system of financing in the arts, but it is important to create alternatives and to live by their consequences.

## FROM GRANT WRITING TO WRITING LOVE LETTERS

**IG** I want to talk a bit more about the kinds of values that are central in The Sphere. For example, I noticed on The Sphere's website that you are interested in the idea of co-ownership. How does The Sphere understand a value like co-ownership?

**EB** This gets to the point of how much you can change with a DAO or with a blockchain. When an artist creates a work, it is going to circulate within a circuit of established venues that have their established ways of organising. How much money goes to the artists and how much goes to the venues, this type of stuff. So, the question is, how much of that can be replaced or supplemented with our little off-the-cuff infrastructure? In the end, we decided to stay minimal, meaning that the ownership of the work itself (the intellectual property) remains entirely with the artist.

Instead, we put our energy into working on the ethical and (in)formal conditions of how works participate in an upcoming derivative lineage. How can an artist prepare their work for future iterations by other artists? This is the core question at the heart of what we call the anarchiving process. The source code of each performance was addressed through a protocol we called 'love letters.' A seed performer writes a publicly available love letter to unknown future artists, and future artists interested in creating a version of the seed work write a love letter back to the seed artist. The selection process involves the whole Sphere community. This playful and relatively minor tweak was most welcomed by the artists. The love letter is a way of transmitting an intent and a commitment.

It offered an interesting medium through which to rethink the funding ecosystem as a whole. Instead of reading and writing dry grant applications, everyone involved in The Sphere's community got to engage with these passionate expressions of interest. The current grant system is optimised for anonymity to facilitate the impartial distribution of funding. In the case of The Sphere, it is the opposite; it is extremely personalised! The Sphere's model is not meant to replace the current anonymous jury of peers model; it is a complementary alternative that has the advantage of allowing a new kind of participation in the production, the curation, and eventually, the collecting process for the whole circus community. Indeed, our key question throughout the whole experiment was: *what if we could collect live art?*

## THE POWER OF NARRATIVES AND IMAGINATION

**EB** This system of writing and voting on love letters is one component of the system, but we also thought about how to approach the governance of The Sphere ecosystem as a whole. Central in this part of the research process was a workshop called *We Draw a Magic Circle and Grow at the Speed of Trust*. This workshop was organised at a moment of great tension within the core group of The Sphere. Unfortunately, even though the whole project is phrased as a commons-oriented economy in becoming, some people could not help but approach the NFT craze as a way to generate 'free money.' But The Sphere is more about supporting a live art network than about owning a single piece of digital art. So, when The Sphere did not live up to the NFT promise, some people thought we had to adapt our proposition to the NFT market and go more commercial. Now, I am obviously not against bringing more money into the Sphere's ecosystem; it is one of the initial objectives of the whole adventure. But to what extent should this be done at the expense of the invention of an alternative ecosystem and way of involving the community? The workshop addressed the issue of protecting the spirit of the project – the digital soul of The Sphere – amid these tensions. Instead of automated rules, there was a series of (difficult) discussions

: The Sphere. "We Draw a Magic Circle and Grow at the Speed of Trust – Executive Overview. Youtube video, 22 November 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8yL9na7DYJU&list=PLAikxyDehQwNNWvI9ujjaPIVCSXUBahx>.

about where the project should go next. It was not easy to express and formalise what is actually at play in this whole ecosystem. We managed, but it was hard.

**IG** So, the power of the NFT craze narrative took hold even within your own ranks. The story was that with NFTs, we can all be money-making artists, which sounds a bit like a new rendition of the social media story of a decade ago that told us that everyone can be famous. Every time there is a new technology, it seems that we get caught up in these powerful narratives. How do you protect your community against the pull of these narratives, especially as the community starts to grow?

**EB** Social media has generated a new type of persona that we did not know before: the influencer. This is a new value proposition, a new way of making money on the internet. In the case of art and NFTs, the discourse for The Sphere has always been very clear: NFTs allow you to collect art differently. The pitch for the karmic funding cycle was about collecting live art, which otherwise is not collectable. With this ecosystem – which includes NFTs – it becomes possible to collect live art, not just a single performance, but generative lineages of performances that are artistically and financially entangled with one another.

I think that NFTs do allow for a new class of collectors to emerge. Substack works with subscriptions, which is a way to directly support an artist, writer, or thinker you like. In the case of The Sphere, one could say you need a collective to collect live art. The question is how you manifest the financial powers of that collective. This is where NFTs become interesting. It becomes a symbolic object that allows the community to manifest itself. It is a bit like chaos magick: you need a sigil, a token, something that catalyses and represents the power of a collective externally in the form of a financial sign. This is a narrative or choreographic challenge, something that can potentially trigger a virtuous circle. It is a way for the public to manifest its interest in a work, maybe even before it exists. Instead of buying a ticket to a festival to see a performance, an

audience member could say, “I would like to see this artwork exist” and then invest ahead of time. This is a model that the Berlin Circus Festival, a core partner of the Sphere that has been with us since the very beginning, is currently developing. Maybe you do not really need blockchain for that in the end, but that is another question...

**IG** Well, now that you mention this... Is blockchain more of an imaginative tool that is perhaps better not taken too literally in practice, or is it a technical tool for the actual creation of new infrastructures?

**EB** The modern understanding of something that is said to be ‘imaginary’ is that it is not real. This is a very limited view, in my opinion. We can clearly see the power of narratives and imagination at work in the crypto and blockchain space. Imagination makes things come into being. Part of the DAO dreamscape is about imagining effective organisational powers that work translocally, as Ruth Catlow likes to describe it. Your question makes me think of what the financial theorist Martin Koning says about surplus value and profits: “Profits need to be imagined before they can be reaped.” : I guess it is all about the degree of effectivity one grants to the idea of imagination...

: Konings, Martijn. *Capital and Time: For a New Critique of Liberal Reason*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018.

**IG** This sounds like you are referring to Cornelius Castoriadis, who argues that the imagination has a radical capacity to create reality. : I agree, that is such an important point to make clear about the imagination. It is consequential and, therefore deserves serious attention!

: Castoriadis, Cornelius. *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998.

## BELONGING-IN-BECOMING WITH OTHERS

**IG** Earlier, you discussed the different sorts of stakeholders in the Sphere, including collectors, audience members, the artists themselves, etc. How do these different members of the community belong to each other? You sometimes use the notion of belonging-in-becoming, can you explain what you mean by this?

**EB** Wealth is a collective thing, and blockchain has triggered the imagination of new collective formations, digital tribes, etc. This is less about the greater social contract and more about intensifying the affinities between certain groups of people and supporting them financially.

I have always been interested in the question of community. I wrote a book on how to activate the transindividual, the relational and individuating powers at the core of the formation of commons. It is not enough to just claim the commons against capital. You need to choreograph, you need to set attractors, and you need to facilitate the emergence of all sorts of movements within that ensemble that you have generated. That is why I like the expression of belonging-in-becoming. It is a progressive proposition. It is not just about sharing the same provenance, the same identity, the same historical path. It is about setting a goal and feeling how we move together towards that aim.

It is interesting to see how some people on the left react to the possibility of creating new collective treasuries. Wealth is a tricky issue. There is a comfort in staying in a critical position with regard to existing games of wealth, preferring to criticise them from the outside rather than engaging in alternatives. I believe that we need to experiment with different forms and configurations. We cannot just stay on the critical shore. It makes a huge difference in the way that we conceive of value and communities.

## THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN LARPING AND DAOS

**IG** You mentioned the idea of playfulness a few times. Play, playfulness, and practices like Live Action Role Play (LARPs) are recurring themes around DAOs. Why is this?

**EB** Play is absolutely fundamental for The Sphere. Playfulness has a generative power. Something happens in actual play that is not predefined by the rules of the game. Participating in a DAO needs to be fun. It needs to be enjoyable to come



together to think about these new ecosystems. LARPing is a fundamental technique for ecosystem design. All participatory design, all ecosystem design, and all new choreographies of value need to be play-tested.

: Volksbühne am Rosa Luxemburg Platz. "Armen Avanesian & Enemies #48: Goldman \$nax." YouTube video, 10 April 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7JKXtMD6etQ>.

: PlusX. "PlusX with Goldman \$nax hosted by Leak Ventures," *Cashmere Radio*, 15 May 2021. <http://cashmereradio.com/episode/plusx-with-goldman-nax-hosted-by-leak-ventures/>.

: <https://www.lenevollhardt.xyz/sphere/>.

: <https://www.kw-berlin.de/en/hackathon-black-swan-the-communes/>.

We curated two LARPs in The Sphere. One : was about collective fractal ownership, orchestrated by the Goldman \$nax collective using the Real Game Play methodology. I was part of their *Art CUMmons* LARP at Volksbühne in 2019 about the collective governance of the Berlin artworld as a whole. I was impressed by their methods and asked them to collaborate with The Sphere. They created a scenario called OpenParc about the fictitious reclaiming of the land in a suburb of Berlin where a Tesla factory has been built. It was wild! :

The other one was called *The Sphere 2033 – After the Datafication of the Flesh*. It was set up as a performance at the ConTempo festival in Kaunas, Lithuania (August 2022). The LARP play-tested the hypothesis: what if The Sphere became very successful ten years from now? How do we make sure that the soul of performers does not get lost along the way? :

Another LARP I participated in as part of the whole DAO-mania was called *The Communes*. : It was organised by Black Swan DAO and took place in August 2021 at KunstWerke, an important art centre in Berlin. It was mind-blowing! It is weird what happens to humans when we start playing a role. In this LARP, I played the role of Spinoza de Medici, a techno-poetic-bro with a taste for art collecting.

Each LARP I have participated in so far has been a transformative experience. I strongly believe in LARPing as a social technology for collective transformation, and I am so grateful that, through all this experimentation with blockchain and DAOs, I also discovered the power of LARPing.

**IG** Can you tell me a bit more about the LARP that was about what would happen if the sphere was super successful?

**EB** It was initiated by Lene Vollhardt, who is a core member of The Sphere and involved a popular technique in psychotherapy called 'family constellation.' We worked with professional performers from Lithuania and made them reflect on what they would like to transform in the art ecosystem. Based on that, we came up with a series of roles that embodied different aspects of the art ecosystem. For example, I played Staatskunst, so basically, I had the role of the State. Another important role was called The Scar of Funding. It encapsulated the trauma that we carry as people who write grants and get rejected or who lack the money needed to do work. The artist who played The Scar of Funding refused to speak in the role. She was so dramatic... And then we had another role that was That Which Cures the Scar of Funding. Staatskunst ended up giving all the resources that it had to That Which Cures the Scar of Funding, went on an ayahuasca trip and came back as a curator (laughs).

Within and between all this playfulness, LARPing puts a lot of flesh onto ideals. It allows people to explore what it really means for a system to be fair and redistributive, and how people that would be part of this new ecosystem would engage with each other. Among other things, the LARP revealed the lack of coherence that had started to appear at the core of The Sphere team in relation to crypto's 'free' money dream. And because it was revealed, we could start to address it. The LARP directly led to the governance workshop we discussed earlier, *We Draw a Magic Circle and Grow at the Speed of Trust*.

## DREAMING AND EXPERIENCING DIFFERENT REALITIES

**IG** While it is, of course, amazing and important to be able to LARP and experience all these shared moments, many people are too precarious to engage in this reimagination in the first place. What kind of responsibility do DAOs have in this context? Is there a way to include people who are too precarious to initiate experiments for themselves, or are there ways to respond to their needs?

**EB** If we take a little bit more of a macro perspective, I do not

think DAOs will solve the problem of funding in the arts. The only thing that could solve this problem is something like a Universal Basic Income. But under current conditions, I think LARPing is a very democratic way to creatively engage in the practice of redefining the rules of the social 'games' we are part and parcels of. In this sense, I would say LARPs and DAOs are collectivising techno-social technologies.

I do not think it is a question of having access to resources or not. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai talks about how if you are a colonised subject, the first thing you are often, imperceptibly, deprived of is the meta-capacity to aspire. If you are rich and privileged, that expresses itself through a certain confidence in making claims about the future and the network of people to actualise them. :

: Appadurai, Arjun. "The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition." in V. Rao and M. Walton (eds) *Culture and Public Action*, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2004, pp. 59-84.

What is interesting about LARPs and DAOs is that they both allow you to synthetically create the conditions for a new type of claim unto the future. I believe this can be a decolonial act. Decoloniality is not just about redistributing already existing wealth. It is also about creating new capacities for claims on the future. People who are less privileged want to know how they could start playing the game of redefining the future. This also relates to your own article *Towards DAOs of Difference*, where you talk about DAOs along Sylvia Wynter's decolonial theory and the notion of the plot and the plantation. : I think this way of approaching how to nurture alternative spaces from which to question the current social conditions is fundamental.

: Gloerich, Inte. "Towards Daos of Difference: Reading Blockchain Through the Decolonial Thought of Sylvia Wynter." *A Peer-Reviewed Journal About: Minor Tech* 12.1 (2023): 162-76. <https://ap.rja.net/article/download/140448/184384>.

**IG** For me, the writing of that article was very much related to a particular moment in my PhD. I had been focussing on very mainstream blockchain projects for over three years and had spent my time critiquing what happens there, such as the colonial logics that feature in many processes of tokenisation. After all of that, I had a difficult time finding any positivity at all in the blockchain space. Sylvia Wynter's framing of the plot as this space of difference within overwhelming structures of extraction and exploitation gave me a tool to recognise where interesting things *were* still happening within all that negativity.

And by understanding artistic DAO experiments through the notion of the plot and plot-work, : they were freed from the immediate need to change the whole world. They could be small, temporary places where people can create an opening in the curtain of reality that is made by the dominant forces in society. In these DAO plots, people could (re)learn to understand the world differently, to relate to each other differently, and finally to imagine the future differently.

I wonder, what do you think is the purpose of experimentation with DAOs? At what scale or sphere should they attempt to have an impact?

**EB** If we take this qualitative intensity of plot-work as a refuge, as a protective space, then I think blockchain is essentially about federating or interconnecting these different localities. The idea of the translocal is at the heart of dreaming through blockchain because, fundamentally, blockchain is a network technology. So, how do we network these qualitatively charged localities?

There is a radical space for taking on new types of responsibilities collectively through DAOs. Beyond the fascination for the technology, I am much more interested nowadays in whatever it is that makes people recognise one another and want to work together. Historically, religions used to play a large role in this, but that has changed. With DAOs, we have a form that we can work with, but it is so important to talk about the ideals, the content, and the visions for the future that are shared among a community. The narratives around DAOs sometimes obfuscate that most of what organising is about cannot be coded or automated.

**IG** That is a really important point to make about DAOs! It is a lot of hard work that requires being together with others and discussing points of view together. It is not as automated as some people may think.

**EB** The part that people think is automated is the profit-

: See also de Vries, Patricia. *Plot Work as an Artistic Praxis in Today's Cityscapes: An Introduction to the Lectorate Art & Spatial Praxis / the City*. Amsterdam: Gerrit Rietveld Academy, 2022 <https://networkcultures.org/blog/publication/plot-work-as-an-artistic-praxis-in-todays-cityscapes/>.

making! They think that a DAO automates what everyone should be doing in order to make a profit.

**IG** And it is so difficult to activate people for a future vision. But what DAOs do is make such a future vision tangible in small ways. They make it possible to feel and experience how things could be different in a very practical, tangible way.

**EB** On this specific point, there is a passage from Isabelle Stengers that I keep using. It is about the fragile interstices where individual dreams meet one another. Maybe that could be a nice way to close our conversation. The question of dreaming intersects closely with what we said earlier about imagining: it is not outside of reality. On the contrary, it is a super pragmatic operation without which there cannot be actual (and virtual) belonging-in-becoming. *Dreaming is, after all, another form of planning.*

“Only dreamers can accept the modification of their dream. Only dreams and stories [fabulations], because they are the enjoyment of living values, can receive the interstices without the panic effect of people who believe themselves to be in danger of losing hold.” :

: Stengers, Isabelle.  
*Thinking with Whitehead:  
A Free and Wild Creation  
of Concepts*, Cambridge,  
MA: Harvard University  
Press, 2014, pp. 516-17.



