

CLASS AND CURATING



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CURATORIAL PRACTICE AND SOCIAL CLASS: CHALLENGING A CULTURE OF EXCLUSION


Through an analysis of the structural inequality evidenced within the arts and cultural sector, the following essay will explore the need for contemporary curatorial practice to react to the glaring omission of working class voices and experiences. An articulation of systemic classist exclusion, demonisation and inequality have been refined through a consideration of the history of both social class and curatorial practice, and my own research has been prompted by an ongoing desire to better understand inequality and the experience of acute cultural alienation.

Amongst an increasingly divisive political reality, the following text is grounded in the belief that the culturally legitimising role of the curator must be better utilised to incite sectoral change and welcome a multiplicity of diverse voices and perspectives.

INEQUALITY, POVERTY AND THE AUSTERITY CONDITION

Late this summer, with the support of the Arts Council International Development Fund, I had the opportunity to undertake a short period of international research into community archives and the archival preservation and celebration of marginalised histories. I visited the collections held within Stony Island Arts Bank as part of Rebuild Foundation - an expansive not-for-profit neighbourhood regeneration and transformation project led by artist Theaster Gates in downtown Chicago (USA), as well as Interference Archive (IA) in Brooklyn.

Entirely volunteer-run, Interference Archive is a not-for-profit library, study centre, gallery and open-access archive of materials all relating to activism, social movements and political agitation. Founded in 2011, the work of IA foregrounds contemporary activism within historical lineages of local and global oppression, demonstrating and preserving the inextricable relationship between art and protest. Rooted in a belief that shared histories should be accessible, visitors are actively encouraged to explore and interact with materials



within the archives. This approach privileges use over preservation and informs IA's collection development policy, which explicitly states that 'materials should not be donated if they cannot be handled extensively, albeit with care'.¹ Wary of jeopardising their autonomy by relying on sources of public funding, IA prefers to remain accountable to a community of over one hundred donors who support the project with monthly donations of \$10 to \$50.




Interference Archive, Brooklyn

In Chicago, initially vacant since the eighties and threatened with demolition, the Stony Island Arts Bank was purchased by artist Theaster Gates in 2012 and radically transformed into a gallery, library, media archive and community centre. The Johnson Publishing Archive, comprised of books

and periodicals donated by the Johnson Publishing Company (publisher of Ebony and Jet magazine), over 60,000 glass lantern slides of art and architectural history donated by the University of Chicago, and Frankie Knuckles' (the godfather of House Music) vinyl collection are examples of some of the works on display which centre around preserving, celebrating and affording dignity to the history and culture of South Chicago. Gates also preserved the gazebo next to which Tamir Rice stood when he was fatally and unlawfully shot by police in 2014. Now safeguarded by Gates and Rice's family, the gazebo lends itself to a further community led discussion and public programme around police brutality and the black experience.



'Johnson Publishing Archives and Collections at Stony Island Arts Bank, Chicago. Image Credit Tom Harris @ Hedrich Blessing Photographers'





The long awaited ambition to spend time with both Interference Archive in Brooklyn and Stony Island Arts Bank in Chicago evolved alongside a research and later curatorial preoccupation with diversifying contemporary arts representation and engagement. Early on, the trajectory of my own curatorial practice was affected by the profound polarisation I experienced while working in Education at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London whilst still residing and developing projects in my hometown of Luton. Developed as a personal antidote to both negative sensationalist press and a limited cultural infrastructure, my work in Luton, under the guise of TMT Projects,² has supported local creatives and afforded dignity and representation to the complexities of working class experience. Since 2012, these exhibitions and events have embraced the challenges (both logistically and conceptually) of working with functioning alternative spaces. A commitment to interdisciplinary collaboration and the utilisation of venues as diverse as former hat factories, empty shops, offices, pubs, nightclubs and youth centres has served to consistently engage and involve new and diverse audiences.

Luton is one of only three towns and cities in

the UK defined as 'plural', meaning there is no ethnic majority. Here, multiple deprivation indicators such as poverty, unemployment, youth unemployment, and lack of access to adequate housing provisions are way above the national average. Whilst it is important to be critical of funder-led definitions of 'valid' cultural engagement (which I will discuss later in more detail), arts engagement in Luton is marked at the lowest 20% in the country.³ Unlike many other post-industrial towns and cities, Luton has never economically recovered from the rapid decline of industry.

In Luton, a lack of employment opportunities and available social housing has plunged swathes of individuals and families into the depths of poverty - a condition defined by social change organisation Joseph Rowntree as being 'when a person's resources are not sufficient to meet their minimum needs'⁴. But this is a crisis far from exclusive to the town's boundaries. Seventy five years after Sir William Beveridge presented his urgent postwar recommendations in a social report⁵ which paved the way for the introduction of the welfare state, the UN has condemned the UK government for 'entrenching poverty and inflicting unnecessary misery'.⁶







Despite being the world's fifth largest economy, successive slashes to social support have undermined the capacity for benefits to alleviate destitution.⁷ The last eight years has witnessed a 60% rise in homelessness and 14 million people or a fifth of the population are now living in poverty.⁸

In the UK, against a backdrop of increasingly turbulent and divisive politics, a pervasive media rhetoric has problematised and scapegoated the country's most vulnerable. And whilst low wages and the government's ten year benefit freeze has failed to keep up with the rising cost of living, structural inequality in the press has continued to peddle a curious caricature of the working class as scrounging, feckless and lazy. Unmistakably, this propaganda has served to promote inequality, refining a poisonous narrative which rationalises class divide, equating success with ambition and moral standing. In the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, the austerity condition has heralded a steady dismantling of the welfare state as well as a steep decline of state support to the cultural sector. A prevailing political homogeneity continues to represent an ideological and economic threat to multiculturalist values, diversity and creative expression.