# RUTH CATLOW

Interviewed by Inte Gloerich on 4 November 2024.

## CLAIMING SPACE FOR MUTUALIST DAOS AMID WIDESPREAD SPECULATIVE FINANCE

: <https://www.furtherfield.org/> and <https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/whats-on/blockchain-lab/>.

: <https://culturestake.org/>.

: Catlow, R., M. Garrett, N. Jones, and S. Skinner (eds). *Artists Re:thinking the Blockchain*. Liverpool: Torque Editions, 2017; and, Catlow, R., and P. Rafferty (eds). *Radical Friends: Decentralised Autonomous Organisations and the Arts*. Liverpool: Torque Editions, 2022.

*Ruth Catlow is co-founder and director of Furtherfield and co-lead of the Blockchain Lab at Serpentine Galleries in London. She is also an artist, writer, and curator working with emancipatory network cultures, practices, and poetics. She developed CultureStake, a voting system for decentralised cultural decision-making that uses quadratic voting on the blockchain. CultureStake's playful interface allows everyone to vote on the types of cultural activity they would like to see in their locality. She co-edited Artists Re:Thinking the Blockchain and Radical Friends: Decentralised Autonomous Organisations and the Arts. Together with Penny Rafferty, she is currently working on Syn, a DAO-based protocol for artist communities that are self-organising cultural frameworks. Ruth has been a central figure shaping and theorising the intersection between the artworld and DAOs. In our conversation, we discuss DAOs against the historical backdrop of experimentation with internet technologies and the contemporary erosion of cultural funding. Ruth stresses the importance of situatedness, harm reduction, and environmental accountability in artworld DAOs. She also shares how playfulness can engage people in political discussions and experimentation.*

### CENTRING COMMUNITY AND CULTURE IN A CONTEXT OF PROFIT-MAKING AND FINANCIALISATION

**Inte Gloerich** I start these interviews with the question of how to explain what DAOs are to you. Can you tell me about that?

**Ruth Catlow** DAOs, as we understand them now, are peer-built

member organisations run through systems of proposals and voting, automated on the blockchain. This means that they lend themselves to experiments in translocal, cooperative organisational forms. The term was used early on to describe both multi-agent systems in the Internet of Things and the organisation of nonviolent decentralised action in the counter-globalisation social movement. : However, their development in the blockchain space has been primarily as a form of corporate governance that uses tradable tokens as shares to automate the distribution of dividends to shareholders, producing speculative financial vehicles or new ways to do business in a highly unregulated field. So, there is a potential for building collectively owned cooperative infrastructure, however, a profit-orientation currently strongly dominates.

**IG** How do you navigate a space that is characterised by such diverging political and economic visions?

**RC** It has not been easy to gather the financial resources necessary to make proper, real-world experiments to test the social, civic, and cultural benefits of these technologies. The tech industries conflate communities with databases of users. And so rather than building infrastructures that support the thriving of diverse communities and societies, now and long into the future, the risk is that communities will be “treated as a commodity, like pyramid schemes treat their communities as a commodity”. : This has only gotten worse since the COVID-19 pandemic. And in the arts and culture, both public and private funding is under desperate pressure in so many different places. As per usual, the interests of capital determine the kind of decentralised networks that get built on a planetary scale.

Zooming out, it is interesting to reflect on the difference between, on the one hand, the free and open source software boom of the early 90s and the feeling we had of co-creating a new context for life with the birth of the web, and, on the other hand, current experimentation with blockchain and DAOs. The major difference is that, in the early days of the web, the technology was far less complex. And, importantly, there was a

: Hassan, Samer, and Primavera de Filippi. 'Dao (Decentralized Autonomous Organization)\_' *Internet Policy Review*, 17 November 2020, <https://policyreview.info/open-abstracts/decentralised-autonomous-organisation>.

: Hamburg, Sarah quoted in Miranda Dixon. 'Decentralised Community Building in Web3 – “Is it all nonsense” or Could This Change The World?' *Brink*, 21 July 2022, <https://www.hellobrink.co/post/decentralised-community-building-in-web3---is-it-all-nonsense-or-could-this-change-the-world>.



10-to-15-year period where those techies, artists, and activists with access to internet connection and simple computers, had the freedom to work together to try to understand the social potentials of the technology before commercialisation and financialisation would properly kick in. Some of us therefore had the time to explore where our interests and values intersected, to take a critical approach to building communication infrastructure, and to build platforms that would allow us to collaborate and work together in ways that resisted, questioned, and organised against the logic of capital. In the blockchain space, there was virtually no such moment. Almost immediately – because this is a financial technology – blockchain developers were paid 20 times what an artist would be paid. So, the space for collaboration and experimentation just does not exist in the same way right now.

: See e.g., Koshino, T., and M. Straeubig. 'On the Early Days of Hic et Nunc,' *Right Click Save*, 23 January 2023, <https://www.rightclicksave.com/article/on-the-early-days-of-hic-et-nunc>.

: <https://rhea.art/>. See also her collected works in Myers, Rhea. *Proof of Work: Blockchain Provocations 2011-2021*, London: Urbanomic in association with Furtherfield, 2022.

: <https://isthisa.com/>.

An effect of this is that the relationship between artists and techies in the blockchain space has been different than it was in the early days of the web. There are some examples : of blockchain developers engaging in deep collaboration with artists, leading to projects such as the early Brazilian crypto-community platform, Hic et Nunc. At Furtherfield we have collaborated with a few, rare artist-developers committed to critical exploration of the potential of blockchains from both artistic and political perspectives. Rhea Myers has informed our investigations with her critical artwork, writing, and mentorship. : Others have brought their artistic practices to collaborations with us on experimental cultural infrastructure projects. Sarah Friend's work, for instance, has a strong focus on systems of decentralised coordination. She is connected to a high percentage of exploratory art and blockchain experiments because she has been willing to go on a journey of learning and building together with others. This ultimately gives her body of work integrity and depth. :

But the fact that this economy is underpinned by narratives of financial incentives and speculation drives a furious tech acceleration. And, at the same time, of course, the web itself is so much more centralised than it was in the 90s with

communication infrastructure owned and controlled by a few huge tech conglomerates. These two developments together limit the social imaginary for decentralised technology. However, thankfully there are still projects resisting a total takeover. The grassroots crypto-art scene has been very well documented by Alex Estorick at Right Click Save, : who fiercely defends the right of artistic communities to tell the stories about their own experience as practitioners on their own terms and. Other projects like The Sphere DAO have managed to keep spaces for inquiry and experiments with weird economics open. But examples like this are few and far between. Or perhaps I am just not familiar with them. I hope it is the latter!

: <https://www.rightclicksave.com/>.

With the support of Goethe Institute-London, I have collaborated since 2018 with Penny Rafferty on a series of artworld DAO workshops, labs, symposia, and prototypes to activate collaboration across communities, disciplines, and sectors. : Since we published *Radical Friends* in 2022, we have been working towards a cultural and technical protocol called Syn which creates a translocal deliberative decision-making and resource distribution space in which cultural and civic communities can act together in support of emergent art practices. These would encompass hybrid digital, physical, and community-specific art forms. This work is founded in the understanding that arts methods and practices provide the most potent and precise probes for anticipating the impacts of fast eco-social change. It is through these practices that communities develop ways of being, feeling, knowing, and acting together toward the emerging worlds they want. We need to build technologies to serve cultures, not the other way around.

: <https://www.daowo.org/>  
and <https://www.goethe.de/ins/gb/en/kul/zut/dao.html>.

With Syn we are collaborating with the Serpentine Galleries in London to develop a translocal DAO and to test it with various artist-communities in cities across the world. The protocol explores ways in which networked cultural communities could interact to discuss and decide on their priorities – from shared values to joint actions and resource distribution. We want to test different cyclical patterns of engagement that make up these processes, to discover how these might be coordinated

with biological, seasonal and planetary rhythms, and to move through moments of socialising, discussing, proposing, and deciding. With Syn, we are trying to create a pattern that will feel comfortable for all involved. This does not mean that there will not be any disagreements, tensions, or conflicts – that is just part of life! – but acknowledges that we are not just disembodied entries in a ledger, whose creativity exists to populate other cells in that ledger.

## TOWARD MUTUALIST DAOS

**IG** In light of this sketch of historical developments in the culture around emerging technologies, how would you characterise the moment in DAO history that we are in now? And where do you think DAOs are going in the future?

**RC** The relationship between art-as-commodity and DAO as-financial-vehicle predominates, continuing a long tradition in the arts; this is nothing new, crypto and DAOs have extended the art market and added to its methods of economic accumulation. However, what I have become most interested in recently, is what we might call a ‘mutualist moment’ in DAO culture. : Mutualism is an economic and social model centred around cooperation, mutual aid, and collective support, rather than competition and individualism. It emphasises the importance of people working together to meet each other’s needs.

The work of Kei Kreutler plays a big role in this development, and I highly recommend people explore her contributions to DAO culture in general. : Kei is a designer and DAO theorist who worked as chief strategist at Gnosis, building decentralized software infrastructure. There she co-created Gnosis Guild, a small team that developed an open standard and created a series of accessible, modular tools and toolkits for anyone who wants to experiment with DAOs. Kei stresses the importance of understanding the way technologies are framed within certain cultural narratives. To improve the chances of technologies behaving in a certain way in the world, and for them to support certain kinds of relationships, the right stories need to be told

: ‘OMG – Toward an Open Mutualism,’ *Open Mutualism*, 17 December 2024, <https://www.openmutualism.xyz/OMG-Toward-an-Open-Mutualism>.

: E.g., Kreutler, Kei. ‘A Prehistory of DAOs,’ *Gnosis Guild*, 21 July 2021, [https://gnosisguild.mirror.xyz/t4F5rItMw4-mIpL\\_Zf5JQhEibDfQ2JRVKAZEpanyxW1Q](https://gnosisguild.mirror.xyz/t4F5rItMw4-mIpL_Zf5JQhEibDfQ2JRVKAZEpanyxW1Q); and <https://www.gnosisguild.org/>.

around them.

Kei made me aware of current mobilisation around mutualism, and of Sara Horowitz's book *Mutualism: Building the Next Economy from the Ground Up specifically*. The book's message about mutualism is framed through classical anarchist, unionisation, and solidarity movements – think of workers' cooperatives for example – and it is especially relevant to DAO-curious people who share these kinds of values. Horowitz formulates mutualism as a system in which labour, community, and the economy are in an interdependent relationship with each other in a way that does not prioritise the economy. This is at odds with the default DAO design strategy that influences and shapes social relations using financial incentives alone. What you end up with if you use this strategy is decision-making that favours financial gain over social relations, thriving and belonging.

: Horowitz, Sara.  
*Mutualism: Building the Next Economy from the Ground Up*. New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2021.

Horowitz describes three core principles for mutualist organisations. First, mutualist organisations serve a social purpose that is important to their community. Simply put: community before profit. Second, they have independent and sustainable economic mechanisms. Whatever the community does should produce a revenue that exceeds their expenses. Third, mutualist organisations focus on the long-term. This means that they aim to serve future generations. Fundamentally, mutualism has a practical economy at its heart that shares a lot of perspectives with commons theory and practice, and with indigenous approaches to sustaining biodiversity and thriving life-forms.

For Furtherfield's current work and for Syn's DAO experimentation, mutualism emphasises the importance of 'place' as a central aspect. Creating something meaningful goes beyond economic mechanisms or financial concerns – it requires engaging directly with the people and context of a specific community. By grounding our efforts in the realities of a particular place, we ensure our work addresses real needs, fosters accountability, and strengthens the living systems we

are part of. This focus on place reflects a commitment to mutual benefit, recognising that technology should serve the communities it touches, rather than existing in abstraction from them.

## **BUILDING PLACE-BASED RESPONSES TO THE EROSION OF CULTURAL FUNDING**

**IG** In *Radical Friends*, you use the term 'translocal' a lot. Is the focus on 'place' also a translocal one, or is it a geographical place?

**RC** Important shifts have occurred since *Radical Friends* was published, and they have caused me to shift gears on this slightly. There are a multitude of wars, genocides, and ecocides taking place at the moment. These take a toll, not just on the people and living beings who are right at their centre, but on us all. I am talking about psychological, political, and economical tolls. Working translocally at the moment is immensely taxing as everyone is exposed to the impacts of multiple, complex harms. The context of massively centralised communication infrastructures owned, controlled and misused by oligarchs only complicates this further.

Initially, Penny and I framed Syn as a translocal DAO. We planned to test it in five different global cities and to learn from the specifics (the commonalities and differences) of each community and their economic context. Unfortunately, the kind of funding necessary to organise something at this scale is just not available at the moment. Instead, now we will do our first organisational experiment in one city. This allows us to dive into exactly what makes something work in a specific context, location, or culture and to think about how it could take shape as a template that can be tested by others in different places.

**IG** What problem does Syn address? Or, what context does it want to engage with specifically?

**RC** I will answer this question specifically about London

because that is where the first Syn DAO experiment will be located, but similar effects are taking shape elsewhere. In London, we have seen an erosion of the entire artworld ecology. This sounds very dramatic, but is unfortunately true. Public spaces for gathering, exchanging ideas, and exhibiting art – I am talking about the middle and lower levels of the art world, like galleries, and lab spaces – have been squeezed out. This is about both spaces and surplus social energies. The results are palpable on the ground in London, but also in discussion spaces online. So many platforms for exchange and critical discussion around art, media, and technology have disappeared because people have had to focus their energies elsewhere, to sustain themselves economically.

This is the need that Syn is addressing. The need for public spaces that can support and nurture art and creative practices. We want to create a way for people to come together and develop the social and cultural frameworks that they need. We want to create a context for communities to think through what economies they want to draw on so that everyone involved benefits, how they want to work together in new ways, and how a shared framework could boost their creative capacities and resources. The first community we work with will probably consist of about 20 people, so it is quite small. But the concerns are very practical and relevant to bigger communities too. Think for example of organising access to a space for regular meetings, sharing studio materials, or creating connections with other arts organisations. None of this is rocket science, but this support completely fell away in places like London. What we want to find out is if DAOs could support a co-shaped infrastructure for the arts that could make artists less dependent on frameworks that are outside of their control and that could collapse at any moment.

## COMBINING CRITIQUE AND CREATION

**IG** It sounds like on the one hand, you see DAOs as a practical tool to build usable infrastructures, but on the other hand, there is also an element of DAOs as a tool for the process of

reimagining what the arts could look like.

**RC** It is probably a bit of both, yes. It is about imaginaries and practically testing and understanding how these tools can work for us. I believe that these tools might actually serve humans and their situated communities, but we have to learn more about why and how people reach decisions with others about the things they value. We have to make it legible to people outside the DAO space in what ways the technology could support these processes. This is what we are aiming for with Syn as well. These are all things that a DAO can do really well: registering and storing results of deliberations and nuanced decision-making processes. At the same time, I am full of reservations about this. This is just a fraction of what DAOs can do, and perhaps as a technological backbone, they are far more complicated than they need to be to do the simple things I just mentioned.

: Dávila, Joshua.

*Blockchain Radicals: How Capitalism Ruined Crypto and How to Fix it*, London: Repeater, 2023; and, <http://theblockchainsocialist.com/>.

But I like this question a lot. It reminds me of something I heard Joshua Dávila, a.k.a. The Blockchain Socialist, say at the Regen London gathering last Summer. Rather than toiling to create totalising metaphors about the true purpose of blockchain it is more useful to work in our own communities with the small “units of use and capacity” that we find in blockchain technologies. The dominant metaphor of Bitcoin as a gold standard – as scarce and increasing in value when saved – has served far-right, libertarian, extractivist purposes, by repelling engagement with crypto by those interested in emancipatory goals. Instead, if we want to build infrastructure to last, that is not profit oriented and not part of the state, we need to use blockchain technologies for our own objectives, to create the political economies we want to create or as Josh says “to build the tech that we use to be together.” :

: <https://www.regensunit.e.earth/event/regens-unit-e-london-2024>.

So we are working with a couple of blockchain’s units of use in Syn. Probably the most important of these is recording and archiving the results of collective cultural decision-making about priority setting and resource distribution. Syn uses quadratic voting (QV) for its ability to support nuanced and

more informed decisions about what really matters to a community, enabling what Charlotte Frost, Furtherfield's 2018–23 co-director called an “economy of emotions.” : The data produced by QVs can be used to both reflect what matters most to a decision-making community and, by recording it to the blockchain, preserving tamper-proof records of these decisions in the public domain.

I read a book a couple of years ago that influenced my thinking on technology. It's called *In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology and the Survival of the Indian Nations* by Jerry Mander. : Mander was part of the anti-globalisation movement and he wrote the book in 1991 – so before the web exploded. The book is about the terrible problems associated with the way technology “innovation” happens; about how anti-democratic innovation is because there is no oversight or regulation. Mander focuses on the example of the advent of satellite TV and the impact it has had on indigenous communities in the North of Canada. He eloquently and clearly describes the speed at which thousands of years of culture – whole ways of life in which humans and their entire environment coexisted – are broken down by this sudden appearance. Within three years, so much was lost. Through examples like these, he frames technological innovation as a massive social experiment in which the tech industry will always win and democratic interests are highly likely to lose. I feel like that really captures what happened and is still happening with the web and with blockchain. We are always sold a shiny solution – for example, currently, with AI we are told it will find new cures for rare diseases – but in the process, we forget to look at the devastations these technologies are also causing to the environment and labour justice.

**IG** I read in an article by you and Penny on The Brooklyn Rail that your work “is still mistaken for an exercise in blockchain boosterism rather than an earnest community claim to tools that can help shape lively infrastructures of translocal belonging.” : At the same time, you always include thorough critiques of the extractive and colonial effects of the systems

: Frost, Charlotte. 'CultureStake: It's Your Culture, It's Your Call,' in R. Catlow and P. Rafferty, *Radical Friends: Decentralised Autonomous Organisations and the Arts*, Liverpool: Torque Editions, 2022, pp. 289–290.

: Mander, Jerry. *In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology and the Survival of the Indian Nations*, San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1991.

: Catlow, Ruth, and Penny Rafferty. 'Beyond Innovation: Decentralization, Imagination, and Care,' *The Brooklyn Rail*, May 2023, <https://brooklynrail.org/2023/05/criticspage/Innovation/>.



and infrastructures around us in your work. It seems to me that you have found a way to balance between critique and creation, which is very difficult to do. Can you tell me a bit about how you go about this?

**RC** It is difficult! I have a lot of sympathy with those who note that our eco-social worlds are on fire and that DAOs are slow to fulfil their potential as tools for coordination and governance. I see it like this: we have both the right and feel a responsibility to stay curious about DAOs. Despite their limitations, they do still offer a way to experiment – conceptually and technically – with translocal governance. This is still very important as it helps build infrastructures that empower people to act in solidarity with peers across state borders.

Another important aspect of working with contemporary digital technologies has to be a commitment to harm reduction. Recently at Furtherfield, we have been working to answer this question by collaborating with curator and researcher Dani Admiss on a new environmental policy. Dani's work is on climate justice and environmental accountability in relation to global cultural dynamics between the global North and the majority world. Together, we are looking for ways to deal with the impossible tension between using technology for particular eco-social goals and not wanting to reproduce the ways in which it inconspicuously causes harm at the same time.

Dani has pointed us to the work of sustainability expert Roland Geyer, who argues that the resource that has the least amount of environmental impact is human labour. Yet, the capitalist economy demands that everything is always produced faster and more efficiently. In the process, more and more human labour gets outsourced to machines and/or to cheap, invisibilised, and racialised labour. We are seeing exactly this with AI at the moment: people justify its use because it seems to be able to do hard cognitive and creative labour at the snap of a finger. What remains hidden from view, is that by outsourcing human labour in the Global North to AI, we are actually outsourcing it to workers in the Global South and to

: <https://www.daniadmiss.com/>. See also her work as part of the Sunlight Liberation Network at <http://artscatalyst.org/whatson/sunlight-liberation-network-tending-waste-cultivating-life/>.

: See e.g., Geyer, Roland, and Trevor Zink. 'There Is No Such Thing As A Green Product,' *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Spring 2016, [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/there\\_is\\_no\\_such\\_thing\\_as\\_a\\_green\\_product](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/there_is_no_such_thing_as_a_green_product).

petroleum! AI causes a bunch of carbon emissions that otherwise would not have occurred. Furtherfield's response to this is to try to work towards using technologies to achieve eco-socially defined goals, and staying alert to the balance of harms we are contributing. Ultimately, we want to remove ourselves from the growth economy that is setting the world on fire. But I would not want to imply that this is either simple or perhaps even achievable.

**IG** Besides environmentally just practices – which are so important! – what kinds of values are important to you in your DAO work? For instance, you use the word 'translocal belonging' sometimes. Can you tell me a bit about that?

**RC** Translocality refers to the dynamic interplay of belonging, identity, and interaction across multiple, interconnected locales – both physical and digital. It arises from globalisation, migration, and hyperconnectivity, fundamentally reshaping how we perceive the places, people, and cultures we are part of. Translocality acknowledges that individuals simultaneously inhabit layered and overlapping localities, creating a sense of belonging to multiple communities at once. These diverse, place-based affiliations often make conflicting demands, influencing our identities and relationships in complex, and unpredictable ways. The idea of 'belonging' is important, because it motivates us to think and act beyond our own individual interests. But it is complicated, because while it sounds very friendly, it can also be used to segment, degrade and exclude social groups! This is why so much of our work on Syn has been about the design of protocols and patterns of connection, creating different kinds of rituals, and acknowledging the different limits and restrictions members might experience because of the localities they inhabit. In some DAOs, belonging is about creating binaries – who is in and who is outside of the community, who has tokens and who does not – and establishing hierarchies between degrees of access. I think about belonging less as an essential value than as a valence to attend to in community settings, and a question that we need to keep addressing and thinking about as we anchor

: See for more on the different meanings of belonging Zeilinger, Martin. *Structures of Belonging*, Ljubljana: Aksioma – Institute for Contemporary Art, 2023, <https://aksioma.org/structures-of-belonging>.

: Selasi, Taiye. 'Don't Ask Where I'm From, Ask Where I'm a Local,' *TEDGlobal 2014*, October 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gT5OpU2PIS4>.

social relations in our technologies.

This reminds me of two prominent token-gated DAOs in the web3 culture space: Nouns DAO and Friends with Benefits (FWB) DAO. Nouns DAO is a fund that generates a new profile picture (PFP) NFT consisting of a pixelated icon every day. : People then bid for it, but essentially, they are paying in order to become a member of the DAO. Then through proposals and voting, they decide what the common pot of funds should be spent on. Those with more tokens have more power. FWB is a social DAO to realise crypto cultural projects. : The swift rise in its token price in 2021 arose from its operation as an exclusive members club. The higher the token price, the more desirable membership became, especially for movers and shakers in web3 “culture.” It was the place to be – the place to meet other innovators! In the spring of 2022, the price dropped again.

: <https://nouns.wtf/>.

: <https://www.fwb.help/>.

Often when people say there are no great examples of DAOs, there are others that point to these two DAOs to prove them wrong. These DAOs did succeed in providing a centre of gravity for people to come together to coordinate themselves. However, because they are primarily founded to coordinate around speculative capitalism it seems that what they then produce is a global pizza party or at best an exclusive festival! I am sure that great friendships are made at these events, but it is disappointing that their ambitions do not extend further. When we published *Artists Re:Thinking the Blockchain*, we wondered if artistic investigations with blockchains as a financial technology would help create more transparency about the relationship between art and money. Maybe, what this whole process has told us is that money is only interested in art’s ability to make more money.

Getting back to your question, and connecting it with what we were talking about before, a value that should be absolutely at the core of any project I am involved in is harm reduction. I mean this both in an ecological and social sense. A concrete way in which this can take shape is for example by supporting practices of maintenance, repair, and remembering. What I mean

by remembering is that, for 50+ years, knowledge of the dangers of climate change has been downplayed and ignored. We need to act according to that knowledge and demand that those in control of the systems that both support and poison contemporary life also start to act. We have to be prepared to change the way we behave, to do justice to that existing knowledge and forms of knowledge that have long been suppressed but need to be brought to the fore.

## EXPERIMENTING WITH POLITICS IN IMAGINARY WORLDS TO BRING ABOUT REAL WORLD CHANGE

**RC** One of the ways in which we are approaching these concerns is through Live Action Role Play as a method of community co-creation. When we are organising a LARP, we are trying to create a new space, an intimate setting for exploring together what new worlds that we want might look and feel like. What would it feel like to live with different sets of social relations with each other?

**IG** I am happy you bring up LARPs because I am interested in the playful element of your work. It seems like the Venn diagram of LARPing and artworld DAOs has a pretty big overlap! Why do you think this is?

**RC** Well, Penny and I have both been working with LARPing in our own practices, and it is great for exploring future relational scenarios together with others. What we are doing at Furtherfield fits mostly with the Nordic LARP framework, : because this allows us to dip into fictional futures, science fiction, and political theatre. Basically, it allows us to experiment with politics and political economy! We bring specialists together who each bring a different perspective to a question or a problem. In this context, a specialist might be an academic who brings expert knowledge on a topic, but they might equally be someone whose life is affected by the topic under consideration. We are bringing these different people together on a level playing field and asking them to engage with the playful, imaginative part of themselves. We all have this part

: [https://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](https://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Main_Page).

because we were all kids once! Almost everyone played in make-believe worlds at some point, so it is something that does not need a lot of explaining. Decentering intellectual processes can free people up to invent worlds that we do not know yet. Our experience has been that, without fail, people made up sensible, defensible worlds to explore and test together in this LARP form.

: <https://treaty.finsburypark.live/>.

For instance, with Furtherfield we have spent the last 5 years organising a series of community-created interspecies justice LARPing events called Treaty of Finsbury Park project as part of the EU Horizon 2020-funded CreaTures collaboration. : In this near-future fiction, a treaty of cooperation is to be signed, granting equal rights to all life-forms of the park. Unfolding in 3 acts, it aimed to foster real-world interspecies cooperation and social justice from a more-than-human perspective. Participants included biodiversity scientists, park rangers, rewilding activists, and park users, who were all approached as experts. What was beautiful to see was that, while LARPing, people became much more intimately connected to all the different species and lifeforms in the park. We are now exploring whether by transforming the park into a more interactive ecosystem, players might be more likely to pledge and take both practical and political action in support of more-than-human interests.

**IG** It sounds like what you were doing was making explicit the community that was already there but that was not recognised yet as a community. I imagine this is an ongoing process: you cannot just point to the community and leave it at that.

: <https://profiles.sussex.ac.uk/p29619-ann-light>.

**RC** Yes. To some degree, it is self-defining and quite fluid, but it is also a process of community- and place-based mapping, and strengthening the connections between different entities. For example, we are currently collaborating with Professor Ann Light : on a structured and focused form of community mapping and immersive role-play in Felixstowe, a town on the English East Coast to which Furtherfield has recently relocated. This process is about trying to understand what the priorities, needs, and wishes of the people and other species in this area are. We

want to turn this into a continuous process of mapping needs, public co-creation events, LARPing, and then spiraling back to the beginning. By doing this over the next few years, we hope to understand what we can do to support the community to take action in areas that matter to them, based on what they discovered in those imaginary LARP spaces. In a way, it is about understanding the changes that happen in people's imaginations when they collaborate together.

## THE HARD WORK OF BUILDING A PLACE-BASED CULTURAL DEMOCRACY

**IG** It sounds like it also has to do with democratic deliberation processes and the public sphere. Maybe about relearning how to be in a society together.

**RC** Yeah, I guess so, although my only reservations about that is that it sounds rather grand. As of yet, we have not exactly worked out how it is going to work.

This also relates to CultureStake, which is a project that we started to develop at Furtherfield back in 2018. : CultureStake is a blockchain-based quadratic voting tool – it is actually the basis for the process that we are now developing for Syn – that enables people to distribute given resources based on their own parameters for what is needed or important. It then makes data about this collective decision-making process available back to the community, so it can start to understand their own dynamics and concerns. We wanted to involve all users of Finsbury Park in London in decisions about what culture they would like to see realised in that park. We gave people a vote and a way to share with others what matters to them. Basically, this is about a place-based cultural democracy.

: <https://culturestake.org/>.

**IG** Is there a next step on the horizon for CultureStake?

**RC** I am dying to bring something like CultureStake to Felixstowe! But app development is a resource-hungry process and blockchain app development even more so! For this reason,

we are thinking about building an off-blockchain version of CultureStake. In many ways, putting CultureStake on the blockchain was probably a case of technological overspecification for what was needed. We built it on the blockchain to explore whether permanent tamper-proof results would be important to people and learned that the feature people really valued instead was the more subtle way of expressing needs and preferences. We discovered that the people in the community were much more interested in finding ways to vote that were more expressive and emotional, rather than concerned about the trustworthiness of the results of the vote. Of course, priorities will vary according to what is at stake with a vote.

The reason CultureStake had a blockchain underneath it was because of the immutability of data. CultureStake was developed partly as a response to the 51%-49% Brexit referendum vote. Because that 51% was the only thing that counted in the end, we were suddenly framed as a country of racists and immigrant haters. With CultureStake, we tried to deal with that trauma. We tried to create a system that would produce data that could be relied upon, data that no one could mess with, and infrastructure that allowed anyone to see the data, and make up their own minds about what mattered to people and how much it mattered to them. Blockchain was a good solution for that because it can store data immutably and transparently.

**IG** How did you encourage people to get involved in CultureStake? Was there a lot of explanation of how blockchain works, or did you feel that it was not essential that people knew all the ins and outs, technically speaking?

**RC** There is a tension between making things accessible, attractive, and inviting on the one hand, and making their mechanisms transparent on the other hand. It is a really difficult tension! I spent a lot of my life arguing against the smooth appearance of systems like Facebook that hide all sorts of surveillance processes, algorithmic influence systems, and

frictions under their surfaces. Take for example quadratic voting. I am quite good at maths myself and I quickly understood in my bones the benefits of quadratic voting for collective decision making. But not everyone is made this way. People have different ways of understanding, sensing, and knowing the world. Add that to the complexity of explaining how blockchains work and why they might be useful, and it becomes clear that it is just not realistic to expect every user to grasp every mechanism in every app they use.

So in CultureStake, after making many, many mistakes in user experience design, we put our focus on creating a playful and fun interface so that people could test and feel the underlying mechanisms through their interactions with the app. It was more than just the design of the app, though. During the voting period, we had a team stationed throughout the park that helped people cast their votes – we called them our ‘access angels.’ People absolutely loved it; they loved the way they were asked to cast their vote and what it felt like to vote. There were about 2000 people that took part in the vote in the end!

Building this on the blockchain added an enormous amount of effort. It really was a gargantuan job to make this work, but in the end, I think we did pretty well! We managed to test a new system of cultural decision-making that upended the prevailing one in which privileged people with a lot of power make decisions about culture behind closed doors – the kind of system that makes people feel alienated from their locality. We also learned a lot with Sarah Friend, who was the developer for this project, about the inflexibility of smart contracts. It was very valuable work, but we should not forget that it takes a lot of effort.

## **MAKING INTENTIONS AND ENDINGS EXPLICIT**

**IG** Seeing as our time is almost up, I have a final question: what should people who are thinking about setting up their first DAO be aware of?



**RC** Two key contextual forces complicate this at the moment. First, mainstream DAOs have been moving in the direction of speculative financialization, which makes it harder to build momentum for conceiving how they might be useful to cultural cooperatives, though projects like The Sphere : help to ensure that the imaginative possibility stays open. And second, access to funding for culture is becoming harder all the time. Maybe the first question anyone should ask themselves is why they are interested in DAOs. Is it because they are interested in experimental governance technologies? In which case, yes, go for it! Breadchain, : set up by The Blockchain Socialist is an example of this – modelling how to use cryptoeconomics to fund experiments with cooperative ventures in crypto. However, if people are interested because they think DAOs might be a new way to make money as an artist or as a cultural producer? Possibly, but I do not know if that is the case yet. That does not mean that this opportunity will not take shape in the future, but it is not a quick fix.

: <https://www.thesphere.as/>.

: <https://app.breadchain.xyz/>.

If people still want to go for it, the great thing is that the tools that make this process easier are here now. Particularly helpful are the Gnosis Zodiac tools, which allow people to start playing with an easy DAO setup. : It is not complicated to do experiments that lead to important discussions about pooling money and how to make collective decisions. These are very basic things, but they are the start of setting up a DAO. Doing these experiments and having these conversations brings into focus whether a DAO could benefit the individuals and the collective at the same time.

: <https://www.zodiac.wiki/>.

**IG** Should people also ask themselves at these early stages what would be a cause to end the DAO? When does it not serve its purpose anymore?

**RC** Yes, definitely! Maybe different projects have different answers to that, but yes, I love a planned ending. I have not been very good at it historically! Some things are better to leave open-ended, but with others, it is good to say “It ends when this point is reached.” It is like good punctuation: very

important! It is also important to make sure that people can step out of the DAO as individuals, without dismantling the entire DAO.

# YAZAN KHALILI

Interviewed by Inte Gloerich on 11 November 2024.

## THE ECONOMY IS NOT JUST FOR ECONOMISTS. OR, RECLAIMING DEBT AS A FORM OF COMMUNAL WEALTH

: <https://www.radioalhara.net/>.

: <https://thequestionoffunding.com/>.

: <https://thequestionoffunding.com/How-can-Dayra-allow-us-to-make-use-of-existing-local-resources-I>.

*Yazan Khalili is an artist, architect, and cultural activist living in and out of Palestine. He was the artistic director of the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre in Ramallah between 2015 and 2019. He is a co-founder of Radio Alhara, and currently is a PhD candidate at Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, University of Amsterdam, and a member of The Question of Funding (QoF) collective. This collective brings together cultural producers and community organisers from Palestine to rethink the economy of funding and how it affects cultural production both in Palestine and the world. In the context of the Documenta 15 exhibition, QoF developed Dayra, a DAO-based economic model to appreciate and share communal wealth in the absence of money. In our conversation, we discussed how DAOs relate to the nation-state and how they could facilitate communities to organise outside of these top-down structures. Yazan lays bare the dynamics of the crisis economy in Palestine. He shows that rather than an exceptional situation, the cultural economy of Palestine is an extreme example of what is taking shape in Western Europe and the world. This means that the situated knowledge from Palestine is fundamental for the wider world. Ultimately, Yazan makes a case for pushing the crisis to its limits in order to radically rethink the logics through which our societies function. Dayra is attempting exactly this.*

### TO FUNCTION BEYOND, ABOVE, AND BELOW THE STATE

**Inte Gloerich** What is a DAO to you? Why is DAO technology interesting to you?

**Yazan Khalili** Regardless of its technological or financial meaning – which often dominates the conversation about DAOs – for me, DAOs allow for the possibility of thinking beyond the limitations of the nation-state and neoliberal economy. I am interested in trying to imagine liberation beyond these frameworks. This is informed by the context of Palestine specifically, where Palestinians must struggle on three levels: *against* the state of Israel as an occupier, *for* the Palestinian state as a way to achieve rights within a world dominated by state structures, and *against* The State as such as an apparatus of dominance. These are, I think, the conditions we are working under, especially while a genocide is ongoing.

A central question in our work is how we can bring back the social relations and systems of trust that got lost in contemporary economies and state formations. This question also features prominently in Dayra. DAOs are interesting to me because they address a level that is simultaneously underneath and above the state, but never on the level of the state itself. Underneath the state are social relations. At this level, we can ask questions about how we want to live together, what a local community functions like, or how local economies work. DAOs also function above the state because they can jump over their borders and systems of control, and rethink global relations through deep locality. With DAOs, it is possible to create economies that are not based on state structures and to address these two levels simultaneously.

With Dayra, every community can define its own boundaries. This is facilitated by the design of the system: we are setting Dayra up in such a way that you cannot extract value from one community to another. Value is locally produced through the exchange of wealth within a particular community, and it is designed so that it never leaves that community. This is because we want to prevent people from getting incentivised to produce more Dayra just for the sake of exchanging them, as the next step after that would be to extract Dayras from their local communities and start to speculate with them. Instead, we are trying to define (trans)local structures and maintain them,

meaning that a Dayra is intentionally small. This does not mean they have to be in the same physical place, though. For example, a group of graphic designers using Dayra could work from around the world. But a group of local farmers can also define the limits of their Dayra to their own small village. What is important to understand is that these Dayras are not the same.

**IG** Is Dayra still ongoing?

**YK** Well, it has begun moving again! But it is important not to make it bigger than it is. We are still small, and we are still in the process of trying things out. Right now, anyone creating work from or dealing with Palestine immediately gets a lot of attention. This is simultaneously a good and a bad thing. Palestine is an extreme place, politically and culturally, which means that small acts in cultural and social movements have to deal with a huge international structure. This work is essential, so on the one hand it is great when these acts get picked up in the media and are brought to the forefront. On the other hand, this sometimes happens too quickly. Projects are pushed too far, too quickly when they still need to make baby steps. Dayra is somewhere in the middle of those steps.

We are approaching the process of developing Darya by not being too involved with the technology immediately. When you focus too much on the technology, it can turn into a necessity in and of itself. Instead of technology, what we really need is to rethink cultural and political questions. With Dayra, we were interested in addressing the politics of funding and the economics of cultural practices. In the process, we found out that we sometimes had to push developers outside of their comfort zone, because they often immediately wanted to come up with solutions. However, we were not interested in quick answers or in creating a crypto economy. We wanted to sit with the developers, to work together in a bottom-up way while being aware that it will be a long process and we do not know exactly where it will lead us.

We started by researching alternative past and present socio-economic models and by thinking about which ones we wanted to take into the future. This process was about bridging an economic knowledge gap: how can we bring economic models that functioned in the social structures that existed before the neoliberal economy into contemporary life? What kind of infrastructures and social relations are needed? How can trust be enacted in contemporary settings? What know-how is needed to engage in these economies? There are so many questions to think about!

At the same time, we were also engaging with contemporary questions about funding, the economy, and survival in a time in which everything is financialised and monetised. Often, these sorts of questions are reserved for economists, but the economy is all around us, and we all have insights about it! We should all be able to weigh in. When value is equated with financial value, social value gets obscured in the process. In response, with Dayra we want to find ways to regain the capacity to define our own ways of living within these broader contexts.

## DEBT AS A FORM OF COMMUNAL WEALTH

**IG** I wanted to ask you about the introductory video for Dayra. The video opens with a statement: “Not having a measuring tape to measure a table, does not mean the table does not exist.” : What did you want to evoke with this framing?

**YK** Both Dayra and fiat money are tools through which a community measures, stores, and exchanges wealth, but the important thing to remember is that wealth exists outside of those tools. The measuring tape – whether this is Dayra, money, or something else – can certainly be useful, but the communal wealth that exists in societies goes beyond what the measuring tape can measure. With Dayra, we are interested in measuring social relations rather than assets. So, if we go back to the metaphor of the table: Dayra is not about measuring the table itself, but about measuring the act of sharing the table. As

: Dayra. 2022. “Dayra – How it works?” *Vimeo video*. <https://vimeo.com/721710848>.

an object, the table has no value or meaning until it is shared. Once that happens, the table enters into the Dayra system, and it is recognised as part of a communal wealth that takes the shape of practices of sharing.

**IG** Dayra also frames debt as a form of communal wealth. Can you explain your thinking around this?

**YK** Luckily, we are not economists, so we have the freedom to play with these terms! Terms like 'debt' dominate our lives, yet we have little agency over them. As cultural producers, we wanted to find ways to open up what such terms mean and to use them in a way that challenges the dominant structures through which money is produced.

The way we see it, being indebted to your community is how that community is created and sustained. Mutual indebtedness builds communal relations that are dynamic and strong. It creates interdependence rather than independence. This is another term that we would like to reconsider: being dependent is often framed as a negative thing, especially in the context of national struggles and foreign domination, but on another level, we are all always dependent on something or someone. No one lives in a vacuum. We have to ask what we want to be dependent on. With Dayra, we think of being dependent as part of what makes social relations work. Rather than dealing with big institutional questions related to the banking system or the monetary economy, Dayra addresses the economy as a question of social relations.

As I briefly mentioned above, we are researching different socio-economic models of indebtedness. There are so many examples, and they have already existed for ages! One example is the practice of keeping village notebooks, *Ad Dafter* الدفتر in Arabic. The way it works is that when people do not have money at a particular moment but still need to buy things in their local village shops, the shop writes this debt down in a notebook. This can only happen because the people involved know and trust each other. An outsider would not be able to

make use of this system of indebtedness. What may sound surprising from the perspective of the individualism of the neoliberal economy is that both the shopkeeper and the buyer protect the notebook. For example, I used to work with someone who lived in a small village and often bought things from a local shop. When the shop burnt down, the notebook in which his debts were logged was lost too. Rather than taking the opportunity to be released of his debts without paying them, he went back to the shop and paid the debts anyway. Although the notebook is a way to log debt, what makes the system work is the system of trust that exists around it. Both parties know that they depend on this trust relationship to make a living, so even when the notebook is gone, they honour this trust. This kind of system used to exist here in Amsterdam too, but it has almost completely disappeared. In places like Palestine and Lebanon, it is still all around.

Another example is called *An-nqoot* النفوط , or, the 'dripping system.' At Palestinian weddings, people put money in an envelope and give it to the newlywed. This way, the cost of the wedding is communally shared. All contributions are registered and passed down from generation to generation, creating an ongoing communal system of debt.

Then there is *Owneh* عونة which means 'to help out.' This practice does not involve money itself but rather people's efforts to help each other out. For example, when you are building something at your house, and you need to pour concrete, you cannot do this job alone. You need fast action and many people helping out at the same time. Through the practice of *Owneh*, a community comes together to share the work in such moments. This used to be announced publicly and scheduled after Friday prayers so that people come to the prayers prepared to help each other out afterward.

Another practice that I learned about is called *Mqarazza* مقارظة which literally means 'indebtedness.' This one takes place in small production economies, such as villages with a few small farmers that each have some sheep or goats. Each farmer's



animals do not produce enough milk to make cheese from, so the farmers pool their milk in order to make cheese in turns. Every day, the collected milk goes to a different home. The farms that are waiting for their turn have to trust the others to bring them their milk in the future. In effect, this is a process of sharing existing wealth communally.

The last one is called *Jameyyaat* جمعيات , These are women's or employees' associations in which members agree to put a set amount of money into a shared box each month. Let's say there are ten members and they each put in € 100 at the beginning of the month. The community collectively decides on a schedule so that every month someone else is allowed to take the collected money out. Basically, this is a communal saving system. We used to do this in class when I was in school! Of course, it takes a lot of trust relations, especially if you are the last one in the schedule.

All these systems exist with different nuances, at different moments in time, and in different communities. We can learn from the past, but this does not mean that these practices should be copied one-to-one. New systems might take shape in the future based on this knowledge of the past. We have to think about how to create bridges between past practices and future economic systems.

## IMAGINING SOCIAL RELATIONS BEYOND THE CRISIS ECONOMY

**IG** On the one hand, Dayra is a project that is situated in the specific context of the economy of cultural funding in Palestine, but on the other hand, it is relevant beyond that because we can recognise many of the same dynamics in places like Western Europe. A lot of those social relations that you described above are eroding because of the individualising logics of the neoliberalist economy. Is part of what you are doing with Dayra also creating a system that could protect these different forms of trust relations in the face of the threat of erosion?

**YK** Yes, because that erosion is bringing with it total dependence on the banking system. Money is so important in the neoliberal economy. There is hardly any other measuring tape left, the only way to understand wealth is by measuring it with money. Because this money works through financial structures, the banking system, and nation-states, it has become a system of control. We have lost our agency to deal with wealth and knowledge in different, community-based ways, to share wealth among our community, and to think of social relations beyond monetary value. So our question is: how do we exchange value outside of money? How do we live together and collectively store, annotate, and exchange wealth when we do not have access to money? Remember: this exchange is in itself a form of wealth! Think about the milk that is shared between families. The wealth of their trust is stored in their memory and their social relations. Thinking beyond the village, we ask how we could support these kinds of trust relationships in contemporary social settings and whether contemporary technologies could support these processes.

In Palestine, we see that money has become a tool of domination and control through the structures of funding that are in place. In this sense, Palestine is an extreme case of how financial funding affects political agendas and ideologies. Think for example of the way funding is currently utilised as a tool of censorship in Europe. We have already seen this for a long time in Palestine. The Palestinian Authority was established in the 90s and with it, the donor economy emerged. This meant that grassroots organisations had to turn into NGOs in order to receive international funding. These new structures of funding changed the social and cultural relations of the society, centering it around the donors' agenda rather than the communal needs and the political aspirations of the people. This meant that cultural actors slowly got distanced and alienated from the communities in which they were working.

**IG** I have heard you describe it also as a crisis economy. : What do you mean by this term?

: Khalili, Yazan, Candela Cubria, and Sepp Eckenhausen. 2024. "Yazan Khalili and the Crisis Economy." *Art in Permacrisis Podcast* (4). <https://soundcloud.com/net-workcultures/art-in-perma-crisis-4-yazan-khalili>.

: Klein, N. 2007. *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. Toronto: Knopf Canada.

: For more on the crisis economy, see Khalili, Yazan, Lara Khaldi, and Marwa Arsanios. 2020. "What We Talk about When We Talk about Crisis: A Conversation, Part 1 and 2." *E-flux journal* (111). <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/111/346846/what-we-talk-about-when-we-talk-about-crisis-a-conversation-part-1/>.

**YK** This economy is a product of crisis, but it also produces crisis. Many economists write about this phenomenon. For example, Naomi Klein uses the term 'disaster capitalism' to describe a similar idea. : The idea of the crisis economy means that being in crisis becomes the central requirement for receiving funding. When you apply for funding, you have to argue that you are the one that is most in crisis. Ultimately, what this structure of funding does is sustain the crisis instead of overcoming the crisis. :

I remember that during the Arab Spring, Palestine dropped from the global consciousness as an emergency. Its state of crisis was not sufficient anymore in comparison to other Arab countries. Of course, right now Palestine is *the* crisis. This shows how extreme the crisis needs to be to receive funding. And it shows that crisis is treated as an event, rather than a persistent reality that we live among. This brings with it a particular kind of money and a particular kind of economic power dynamic. For example, the humanitarian aid that is coming into Palestine at the moment creates a lot of employment for people who can bring local expertise to international NGOs. In the process, a new class of people that are hired and paid good money by these NGOs emerges. Ultimately, the support that comes into Palestine establishes itself as a superstructure, placing the NGOs at the centre of a humanitarian aid economy.

However, this is always connected to the crisis as an event and dissolves as soon as another crisis takes centre stage. Funding that is made available in the crisis economy is never able to target the underlying reality of the persisting crisis, because to work on that level, requires radical rethinking. It means doing the political and ideological work of imagining a different future beyond the horizons of the event that is recognised by the crisis economy. This process of reimagining takes slow, organic, and social practices, connections, and engagements beyond the crisis as an event. We need to question fundamental assumptions about society, the economy, and social relations in order to build something truly different and more resilient.

Every time these extreme situations erupt, they break your backbone, they make you unable to think beyond the present because all your efforts are directed at the need to survive. But we also need to work at a slower pace to figure out what kind of future we want. What do we want society to look like in the future? What do we mean by liberation?

**IG** Can the crisis also be a moment of opportunity, a rupture through which another world becomes possible?

**YK** Yes. The crisis is there, it is ongoing. It just reveals itself in particular moments, seemingly out of nowhere. This is the moment in which the contradictions that permeate society cannot be maintained anymore and the crisis breaks open. Some people might say that we need to eliminate the crisis, but I am for deepening its contradictions and going through it. We need to keep pushing the crisis so that it appears in the open and becomes undeniable.

I have to be honest and say that I am a pessimist. I do not function on hope, because hope makes you passive. It tricks you into believing that eventually, things will be better. No! They will not get better! I am hopeless, which means that I must keep moving in search of something better, but this better thing is not guaranteed. Working for a better future does not mean we will achieve it, but it means that we refuse this current situation. Right now, we are in a horrible phase, which means that we have to keep moving. We need to go through the horribleness, through the pessimism, and through the hopelessness.

## **SPEAKING TO THE WORLD BY SPEAKING TO THE COMMUNITY**

**IG** How has the crisis economy affected the kinds of art and cultural work that have been funded since the 90s in Palestine?

**YK** Most of the cultural practices in Palestine from the 90s onward were about opening outward and exposure to the world.

However, it is important to consider what else could be done. For example, the opposite would be to have cultural practices that are localised and that open inwardly. There is an economy between these two, and the underlying debate is about whether liberation comes from speaking to the world and fitting within an international narrative, or whether it comes from grassroots work that engages local cultures in imagining their future. In Arabic we use the word *Sumud* صمود for this, meaning steadfastness, resilience.

I believe that rather than speaking to the world first and foremost, the role of culture is to speak to the community. I do not say this in a conservative, right-wing way that is about closing doors to others and about only speaking to those who are similar to yourself. Palestine is a small place in the global periphery, but because of its extreme situation, it has become central. The practices that come out of Palestine are not just experiments. These local dynamics create something essential for the world. The more you dive inwards – the more you economically, culturally, and productively depend on your local community – the more new forms of arts and culture will take shape. These situated forms are more meaningful to the world than what can be done by applying or adopting globalised, and mostly Euro-centric forms of arts and culture.

There is a huge cultural crisis in the economy of culture. What is happening in Palestine now is key to understanding what is happening in the Netherlands and Western Europe as well. The political shifts to the right wing and the way in which funding structures are changing affect what people understand as the role of cultural practitioners. The ongoing shift from welfare states to neoliberal economies will break things and this is going to be painful. In this sense, I believe Palestine is an extreme example of how the Netherlands will be moving in the future as well.

Everywhere, finance and state funding have become essential for culture. In this context, it is crucial that cultural institutions rethink the economies they are part of. In Palestine, this

question is immediate, there is no way around it. The Question of Funding collective – of which I am a member – has always tried to critique funding structures in Palestine and work towards different ways of funding culture. : This debate is not so prominent yet in the Netherlands, although currently, things seem to be shifting. I hope that people will become more actively involved in fighting for the political, economic, and cultural futures they want. This goes beyond party politics: it is about nurturing grassroots political movements. Dayra and other DAOs belong to that grassroots economy. They are trying to create an infrastructure for society to express and sustain itself.

We can think of this as a form of prefiguration : – the activist practice of living according to the ideals of the future one fights for in the present. With Dayra, we do not know exactly where we are going but we are going somewhere away from where we are now. We are discovering the new world that will come *while* we are building the tools with which to resist and bury the old world. These are Gramscian times: “The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters.” : At the same time, we do not want to create aggressive cuts with the past like those that modernity created – especially in the region. Not everything of the old world deserves to be buried, we need parts of it to build the future we want. Here, I am inspired by anti-colonial leader Amílcar Cabral’s book *Return to the Source*, which raises the question of how to bring the knowledge, tools, and ways of living of the past into the future without wanting to return to the past. :

The question we are asking ourselves with Dayra is: how do we support trust relations in a time in which there is barely any trust left between people? DAO technology can play a role in it. The idea of Dayra is to explore how a technology that claims to be trustless can help bring back these social relations of trust. The question of trust is not only about exchange but also about how we can disagree with each other. We want to find ways to mediate disagreement within the Dayra system. To have social trust relations and communal connections also means that

: For more on rethinking cultural institutions, see Khalili, Yazan. 2020. “The Total Work of the Cultural Institution.” *Makhzin* 3. <https://www.makhzin.org/issues/dictatorship/the-total-work-of-the-cultural-institution>.

: For more on prefiguration, see e.g., Monticelli, Lara. 2021. “On the Necessity of Prefigurative Politics.” *hesis Eleven* 167(11): 99-118. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07255136211056992>.

: Translated from Italian in Zizek, S. 2010. “A Permanent Economic Emergency.” *New Left Review* 64, <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii64/articles/slavoj-zizek-a-permanent-economic-emergency>

: Cabral, Amílcar. *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches of Amílcar Cabral*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973.

there should be room for disagreement and that there are ways to deal with that disagreement without having to go to the state or a court.

Recently, Dayra has been moving slowly. People's attention is elsewhere, understandably, and we did not reach the implementation level before the war started. This is unfortunate because we need a system like Dayra badly, especially in the context of the genocide! Currently, we are slowly starting things up again and we are rethinking what Dayra could be, diving deeper into the structures through which knowledge of past practices can be shared and made accessible to communities in the future.





# AUDE LAUNAY

Interviewed by Inte Gloerich on 14 November 2024

## DAOS ARE LIKE PLANTS, THEY NEED CONSTANT ATTENTION

*Aude Launay is a philosopher focused on the ethics and political philosophy of technology, and web3 in particular. Since 2016, they have been researching distributed decision-making through algorithmic processes and blockchain-based democratic systems. They are interested in the power mechanisms underpinning governance structures. They also apply these ideas in their curatorial and DAO work. They were one of the co-founders of the Decentralised Autonomous Kunstverein, an early art DAO, and have contributed and engaged with many others over the years. They are currently writing about the political philosophy and intellectual history of DAOs. In our conversation, Aude shared many examples of artworld DAOs, focusing on how they emerged, the issues they attempt to address, and why they did or did not work out. As a researcher of and a practitioner in the DAO scene, they emphasise that setting up and maintaining a DAO is anything but automated. It is hard and continuous work that requires a lot of dedication and conviction. Finally, they warn that DAOs are not deterministic: using a decentralised technology does not mean that the social effects of the technology are decentralising.*

: <https://dak.international/>.

### COORDINATING FOR A COMMON GOAL

**Inte Gloerich** How do you explain what a DAO is and what it can do?

**Aude Launay** When I started researching DAOs from around 2016 onward, I made a collection of definitions that I came across. I loved how much they revealed about the people who coined them: DAOs are a moving object, and everyone frames them in a slightly different way. When I explain what DAOs are, I

try to do it in layman's terms as I seek to address a general audience and to emphasise the continuity I see on a political and historical level rather than the disruption at a technological level that is usually highlighted, and – too often – fearmongered about.

So, this is not a very funky definition, but a DAO is a structure that facilitates the association and coordination of people driven by a common goal, especially with regard to the funding of that goal. Its particularity is that it can theoretically exist without leadership thanks to some operating mechanisms that are automated via rules encoded on a blockchain. At a minimum, these rules define the way to join the organisation, the way funds are deposited to it, how voting on the allocation of those funds takes place, and how people can leave the organisation. The proposals, the voting procedure, its results, as well as the code itself, are all publicly auditable, meaning that the organisation can be collectively owned and managed by its members. As such, DAOs on public blockchains are *a priori* uncensorable entities that only a global power outage could threaten. Importantly, "DAO" is an umbrella term for many different types of organisations that we will probably not all cover here as not all are concerned with the needs that are at play in artworld DAOs.

One of their features that particularly interests me is that, contrary to traditional organisations that use retroactive rule enforcement, DAOs use preventative rule enforcement. Consensus on proposals has to be reached through the voting mechanisms that have been chosen by the DAO, and defining these rules is already a first level of autonomy that is present from the very start. The use of blockchains for basic operations, such as voting and transferring funds, facilitates transparency in governance.

## THE MANY SHAPES ARTWORLD DAOS CAN TAKE

**IG** What potential do you see in the intersection of the artworld and DAOs?

**AL** DAOs can take the role of different actors in the artworld: they can act as artists, as art collectives, as collectors' clubs, as exhibition spaces, as institutions – even educational ones, although I have not yet come across an example of the latter. People in the arts and people in the crypto sphere remain quite unaware of the potential of art DAOs, which is understandable as DAOs are still a relatively small subset of the crypto industry, and art DAOs are a very minor subset of this subset. We have to keep in mind that crypto is still in its early days!

An interesting example of an artist DAO is the Jonas Lund Token (JLT) project which was not framed as a DAO from its launch in 2018, but claimed the term later on. It is an ongoing project by the artist Jonas Lund, whom I met in 2016, and invited for a solo show the following year. On this occasion, we discussed what would later become JLT, and even though it could not be produced in time for our exhibition, I kept following the project as I found it fascinating.

: Lund, Jonas. *Jonas Lund Token (JLT)* (cryptocurrency), 2018 -, <https://jonaslund.com/works/jonas-lund-token-jlt/>.

The tokens represent stakes in his artistic practice. There is a supply of 100.000 shares, which are made available in different ways: some could be claimed by a selected board of art professionals – of which I am part – with regard to their interactions with Lund's work, others can be claimed by people that purchase artworks or collectibles from the project, they can also be bought directly from the project's shop or earned through social media interactions with the project. The tokens give each shareholder a say in Jonas' artistic practice, as is the case with governance tokens in DAOs or blockchains. The market value of the token is a reflection of the market value of the artist's work, so the shareholder's participation is incentivised towards supporting the artist in a successful career path. It is a form of collective decision-making. Or perhaps it is more accurate to call it collective consultancy since the artist does retain some agency in the framing of the proposals to be voted on, as well as on which proposals he makes in the first place. The line that separates one's art practice and one's personal life is fine, and one of the boldest proposals was the one to decide where Jonas should live. As I recall, the options

were 1) moving to Amsterdam where he is administratively based; 2) moving to London where his partner is mostly based; 3) continuing to live in Berlin, and 4) buying a house in the countryside in Sweden, where he is from originally. Just as much as with proposals about formal details of artworks, or about whether to accept an exhibition invitation, people actively discussed the options on the shareholder forum. Witnessing and getting involved in artistic and aesthetic choices felt amazing and somewhat uncommon, even for an art curator! In my experience, the artworld feels devoid of conversations that are actually about art itself!

**IG** It is also a nice way of nuancing the widespread perception that DAOs and smart contracts are all about automation, the idea that you press play and then they do their thing. The JLT example shows that a lot of discussion goes into these processes. DAOs are technical as well as social phenomena, and it is always about finding the right balance between automating certain things and then keeping other things unautomated.

Do you have any other interesting examples?

**AL** Well, yes, especially regarding the swiftness of action that mimicks the speed of a conversation that DAOs can allow. The collectors' club called PleasrDAO has a really interesting origin story that many people, including myself, saw unfold in real-time on Twitter in the Spring of 2021. It was such an exhilarating experience, I did not sleep for two days!

The artist pplpleasr – pronounced people pleaser – produced a forty-six-second promotional video for the Uniswap token exchange protocol, with a view to showcasing the symbolism so prevalent in decentralized finance. Fascinated by the recent and insane popularity of NFTs, which she had been following for several years, she thought she would give it a try, but for the benefit of charities. Originally from Taiwan, the artist wished to support the Stand With Asians movement, which fights against the discrimination and violence against people of Asian and Pacific Island descent that was amplified by the COVID-19

crisis. Her unicorn, bringing prosperity to a desolate land, haloed by colourful lines undulating across the landscape and illustrating the mathematical formula on which the protocol is based, appeared on social media on March 25, 2021, at 3:56 p.m. CET. Its auction was announced to be on the Foundation platform the next morning. At 10:20 p.m., Leighton Cusak, co-founder of another decentralized finance protocol, tweeted, "Who wants to create a DAO in a hurry to bid on this NFT?" By 6:29 a.m., someone offered to help set up the DAO. By 6:43 a.m., two people were already publicly joining the project. Then a WhatsApp group formed and these core people rallied other bidders to their cause. At 1:24 a.m. the next day, the DAO, then consisting of twenty-three people, was leading the bidding. At 2:49 a.m., it won, raising \$525,000 for the charity in the process.

The now-named PleasrDAO is, to my knowledge, the first DAO to have been formed for the sole purpose of an acquisition, as a sort of special purpose acquisition company. A month later, PleasrDAO bid the equivalent of \$5.4 million to acquire Edward Snowden's first NFT to raise funds for the Freedom of the Press Foundation, which the whistleblower, a herald of transparency if there ever was one, chairs. PleasrDAO had about forty members at the time of this acquisition, on April 16, 2021 at 10:10 pm, still on Foundation.

Unlike collectors' clubs, which are generally closed groups composed of people who all more or less know each other, PleasrDAO was formed as an open group and grew via word of mouth on social networks. While some of its founders knew each other through their online profiles, as is common in web3 companies, it took almost a year for most of PleasrDAO's members to finally meet in person.

These moments are extremely important to understand the cultural history of DAOs. My own disappointment in the brick-and-mortar artworld led me to study shady transactions in the traditional art market, so what really stood out for me during those first few days of PleasrDAO was the transparency and

openness.

In addition to these values that are rather uncommon in the traditional artworld, I am fascinated by the ways NFTs opened up the definition of what art is. The traditional artworld would not initially consider memes or profile picture NFTs – like Bored Apes and Cryptopunks – art, yet within the context of web3, the concept of art has expanded to include these forms of expression. Fundamentally, anything that is labeled ‘art’ by its creator, is considered art in this context. Whether they are recognised by the traditional art market or not, teenage content creators, graphic designers, and digital artists all meet each other in web3 spaces *as* artists without distinction or critical apparatus. This gave rise to a culture that features both direct appreciation of the quality of the works and a very clear focus on prices. Whether you are a meme tweaker or a recognized artist in the contemporary art scene, anyone who wants to can, for the cost of the transaction, make a digital file into a rare object. There are no waiting lists nor auctions that select artists and buyers based on their fame, pedigree, or education. Anyone can place a bid while at the same time remaining pseudonymous. Rather than the anonymity jealously preserved by auction houses and freeports, the pseudonymity on the NFT market allows one to connect with a community. For me, all of these elements constitute a compelling paradigm shift away from the traditional saying that “art is what the artworld designates as art,” towards “anyone can be an artist as long as someone buys your art.” In a way, the market always already decided what art is, but now at least we are being open and honest about it!

## **ITERATIVELY DISCOVERING WHAT DAOS CAN AND CANNOT BE USED FOR**

**IG** You were involved in the now discontinued Decentralised Autonomous Kunstverein (DAK). Can you tell me a bit about your experience and what you were trying to do with this DAO?

**AL** I was one of the founding members of the DAK, which

started in 2018. I met its originator, the artist Nick Koppenhagen, as we had each published a text in the same magazine, and his bio said that he was interested in applying the DAO framework to the artworld. He had been part of The DAO – the original DAO! I reached out to him and we met in person – we were both living in Berlin at the time. He was already in conversation with two other people, both PhD candidates in film and visual studies at Harvard University – the researcher Wesley Simon and Francisco Alarcon, an artist and civil engineer – and we quickly kicked things off.

It was still early days for DAOs, to my knowledge, we were the first interested in having an art-related DAO. In the process of setting up our DAO, I bought my first cryptocurrencies, not as an investment vehicle, but as a tool to vote in our DAO, which I gather is not a common origin story for people in crypto. This whole process was a sandbox for all of us: we were figuring out what DAOs were and what we wanted to do with them while we were at the same time setting one up. An idea that we settled on was that the DAO would be a way to fund artistic projects in politically challenged territories, taking advantage of the blockchain as a way to bypass national jurisdictions. Or, as Nick recently put it: “We had lofty goals. In hindsight, I would place them in the middle of an uncanny valley between utopian-revolutionary and pragmatic-reformist.” :

: Koppenhagen, Nick.  
'Centralized Undead  
Organization,' *Google Docs*,  
November 2023, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1rpgktBfopMDjeVlmtk7kq7hZwSw-oH5d5eChiP7oTtHhA/edit?tab=t.0>.

The first tangible idea we discussed and that strongly sparked my enthusiasm was brought in by Wesley. He suggested that we could support the first Kobanê International Film Festival to take place in 2018 in Rojava, the Kurdish-majority autonomous region of Syria. This stateless enclave which functions through a bottom-up, grassroots democratic system and is led by groups instead of a singular leader, was at the time setting up educational programs around blockchain technologies and cryptocurrencies to develop its decentralised and cooperative economic systems. The region was equally driven towards crypto as it was driving crypto people towards itself. Wesley was connected to the festival's organisers over there, and had consulted with Amir Taaki, one of the first Bitcoin developers

who had also recently spent time in Rojava.

Unfortunately, we did not manage to make it happen. We were struggling to raise money because, in Europe, culture is so dependent on public funding and positioning the new form of funding that DAOs offered in this context was very difficult. People did not understand it yet, and retaining their attention was difficult. I realised then that DAOs are like plants, they need constant attention! If you do not engage with the community every day, it dies. I discovered how hard it was to set up and maintain a DAO. Even when you align on values, it is extremely difficult to keep it alive. And to quote the DAK's epitaph once again: "The DAK is an example of technological solutionism, a solution in search of a problem. It was founded with excitement for the technical feasibility of an art DAO instead of emerging as a necessary infrastructure around a collective practice to solve a shared problem when it presents itself." :

: Ibid.

**IG** You also contributed to the Proof of Work exhibition, which was described as a 'decentralised autonomous exhibition.' What does this mean?

: See Denny, Simon, Distributed Gallery, Harm van den Dorpel, Sarah Hamerman, Sam Hart, Kei Kreutler, Aude Launay, and Anna-Lisa Scherfose. *Proof of Work*, Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin, 8 September – 21 December 2018, <http://www.launaya.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/ProofOfWork.pdf>.

**AL** The Proof of Work exhibition was initiated by Simon Denny, who is a well-known artist dedicated to creating a cultural cartography of technologies. He was invited by the Schinkel Pavilion to curate a show in 2018, which he decided to focus on the narratives that surround the blockchain space. He attempted to distribute the decision-making process to a small group of artists and thinkers who would act as nodes in a curatorial network, and would each select two artworks or projects relevant to the current crypto discourse. I was one of the people in the curatorial network and I invited the DAK and the JLT. However, that the process was distributed does not mean that there was no hierarchical structure in place: Simon and his studio manager still vetted the projects, and the Schinkel Pavilion team did as well. There was no collective decision-making process per se. As it often goes with intellectually exciting art projects, there was not enough money nor enough time to make this work to its full potential.



For the DAK, the exhibition was a testbed, and for the exhibition, the DAK was the only project that directly addressed DAOs as an object. To set the stage for openness and decentralised decision-making, we invited the audience to vote on what the logo of the DAK would be, just as The DAO had also done. Personally, it was then that I fully grasped the immensity of the gap between non-crypto and crypto people, and the extent of the necessary work to be done to properly “onboard” people in such an organisation. I think it is then that I first felt that I might feel more comfortable as a witness, an analyst, and a reporter, all in all as a philosopher, than as a proactive member in the DAO. The feeling was overwhelming. So many bright possibilities and yet such a painstaking endeavour to share this vision in all its accuracy. The JLT reception was much more straightforward, probably in part because its presentation relied on tangible artworks “traditionally” hung on the art institution walls!

A few years later, I made another attempt to bridge art curation and DAOs. In 2021-2022, as I was discussing the terms of a research and writing residency with an art centre in France, they suggested I curate an exhibition that would reflect on my theoretical research on DAOs in the cultural field. Due to illness, I have not been able to complete the project, however, what stood out in the working process is that the traditional artworld and the crypto world function on completely different timelines. The art centre asked me to give an outline of the physical form of the show 1,5 years in advance; at that point, we had not even started the collective decision-making process about the ways we would collectively make decisions, let alone on the contents of the show! Making all those decisions was part and parcel of the exhibition itself, it was those processes that I wanted to share with the audience! I guess the most difficult part for me was to be the sole instigator of this project. Had we been a curatorial team from the start, things might have turned out differently. Situating yourself as a withdrawn originator is like walking on a tightrope. You want and need to be there to nudge people into participating, but you also want them to take initiative and ownership, which is why the debate between

progressive decentralisation and decentralisation from the outset is still an unresolved one. :

Yet, ten years ago, I had what I consider – and what was generally considered – a very successful experience of withdrawing myself as a curator. For a show at Fondation d'Entreprise Ricard in Paris, I let the artists I had invited, who, for the most part, did not know each other beforehand, spontaneously and collectively create a unique artwork that would become the exhibition. None of this was planned, it happened organically as the discussion between the artists unfolded and I felt increasingly lucky to witness this very witty and very specific conversation. I felt like the right thing to do was to become a witness and a scribe, to transcribe the experience through my own medium, which is writing. So the exhibition was accompanied not by a traditional press release but by a booklet narrating the whole process that led to the physical experience of the exhibition. This was an exhibition about painting, but so many of the reflections and processes were similar to the ones I experienced in my art DAO attempts. :

In college, I wrote my thesis on relational aesthetics through the prism of Wittgenstein's philosophy. And somehow, it all makes sense in retrospect: the continuity in my thinking and my interests is pretty clear! I was always interested in decentering the author's position, and DAOs sparked my interest because of their fascinating distribution of decision-making processes, not because of their funding capacities. And even in that respect, it is the transparency of funding that interests me more than the ease of pooling resources.

So yes, I had gathered an incredible group of amazing people to create this exhibition as a DAO, but in a way, it was not enough. I had previously organised a couple of side events of Ethereum conferences, and what I learnt from these experiences was that to get things done in the blockchain space, you need to move quick: invite people to something that happens on the following day or in the same week. This sort of timeline is clearly incompatible with the slow pace of the traditional artworld. And

: The notion of progressive decentralization means that originally centralised organisation gradually relinquish decision-making power to the community. For more detailed views on the topic, see Alleyne, M., C. Canon, A. Evans, Y. Feng, N. Schneider, and M. Zepeda. *Exit to Community: A Community Primer*, Boulder: MEDLab, 2020. [https://www.colorado.edu/lab/medlab/sites/default/files/attached-files/exit\\_tocommunityprimer-we\\_b.pdf](https://www.colorado.edu/lab/medlab/sites/default/files/attached-files/exit_tocommunityprimer-we_b.pdf).

: Launay, Aude. (davide balula, jonathan binet, simon collet, blaise parmentier, guillaume pelay, elodie seguin), Fondation d'Entreprise Ricard, Paris, 11 February – 15 March 2014. <http://www.launayau.de/index.php/2014/10/01/davide-balula-jonathan-binet-simon-collet-blaise-parmentier-guillaume-pelay-elodie-seguin/>.

at the same time, it is just impossible to get people in the blockchain space to focus on something that is more than a year in the future, because everything changes so fast that it just does not make sense to look that far ahead. Although I was met with a lot of enthusiasm on both sides, it just did not work.

## ORGANISING A DAO IS CLOSE TO BEING A COMMUNITY MANAGER

**AL** One of the things that I would like people from the artworld to get out of this conversation is that it is very difficult to set up and maintain an artworld DAO. I guess it is clear for those who have read this conversation until here! To some extent, a DAO seems to be a dream tool, but it is not just a technological tool. What is often forgotten is that you have to be very good at forming communities, at gathering people around you, and at keeping their attention. In a way, you have to become a community manager. A DAO is much more than an automated system, especially if you want to do something in the cultural sector that takes place in the physical world. There are very few projects that really succeed. The only one that comes to mind right now is The Sphere. But even they had their struggles.

Hackumenta was another project that I followed from the beginning and for which I had high hopes. It stemmed from Trojan DAO, an art DAO born in Athens in 2019, with the ambition of proposing an alternative to the bureaucratic and financial hierarchies of the art world. : Conceived as a grant-giving organisation, Trojan DAO set out with the aim to transform the cultural economy through the use of blockchain technology. Its board consists of great people, there are real crypto pioneers in there. Many of them met in the context of The DAO, and wanted to take its frameworks into the artworld.

Hackumenta was a project that James Simbouras, who is the summoner of Trojan DAO, started to work on in 2020. One of the many shapes the project took was that of a decentralised contemporary art fair: a peer-to-peer art market that would

: <https://www.trojandao.com/>.

offer a genuine experience of local encounters by setting up accommodation and exhibitions in private homes. To this end, a fungible token would have acted as a local currency that could be exchanged for works of art without any gallery or institution being involved. The project was to be financed through the pre-sale of these tokens, at which point its governance would be opened up to the public and the collectors, who would then be able to become active members of the DAO. :

Unfortunately, crypto culture was not prevalent enough in Greece and James only had a very small group of people around to help him develop the project. He participated in many workshops and educational programs in order to get people on board, but in the end, the project fizzled out. This shows that is difficult to mobilise people, even around beautiful ideas!

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Refraction DAO : was founded three years ago by a collective of 38 artists with the aim of producing big events that bridge visual arts and music from blockchain native artists as well as established digital artists. With over a hundred partners, and after producing many NFT artworks and hosting more than fifty events, the DAO is currently preparing to launch a new token, \$IRL, which they write is “designed to amplify collective creativity and shared ownership” “by sharing value across all stakeholders: audiences, artists, and venues.” : The discussion is token-gated for the moment, which means that, as a first step, it is only open to a select group of Refraction token holders, before being opened to the wider community later on. This also means that I am waiting to learn more and, as enticing as the promises of this new token sound, they remain pretty vague and general.

## RESEARCHING DAOS

**IG** It is great to hear so many examples. You have been researching the DAO scene from within for a long time, and you are even working on a book about it! Can you tell me a bit about the topic of the book? Based on your research for the book, how would you describe the current moment for DAOs,

: See for more information e.g., The Sphere.  
'Hackumenta: Emergent Dreams – James Simbouras – We Draw a Magic Circle and Grow at the Speed of Trust,'  
*YouTube video*, 17 November 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NYruM7-tADY>.  
: <https://www.refractionfestival.com/>.

: <https://x.com/RefractionDAO/status/1838956811195396297> and [https://www.instagram.com/p/C\\_3OWZLp1Cg/](https://www.instagram.com/p/C_3OWZLp1Cg/).

and what do you think the future holds for them?

**AL** The original working title of the book was Democratic Processes Prototyped by Artists. I had started this research on the distribution of decision making long before learning about DAOs. As I mentioned earlier, it is as a continuation of my Master's thesis research. In the beginning, I was convinced that artworld DAOs would take off really quickly, so I was working very fast to keep up with everything that was happening around me from 2016 onward. In hindsight, it was a bit early to be able to reflect on what was happening and for things to take shape properly. After a couple of years, only a few examples stood the test of time. I was very interested in the general concept of art DAOs, and I wanted to raise public awareness about it, but with just a few initiatives going on at the time, it seemed to me that this was not sufficiently rich material to pursue my analysis. So by the end of 2019, I started working more on the political origins of this form of organising.

Then, when the NFT hype took off, I was regularly invited to talk about NFTs at events and in the media. Soon, I got labelled as an "NFT expert" in the press, and of course, this only increased the requests – even though NFTs are not my primary topic of interest! Over time, I engaged more and more with the ideas underpinning NFTs, and it led me to reconsider common and unquestioned conceptions of private property through recent developments in contemporary philosophy. I also went on a quest to learn more about the values that underlie web3 in general. I wanted to go beyond the parts that are most often mediated, such as crypto bro culture and its intersections with survivalism and the life extension and longevity movements. Currently, I am writing about the thinking of the original cypherpunks – a community that was working on, among other things, digital cash from the early 90s onwards. All these different aspects of my research nourish my reflections on DAOs and allow me to apply my philosophical interest to the context of their intellectual history. I am not exactly sure what this book is going to be, but I have an incredible amount of material for it! It feels like a first-person encyclopedic tale of

DAO history told in real time.

**IG** Maybe it can become an auto-ethnographic account of DAO history? That would be cool, I think!

You mentioned private property just now, and I have also heard you speak about co-ownership elsewhere. How do you think DAOs can alter how we understand these notions?

**AL** Ownership is a core concept in crypto, but many different views on it and many different applications of it constitute crypto. One thing that I learned over time is that when you engage with this scene, you will be overwhelmingly confronted with just one ideology. You have to constantly remind yourself that crypto is a sum of many different ideologies and ideas and that it is very difficult to get a broad and realistic view of all that crypto is or can be. It is important to keep in mind that knowledge is always situated, and the discourse around crypto comes for a very large part from the U.S. Take for instance Chris Dixon's *Read, Write, Own*, which is argued from an investor's standpoint but disconnected from the reality of anyone who is not and probably never will be. :

: Dixon, Chris. *Read Write Own: Building the Next Era of the Internet*, New York: Random House, 2022.

Crypto seems to be a direct descendant of the founding ideas of American independence – partial ownership gives one an incentive in the general project – and is also largely rooted in a rather pessimistic worldview: the tragedy of the commons, the Moloch parable, the trolley problem, and game theory. The views expressed by Garrett Hardin in his 1968 article famously titled 'The Tragedy of the Commons' summarise the centuries long philosophical tradition that sees private property as a bulwark against the so-called egoistic human nature, and in which all these influential theories are entrenched: "Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest." :

: Hardin, Garrett. 'The Tragedy of the Commons.' *Science* 162, 1968, p. 1244.

What is fundamental is that in crypto, the technical meaning and the philosophical meaning of ownership conflate. As the saying goes, "not your keys, not your coins". Or in more explicit

terms, crypto is a finance management system in which one can bury an alphanumeric sequence engraved on metal in their garden as a way to preserve their savings. Your money is preserved in an ethereal realm of data but you are solely responsible for it. So it is about the ownership of one's money, of course, but also ownership of one's data, of one's identity, of one's social graph... Hence crypto exemplifies the many facets of ownership, such as (self-)sovereignty, autonomy, responsibility, and private property.

A common understanding of DAOs is that they are co-owned by their members, but as Philippe Honigman points out, "Another way to think about DAOs is actually to think about entities that are owned by no one. This is more like the A of DAOs, the autonomous part." : In this regard, we are coming close to the idea supported by the French philosopher Pierre Crétois that private property is fundamentally relational and contractual and that it cannot be seen as an exclusive relationship between the owner and things, but as a way of regulating social relationships to things that are fundamentally inappropriable or co-owned. Hence, there is no absolute private property, but a multiplicity of partial and relative rights that aim to make possible the coordination of social relations, and DAOs can be thought of as examples of Crétois' thesis that states that regimes of appropriation are modalities of the common, i.e. modalities of the embodiment of social life. : In a literal sense, co-ownership in DAOs is about people getting shares in a project, pooling their funds, and deciding collectively what to do with those funds. However, this is in a very narrow sense. If you zoom out of these specifics, co-ownership is more of a mental framework than the definition of a financial concept. It is about contributing labour, paying attention, performing care work, and all these sorts of elements that get lost if we think about crypto as an investment vehicle. Autonomy does not exist in a vacuum – one is autonomous from something or someone – and the same goes for ownership.

**IG** I see that we are at the end of our time. Is there anything that you want to add before we wrap up?

: Ethereum France. 'EthCC 2: Philippe Honigman,' *YouTube video*, 10 March 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DkKtoulZ3Q>.

: Crétois, Pierre. *La copossession du monde, Vers la fin de l'ordre propriétaire*, Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2023.

**AL** From my perspective, DAOs can be seen as a testbeds to prototype new structures within society, some of which have the long-term view to be viable structures outside of society as we know it today. The examples of such viable structures that I can think of are not in the field of art, as art is far from a common use case for DAOs, as we saw. However, land acquisition DAOs, pop up cities, privatised charter states, all these exit strategies have accelerated through DAO structures. Activist DAOs are an extremely interesting use case too. Speaking of activism, we have not touched upon the tooling topic, which is very important. While working in DAOs, people rely on all sorts of tools that are not dedicated DAO tools, whether that is for organising, communicating, raising funds, or taking action in a decentralised manner. Unfortunately, most of these tools are centralised, such as Telegram, Discord, Twitter... and not confidential at all. This is a problem, especially for activist DAOs that have to preserve the privacy of their members. There are effective privacy-enhancing technologies out there, but most are quite new and not widely used yet. We need to support these tools, expand them, and change the culture around them so that people actually start using them, because while I pointed out that DAOs are not necessarily transparent, on some level they can also be too transparent.



# STACCO TRONCOSO

Interviewed by Inte Gloerich on 19 November 2024

## NEOLIBERALISM IS A GAME WE DID NOT CONSENT TO. LET'S PLAY A DIFFERENT GAME!

: See <https://disco.coop/>  
and <https://guerrillamedia.coop/>

*Stacco Troncoso is an avid synthesiser of information and a radical polymath working towards elemental, people-led change on a burning planet. Stacco lives, breathes, teaches, and writes on the commons, P2P politics, and economics, open culture, post-growth futures, platform and open cooperativism, decentralised governance, blockchain, and more. He is a co-founder of DisCO.coop and Guerrilla Translation. : In our conversation, Stacco explains why he believes DAOs feature assumptions and logics that will ultimately reproduce existing power relations. DisCO is a critique of DAOs and proposes its own model for anti-capitalist, decolonial, and intersectionally feminist approaches to work and technology. In our conversation, Stacco explains how commons theory and feminist economics inform the DisCO framework. The example of Guerilla Translation, which is an organisation that applies the framework, highlights the impact DisCO has on people's lived experience. Finally, Stacco highlights the power of art and playing with the distinction between reality and fiction to convince people that change is needed and possible.*

### TOWARD ANTI-CAPITALIST, DECOLONIAL, AND INTERSECTIONALLY FEMINIST MODELS

**Inte Gloerich** Although DisCOs are not DAOs, I would like to ask you the same opening question as I asked the others. How do you explain what DAOs are? Is there anything that you do find interesting about them, and what made you decide to do something different?

**Stacco Troncoso** I am very ambivalent and critical of DAOs. Many people that use them have very little technical comprehension and yet they have a lot of faith that technology will be able to solve essential social and political matters. At the same time, you have to take into account that the political economy of DAOs is very closely linked to the political economy of Bitcoin, that is, right-wing libertarianism. One of the main ideas that emerges from the intersection of right-wing libertarianism with blockchain technology is that the technology should be used to sanitise away human messiness. People believe that if their smart contracts are detailed and finessed enough, they will be able to prevent any future problems that human messiness causes. This attitude is based on the game theory of neoliberal economists, and it is very deterministic. Instead, my own experience is that the exception is always the rule: something goes wrong every single time. Every equation – however fair it may be in the abstract – does not meet reality exactly.

Additionally, DAOs usually reflect the values of the people that have the money to invest in them or the people that have the technical savviness to design them. The DAO space is saturated with attractive linguistics that persuade people that are not technically savvy to use fiat money to buy tokens. This turns DAOs into investment vehicles rather than vehicles for social innovation. Even though many people involved in DAOs claim that they are reimagining value, this reimagination of value is not very imaginative to me. It reproduces a lot of the same dynamics that are already all around us. They raise money to develop a project, but then after a few years, there is nothing to show for it. If you go back to the websites of some of those early DAO projects now, you will see the same basic promise but with a bit of AI fairy dust on top to catch the latest hype. Well-funded DAOs were promising decentralised, autonomous futures by the mid-2020s. You know the joke about nuclear fusion – it is 20 years in the future *and always will be*. The promised DAO Utopia is similarly perpetually receding into the horizon. We never seem to arrive at the moment when things are actually working. People first got interested in Ethereum

because they wanted to reimagine value and have more autonomy. We are now ten years after the publication of the Ethereum whitepaper, and I think it is fair to say that while it has thrown up some fascinating proposals and use cases, in the larger scheme of things, DAOs have not had the promised and much-hyped impact that gripped so many people's imaginations.

**IG** Did DisCO start out from the idea of using a DAO and did you quickly realise that they were not what you were looking for, or did you come across DAOs along the way?

**ST** Before there was DisCO, there was Guerilla Translation, which is a translation agency that implemented new governance and economic models that consider not just the kind of value that is recognised by the market but also invisible and essential reproductive care work and what we call 'lovework.' This lovework consists of voluntary contributions to the commons, such as the pro bono translation of activist material. By putting a value on these different kinds of contributions, we prevent people from stretching themselves beyond their limits by doing what they value most. Being passionate about a cause can often lead to burnout, so we made sure to visibilise those sorts of contributions.

Around the time the Ethereum whitepaper was published in 2014, we were working on an EU project called P2P Value with Primavera di Filippi and Samer Hassan. : The project researched how common value is created in peer-to-peer and collaborative communities, and we quickly realised that Guerilla Translation would be a great use case to try things out with. Interestingly, the first thing we encountered in this process was a lot of people asking, "Why do you need blockchain technology for this at all?" At first, we thought this was due to a technical misunderstanding, but along the way, we got interested in the significance of this 'why' question. We decided to leave behind the practical case of reimagining value with Guerilla Translation and focus on how we could bring its model of value to other domains.

: See e.g., Hassan, Samer. 2014. "Decentralized technologies to support digital commons." Presentation at *P2Pvalue: Collaborative Production Online*, Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, 22 January. <https://www.cccb.org/en/multimedia/videos/p2pvalue-decentralized-technologies-to-support-digital-commons/210779>.

The DisCO Manifesto, which we published in 2019, was fundamentally a critique of DAOs saying, “Wait a minute, you have gone too fast.” The main problem for us was that, in the DAO space, people seem to have this idea that by developing smart contracts, they are going to solve human messiness. But human messiness is where the fun of life is! If we do not want this planet to turn into a burning hellhole, we need to work together as humans, not as automated scripts. No technology is going to solve climate change if we cannot get our act together as humans.

The DisCO Manifesto embeds these planetary scale issues within a general critique of technology that is very precise in its terminology: we want to see technology that is anti-capitalist, decolonial, and intersectionally feminist. These are very clear words, and for some, they might sound too negative or confrontational. I like to compare it to someone who is allergic to peanuts and therefore really appreciates it when a food label explicitly states that something is free from peanuts and thus will not kill them. Similarly, our planet is fatally allergic to ecological devastation in the name of growth, so stating that something is anti-capitalist is a very useful label indeed. Similarly, if capitalism is based on the labour and resources of formerly colonised countries, then it is important to point this out. And, if capitalism constantly reproduces the patriarchy, then it is important to point this out.

Saying that you are developing something that is anti-capitalist, decolonial, and intersectionally feminist is incredibly liberating, especially in the DAO world. Even though we have to remember that DAOs are different from Bitcoin, these spaces do share a lot of the same exploitative and extractive dynamics.

Take for example feminist economics. Hardly anyone is looking at this in the blockchain space. Maybe since DisCO, there is a bit more awareness, and the *Beyond the Blokechain: the Cryptofeminist Agenda* panel that you organised at the MoneyLab: Outside of Finance conference in 2019 was also an important early contribution. These critiques are fundamental to

: Troncoso, Stacco, and Ann Marie Utratel. 2019. *If I Only Had A Heart: A DisCO Manifesto*. Disco.coop, Transnational Institute, and Guerrilla Media Collective. <https://manifesto.disco.coop/>.

: Video and descriptions of the panel available at <http://www.disco.coop/2019/12/beyond-the-blokechain-the-cryptofeminist-agenda/>. Find the programme of the conference and its (video) documentation at <https://networkcultures.org/moneylab/events/moneylab-7-outside-of-finance-program/>.

creating anything truly different from the status quo. The DAO space is filled with revolutionary rhetoric, but if they do not include these kinds of critiques – which they generally do not – then they just end up measuring the same things with new tools. The results will not constitute real change.

**IG** One of the ways in which the difference between DisCOs and DAOs is described in the Manifesto is by emphasising that DisCOs favour “distributed over decentralised” systems.” Why is this an important distinction to make?

**ST** Decentralisation is about the connectivity between nodes, but it does not address the economic and tacit power relations between those nodes. Our interpretation is that decentralisation always implies that there is a prior, centralised power structure that you slowly deconstruct to decentralise it. Distribution has a much more direct approach to address power dynamics and hierarchies.

This is so urgent in the context of blockchain technologies. Think for example of the Gini coefficient – which measures various forms of economic inequality – of Bitcoin. It is worse than the coefficient of most fiat currencies. Or think of the levels of non-white, non-male participation in DAOs. They are still staggeringly low. There were a lot of neoliberal feminist projects in DAO culture that organised events promoting women in blockchain, but they did not address the fundamental issues. Their feminism was not anti-capitalist and decolonial. This is not what we need.

## **PRACTICING FEMINIST ECONOMICS**

**IG** How do the ideas of feminist economics take shape in DisCO as a framework or Guerilla Translation specifically?

**ST** A key part of it is recognising invisible reproductive work, meaning all those efforts that people put in to create optimal conditions for productive work to happen. Feminist economist duo Gibson-Graham uses the metaphor of the iceberg: we only

see the productive labour above the surface, but that is only possible because there is a lot of essential work that is hidden below the surface and does not get valued at all. :

Another important influence in this context is activist anthropologist David Graeber. He went beyond the question of how value gets reproduced towards a more fundamental question. In Marxist theory, you can read about redistributing value to the working class, or nowadays to the precariat. This is important, but Graeber asked the question that should come before the moment of redistribution: he asked what value is in the first place. The economy functions by constantly measuring value, and we have to understand more about the assumptions about value that influence these processes, even while redistributing value back to the working class. : We have to question why so much work, especially its omnipresent but invisibilised emotional aspects, is still so highly gendered.

Combining these two influences, we started to recognise that, in large companies, care work is both abstracted upwards and pushed downward. In the upward dynamic, there are all these extremely well-paid people in the management layer doing care work; this is what Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel describe as the “Coordinator Class.” : In the downward dynamic, you see that care work – cleaning, maintenance, etc – is highly racialised and gendered. Both of these two dynamics act in service of capital.

Our goal was to move beyond the appreciation of care work in the home – which for example the Wages for Housework movement started to address in the 1970s : – towards making visible and valuing care work in the workplace. We tried to apply these insights to our own context with Guerilla Translation. If translation is our productive work, who is doing the housekeeping? Who is taking care of social media? Who is doing the taxes? Who is cleaning the toilets? This is all labour that is needed but does not get paid. We did not want to reproduce either the upward or the downward dynamic of care work and came up with the DisCO model to overcome these limitations.

: Gibson-Graham, Julie Katherine. 2002. “Diverse Economies: Rethinking the Economy and Economic Representation,” available at <http://avery.wellesley.edu/Economics/jmatthaei/transformationcentral/solidarity/solidaritydocuments/diverseeconomies.pdf>.

: Graeber, David. 2002. *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams*. London: Palgrave.

: See e.g., Albert, Michael. 2003. *Parecon: Life after Capitalism*. London: Verso.

: See e.g., Toupin, Louise. 2018. *Wages for Housework: A History of an International Feminist Movement, 1972–77*. London: Pluto Press.

The central idea is very simple: notice how much care work is being done in your organisation and address this in the way you redistribute value. Now, you may decide to tokenise this or timebank it, DisCO is agnostic to the methods you choose, as long as you notice and appreciate care work and have honest conversations about it. If you want to make a DAO, you need to recognise these obscured tendencies and put them in your value proposition. And you need to make the DAO flexible enough to accommodate reality as it changes because that is what messy humanity does.

**IG** What changed practically for people in Guerilla Translation when they started to organise according to DisCO principles?

**ST** I will answer this question by talking from my own experience. I was a translator for 20 years before DisCO. I was doing all sorts of translation work while going to protests and reading Kropotkin and other anarcho-communist literature on the side. My day job and my activism were very separate. That is, until Occupy Wall Street happened in 2011. Six months prior, its Spanish predecessor, the 15M movement, had taken off, and the people on the streets in New York had a real need to learn from our experiences, but all our documentation was in Spanish. Guerilla Translation emerged to translate relevant pieces of information so that they could be used in different local contexts. For the first time, we organised to put our skills to use for a cause that we agreed with. Soon, it just exploded! We always had more work than we had the capacity for because by voluntarily producing these translations for the commons, people became aware of our skills and came to us with paid jobs that were also intellectually stimulating. Our voluntary work acted as a sort of automatic advertisement! We were reading all these theories but then also putting them into practice.

## CREATING CAPACITY FOR THE COMMONS

**IG** In the DisCO Manifesto, you write that it is important to understand the distinction between culture and structure. What

: See McKeon, Timothy.  
2013 "Seeing the Invisible:  
On Unicorns and the 15-M  
Movement." *Guerrilla  
Media Collective*. <https://www.guerrillamedia.coop/en/seeing-the-invisible-on-unicorns-and-the-15-m-movement/>.

does this mean and why is this important?

**ST** This idea was first verbalised by our mentors David Bollier and Silke Helfrich in their book *Free, Fair, and Alive: The Insurgent Power of the Commons*. : They write that within any commons, there is always a tacit relationship between culture and structure. Culture is the animating logic of the group, it is the vibe, it is what you want to do together. Culture also consists of the linguistic codes that you share and the imaginary that you develop together. Structure, on the other hand, consists of all the legal and technological ways in which a culture is made to persist over time. You cannot just sit in a bar and have great conversations about organising your work differently, you also have to define lasting forms to actually put it into practice together with others. Setting up a cooperative is a way to do this using the structures of the legal system. A DAO is a technological way of going about this that is often used by people who do not agree with the way the state distributes value and want to redesign these processes. What you can do with DAOs is still quite limited by regulatory frameworks though; even if you use DAO technology you continuously bump up against the structures of the state.

The key point is that structure cannot survive without culture and vice versa. Culture can just be a nice conversation, and structure is what gives us security about what happens when things go wrong. Beyond legal and technological structures, the commons are another way of creating lasting frameworks. Commons communities have a lot of conversations about trust and fostering collective culture and reinforce this through structures to document and share their practices with others. For example, a coffee cooperative in Colombia can learn from the way another cooperative in Ethiopia stood up to the power of multinationals in order to avoid exploitation. Or they might learn about better ways to grow the coffee plants or how value can be funneled back to the community. These are the kinds of information flows that we want to foster and create frameworks for: DisCO provides a knowledge structure that can be used to design technological and legal structures along anti-capitalist,

: Bollier, David, and Silke Helfrich. 2019. *Free, Fair and Alive: The Insurgent Power of the Commons*. Gabriola Island, CA: New Society Publishers. <https://freefairandalive.org/>.



decolonial, and intersectionally feminist ways. We want to ensure that these transgressive cultures gain legal recognition, validity, and follow-through by creating structures of mutual support.

**IG** There are a lot of references to the commons in the DisCO materials. There are different theories of the commons. How does DisCO understand the commons?

**ST** Rather than following Elinor Ostrom, who perhaps is the most famous theorist of the commons, we are much more informed by the work of our mentors David Bollier and Silke Helfrich. Through their work and by learning from our network, we realised that there is a lot of theoretical work on European commons, while the on-the-ground commons work of people in Latin America and Africa still largely remains out of view. Our friend and DisCO team member brandon king, a community organiser in Jackson, Mississippi who co-founded Cooperation Jackson to fight for economic justice, told me once that he “has been with people that can talk about sociocracy and holocracy all day long, but they do not have the empathy to sit with someone and have a conversation.” That so perfectly expresses why we are critical of a large part of the white, academic commons movement and its focus on the enclosure of the English commons while at the same time way more terrible stuff was happening in Africa that no one was talking about.

To be fair, Ostrom also did a lot of work all over Asia, but her focus is too much on the economic dimensions of the commons – which makes sense, she was an economist after all. But for us, the commons are not about economics, they are not about rules. The commons are about social relations. The way I see it, the commons are endemic to human nature. Another thing that Graeber showed was that there are always different economic systems going on at the same time. At school, we all learn about how the arrival of agriculture killed the commons that existed during the hunter-gatherer societies. But this is not true! The commons persisted throughout every different economic model that followed. History is riddled with examples

of people drifting away or staying hidden from predatory power structures and, within these, you have commons. Yes, during feudalism a king would forcibly extract an amount of your grain or conscript you for the army, but beneath this extractive layer, peasant economies were largely organised as a commons. Nowadays the commons persists in an untold number of community projects around care, food, free software, or the right to repair. It exists in the 2.5 billion people who derive their sustenance from natural resource commons. It is omnipresent but not legible through the lens of the market.

How much the commons is visible at any given time is the result of power dynamics. To me, the commons is more powerful than the dollar, bitcoin, or petrol. The commons allows us to have autonomy to make decisions about the kind of work we think is valuable to do. I understand the commons as an anti-capitalist, decolonial, and intersectionally feminist way of taking stock of our relationships with each other and with the earth. The commons is invaluable, and we are all already familiar with commons logics, even if Western educational systems – which have been exported globally – teach us to look away from it and instead look to the state or the market for solutions.

**IG** Over the years, there have been a lot of projects that attempt to protect or produce commons by creating blockchain-based structures. From the way you speak about it, you seem to emphasise instead the cultural dimensions of the commons, is that right?

**ST** I will not name names, but there are a lot of blockchain projects with ‘commons’ in their name or in their literature that obviously have no clue of what they are talking about. Sometimes they use a cursory reading of Ostrom, or they conflate the commons with public resources, or with “the public,” all while claiming to be anti-statist. Look, the idea of the commons is a lot simpler than any of this, but it does require that you deconstruct your own biases, and *that* is not easy. The commons are best understood by doing. Only after that,

the right kind of structures can be built. The outcomes of many of those blockchain commons projects show that they had a tacit culture of growth and dynamics of accumulation hidden underneath their commons rhetoric, and that is what the rules and protocols will benefit in the end.

**IG** Capitalism is always ready to coopt anything that attempts to undermine it. How do you protect yourself against this dynamic?

**ST** By building autonomy and by being clear. For example, with regards to the latter sure, capitalism can coopt the commons, but not when you call what you are doing anti-capitalist. It can be as simple as that.

With regards to the former, you need to identify the tendencies you want to change and create the capacity to do so. Most straightforwardly, capitalism can be defined as a system in which the means of production are privately held, and people must perform wage labour to sustain themselves. This leads to an orientation towards growth and the accumulation of power with the few. When people are hungry, they will do anything, so there is a privilege to this kind of activism. Yet, we must do it so that, when a factory closes down, people realise that they can organise themselves differently. A lot of changes come about when they are not lifestyle choices but survival necessities. In the meantime, rather than selling change as a lifestyle choice, it is better if we focus our attention on creating capacity for the moment when things get worse. We saw this firsthand during the financial crisis of 2008. All around Spain and Greece neighbourhood health clinics and food projects popped up. This was an explosion of the commons!

## DEFINING NEW TERMS FOR NEW ECONOMIC SYSTEMS

**IG** I came across the term 'Open Value Cooperativism' (OVC) in the DisCO manifesto. What does it mean to organise according to this principle?

**ST** OVC was a big part of the original governance model of DisCO, because we were focused on creating external transparency to allow for mutual coordination between different initiatives. However, we do not use that term so much anymore, now we talk about Open Value Accounting and Radical Distributed Tech. : We started to move away from OVC because we realised that what is more important than openness is consent. We decided that within a DisCO-based organisation you have the right to keep your books closed as long as you are practicing a form of value distribution that is consented to by the whole group and is based on a re-examination of what value is in the first place. Each DisCO can decide how open they want to be about their internal data, and they can determine the terms according to which those data can be used. For example, a DisCO may decide to prevent the monetisation of their data, or they can stipulate that their data cannot be fed into machine learning processes.

: N.d. "DisCO DNA 4: Open Value Accounting and Radical Distributed Tech." *DisCO*. [https://ball.disco.coop/DisCO\\_DNA\\_4:\\_Open\\_Value\\_Accounting\\_and\\_Radical\\_Distributed\\_Tech](https://ball.disco.coop/DisCO_DNA_4:_Open_Value_Accounting_and_Radical_Distributed_Tech).

Another aspect that contributed to our move away from Open Value Cooperativism is the depoliticisation of open source. A lot of the open-source movement got swallowed by big tech, while the people who made it work in the first place were left with the crumbs. Check out Android – the biggest surveillance apparatus in the history of humankind is built on top of our beloved and open-source Linux.

**IG** Another term I wanted to get some more clarity on is Community Algorithmic Trust.

**ST** We call it the DisCO CAT! : It builds on the idea of Community Land Trusts, which is a legal structure to host a community's culture. Imagine a community that wants to prevent a local area from being bought by an investment company that wants to build luxury condos. Instead, they want to build a school and a park to nourish the community. To do this, the community needs to find a way to take the land out of the market. A Community Land Trust allows them to do so and gives them legal protection as well. CLTs can pool money together from their members, or even from their municipality to

: <https://basics.disco.coop/8-disco-terminology.html#disco-cat>.

“lock” the price of land against inflation and speculation.

A CAT is basically the same, but instead of the legal structure, it uses technological structures to recognise care work, emotional labour, and other forms of invisibilised dynamics as forms of value creation that have weight in a system of value redistribution. A CAT can be a spreadsheet, a blockchain, or whatever the community needs it to be. It is important to choose a form that is appropriate for the scale of the community. For example, if you can fit in a room together, you don't need a blockchain to build trust.

## WHERE IS THE PARTY AT? AN UPDATE ON DISCO

**IG** What is happening with DisCO currently?

**ST** We are currently working on an anniversary edition of the Manifesto. Going back to it, we realised that while we were actually right about a lot of things, not everyone will have the time to go through those 80 pages and engage with the enormous amount of links we put in there. So, we are producing several materials to go next to it. For example, we already have a publication called DisCO Elements, which is sort of like an outtakes album – we love a good musical reference – next to the Manifesto. DisCO co-founder Ann Marie Utratel is now recording an English audiobook version of the Manifesto and I am recording one in Spanish – which of course was translated by Guerilla Translation!

: Troncoso, Stacco, and Ann Marie Utratel. *Groove is in the Heart: DisCO Elements*, DisCO, n.d., <http://elements.disco.coop/index.html>.

: *Stop! In the Name of Love (Before You Break Our Heart): The DisCO Pink Paper*, DisCO, forthcoming <https://pink.disco.coop/>.

: See 2023. “Strategizing with Love, Intentionality, and Presence: DisCO Remastered 2023.” *DisCO*. <https://www.disco.coop/2023/12/strategizing-with-love-intentionality-and-presence-disco-remastered-2023/> for a short film and more information on this approach.

And now we are writing the DisCO Pink Paper, which starts from this question: what does anti-capitalist, decolonial, intersectionally feminist technology look like? Of course, we cannot answer this question by ourselves, so we have been hosting workshops in which we pose this question to different people and collect their answers. We are then using these answers to see how existing technologies could answer people's needs while needing a minimal amount of investment. We distinguish between three types of “tech we want.” One is already existing and ready to use. Two is existing tech that

needs to be adapted or expropriated and brought into the commons, for example, proprietary software that can have social value but is set back by closed code and capitalist mindsets. The third type is the tech we need to create. A clear mapping of all three lets us envision the most expedient combination to improve the efficacy of our systems and practice harm reduction with regard to dangerous tech.

In the future, we want to do more work with communities, and we want to invite people to contribute to the documentation because there is only so much that we know ourselves. Ann-Marie and I are both white and Western, so there is a whole lot that we can't claim first-hand experience of. People constantly reach out to us with the question if we can teach them to become a DisCO. This never occurred to us, and we do not want to be put on a pedestal as expert consultants or something like that. We want to learn from and with each other, and we are developing programmes and frameworks for that. For example, for anyone interested in becoming a DisCO, we have a questionnaire on the website that helps you think through the DisCO principles and how you want to apply them. :

: <https://www.disco.coop/forms/disco-challenge/>.

Developing protocols and tools without working with communities just does not work. There is no perfect design that works in all situations. It is way more valuable to work with others to get through hard times together than to work on the next shiny thing that will break down when you need it most.

We have also published a website called DisCO Basics : for people who do not have the time to read the whole manifesto. We made it with a system that we are calling qwiki (pronounced as: 'quickie'), which allows us to put in pop-ups with definitions that people can decide to read or skip according to their interests and needs. This means that we can use technical language without being exclusionary. qwiki is a low-intensity, adaptable technology that does not need a lot of servers to keep it running, so it allows us to extend our principles into these publishing practices as well.

: <https://basics.disco.coop/>.

**IG** Could you share 1 or 2 examples of DisCO-adjacent projects that you think are doing good work?

**ST** There are a bunch of people who are applying DisCO principles and the language that we developed, such as 'lovework.' Reclaiming the language through which we talk about the things that we care about is very important. People have been using neoliberal language for the last 40 years without ever consenting to it and it is really cool to see these more critical words starting to travel around.

: <https://www.disco.coop/labs/sodaa/>.

: <https://cooperationjackson.org/>.

: <https://www.weareadg.org/>.

There's a cool group in the UK called Self-Organized Decentralised Accessible Arts (SODAA) : that was doing a DisCO disco, as in discotheque – they are a nightclub run by DisCO principles working toward making nightlife and clubbing a more community-based experience. Then there is Cooperation Jackson, : which is a long-standing institution for creating commons and community resilience. We have had a lot of conversations with them, and we are planning to go there soon to understand their interpretation of the DisCO principles some more. There is a group called the Autonomous Design Group. : They have done some great work for DisCO and others and we are working with them on adapting the Guerilla Translation governance model but applying it to design. This works perfectly because a lot of the care work is similar between these two domains.

Right now, we are trying to visit as many of these examples as possible. We want to introduce them to qwiki, so that they can document and share their practices. This should be open to anyone. There are DisCOs out there in the wild that we do not even know about. We do not want to become a regulatory body or anything like that, but we want to learn from these DisCOs! Mutual recognisability is important, so we encourage groups to actively self-identify as a DisCO and use the new economic syntax that comes with it. : Coops are constantly invisibilised: when we wrote the DisCO Manifesto, globally, cooperatives had a collective turnover of 3.1 trillion USD, which was the same as the market cap of Microsoft, Amazon, Google, and Apple

: See <https://basics.disco.coop/8-disco-terminology.html>.

combined. Yet, we never hear about them. Using the right language and narrative is very important to create more visibility.

## FAKING REAL CHANGE INTO BEING

**ST** We always struggled to define DisCO. We went from thinking about it as an alternative to DAOs to thinking about it as a more politicised form of platform cooperativism. In the end, we have come to the conclusion that DisCO is an artwork. It straddles reality and fiction. We are hypothesising something but then also putting it into practice in the real world. I believe that art is the last chance we have to make this world viable. Everything else failed. Capitalism tells us that it can succeed by using propaganda. Propaganda is art in service of power. We need to reclaim its methods for our own purposes! We are really inspired by a 1973 Orson Welles film called *F is for Fake*, a documentary about people who create forgeries of Dalí or Picasso paintings, but halfway through, the documentary becomes fake itself. As a viewer, you do not know anymore what is real and what is fiction. Thinking of this film, we started considering DisCO on an artistic level and the power of this intersection of the real and the fake.

Another definition of DisCO is that it is an Economic Live Action Role-Playing game (eLARP). : We are creating our own rules in the DisCO eLARP, but we are playing with real money. Our art consists of being subversive in the real world and creating real material change for positive social and ecological impacts while being playful at the same time. Neoliberalism was always already a game, although it is one that we did not consent to, with rules that are enforced through dispossession, violence, enclosure, and resource extraction. Let's play a different game.

**IG** In the context of DAOs, I always think of it like this: they allow us to do certain things technically, but they also allow us to do things imaginatively. DAOs allow us to speculate together with others while we are also engaging with the dynamics of

: [https://balldisco.coop/DisCO\\_Glossary#LAERP\\_\(Live\\_Action\\_Economic\\_Role-Playing\\_Game\)](https://balldisco.coop/DisCO_Glossary#LAERP_(Live_Action_Economic_Role-Playing_Game)).



the real world around us at the same time. These two sides need to be balanced.

**ST** Yeah, similarly to the balance between culture and structure, there is no imagination without action and vice versa. They are both part of the same process. Being aware that you can have power is very important. The most complicated aspect of overturning capitalism is convincing people that it is possible. We are trying to convince people by giving them solutions to their practical needs, by inspiring them through art, and by giving them hope. Together, we can change the narrative of reality.

**IG** Finally, I am just wondering, what is with all the references to music and dancing?

**ST** Well, we come from punk. We want to make music, but we find ourselves in this subculture around political economy, P2P, and the commons. When we realised that we did not want to make DAOs, but rather DIStributed COoperatives, Ann Marie came up with the name DisCO. That was an immediate hit! An added layer of meaning is that as a musical genre, disco is tied to black and queer movements in the 1970s. : At the same time, our visuals are a reference to punk, graffiti, and street art culture. All these references communicate different elements of what we want to do with DisCO. Additionally, the name has a punk sort of power: it is easy to remember and you can write it on the doors of toilets.

Good visuals, good narrative, good concept, they all help so much with getting things done. They are like chocolate; they go straight to the pleasure centres of the brain. This is why art is the most powerful thing in the world.

: See Polyphonic. 2022. "The Untold History of Disco." *YouTube video*. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q\\_c2dCQ5WLo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q_c2dCQ5WLo).



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# COLOPHON

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Precarity and budget cuts plague arts and culture while they are still recovering from the damages of the pandemic. Meanwhile, extreme right wing politics spreads across the world and increases censorship and repression on artists and cultural practitioners. How can creatives come together and build solidarity and collective power against these threats?

This book contains conversations with artists and activists that engage critically with the socioeconomic setup of their sector. They activate communities and collectively build tools and infrastructures to prefigure different futures. Sharing their views on the potentials and pitfalls of Decentralised Autonomous Organisations—an emerging technology many of them use—the interviewees invite readers into the important and exciting space of artistic-activist reflection on, critique of, engagement with, and (re)imagination of these (and other) complex technologies.

Interviewees: Erik Bordeleau, Ruth Catlow, Aude Launay, Yazan Khalili, Penny Rafferty, and Stacco Troncoso.

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