CONTEMPORARY ARTS AND CULTURE: A LANDSCAPE OF EXCLUSION

This year, a landmark research publication from Create London reaffirmed that despite its perceived progressive and liberal outlook, the arts industry in the UK is far from immune from structural inequality. Released in March, '*Panic! Social Class, Taste and Inequalities in the Creative Industries*'⁹ provides a sociological analysis of the cultural workforce. Compiled by academics at the Universities of Edinburgh and Sheffield, the *Panic!* report considers class in particular, analysing how the intersections of ethnicity and gender compound inequality of opportunity in the sector. Unsurprisingly, the report identifies an overwhelmingly white and middle class sector. Drawing from the quarterly Office of National Statistics' (ONS) Labour Force Survey, a workforce demographic analysis concludes that every cultural occupational sector apart from crafts (which includes smiths, glass makers and ceramists) has a significant underrepresentation of those from working class origins. Within music, performing and the visual arts the representation of working class individuals is around 18.2%; within publishing it







is just 12.6%; within the film, television and radio sector we see a similar percentage at 12.4%. It's worth noting that in this instance a categorisation of social class considers parental occupation¹⁰ during a respondents teenage years - a technical approach which is particularly useful for social scientist's when also considering social mobility.

With the pervasive and consistent underrepresentation of women, individuals from lower income backgrounds, those identifying as disabled, LGBTQI and individuals from black, Asian and minority ethnic communities (and inequality exasperated at these intersections) the history of the UK's cultural workforce is one of exclusion. Perhaps of most concern is that an analysis of the tastes, attitudes and beliefs of those within the sector affirms that both meritocracy and unconscious bias are sustaining inequality. Mark Taylor and fellow researchers asked respondents what they thought was important to get ahead and 'weighed meritocracy (success based on hard work and talent) against social reproduction (people recruiting people who look like themselves or people getting jobs like their parents)'.¹¹ The findings concluded that those in the most senior leadership roles were more

likely to dismiss the impact of social factors, attributing success to talent and hard work rather than privilege. The *Panic!* paper affirms that more work needs to be done to ensure that opportunities within the arts, particularly at the top amongst cultural gatekeepers, aren't confined to a non-representational, self-selecting demographic.

The recent research on multidimensional structural inequality offers a difficult but welcoming analysis for those desperate to justify an urgent diversification of the sector. However, the associated, palpable disengagement of the working classes with contemporary arts and culture isn't as easy to quantify. In recent years, funders' objectives and an organisational culture of equality and diversity has been shaped with reference to the 2010 Equality Act, within which, unlike ethnicity, age, gender, sexuality and disability, the category of social class is not listed as a 'protected characteristic'. The Equality Act provides a legislative framework and impetus for cultural organisations committed to promoting equality of opportunity and welcoming diverse audiences. But with those from a less affluent social class not necessarily considered an inclusion priority, a comparative lack of available audience data






has impeded research into how socio-economic barriers affect participation and engagement.

In their 'Cultural Value and Inequality' report¹² the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) raised urgent concerns that too much value is being afforded to resourcing and validating 'a narrow definition of arts and culture'. Whilst access to arts and culture is an important aspect of social mobility, structural inequality has guarded a curatorial snobbery - resulting in little exploration of music genres which have a history of hailing from less affluent communities, the aesthetics of working class experience, domestic, or popular cultures.¹³

That state funded contemporary arts, culture and curatorial practice appears to be platforming and legitimising the politics, taste and lived experience of a privileged few is unsurprising. Navigation of the arts and cultural sector is likely to involve unpaid work experience, economic precarity and the quiet expectation of having had access to higher education.¹⁴ Less obvious are the impact of psychological and cultural barriers on access and simply getting by.

My own experience of higher education and the contemporary art scene, particularly in London,

is that the relative exclusion of individuals from working class origins has skewed and flattened a perception of working class life. More specifically, a romantic co-option of working class aesthetic and poverty-as-bohemia attitude have conflated and confused a precarious freelance lifestyle with the lack of resources available to those experiencing sustained economic, social, political and cultural marginalisation. This condition, amongst a landscape of prevailing meritocracy, unhelpfully distorts even the most generative and apparently liberal discussions around class and labour, diverting attention away from those who are truly excluded. Today, the working class have become so disenfranchised and stripped of resources that a language which once referred to 'labour' must now encompass vast and increasing swathes of unemployed.






CLASS, CULTURAL CAPITAL AND THE CURATORIAL CANNON


Class is of course a deeply complex and fiercely contested term, exemplified by the blurred boundaries between the middle and working classes. Led by the seminal research of Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree, it was in 1911 that the Registrar General Office introduced the divisory class schema which is most commonly recognised today. A structure by which class boundaries were associated with the nature of occupations, namely skilled, unskilled, manual and non-manual labour. But, the emergence of post-war global communication technologies that followed, as well as a period of rapid de-industrialisation, catalysed vast evolutions in contemporary lifestyle and labour. More recently, mass migration, the dismantling of the welfare state and austerity-inflicted unemployment has birthed spiralling class inequality; a condition of prejudice and unequal opportunity which can no longer be understood in relation to types of labour alone.

‘We can begin with the recognition that possessing cultural capital involves being familiar with the “national” cultural canon, the cultural repertoires associated with “national belonging”.’¹⁵

– Mike Savage

To comprehend the impact of social support networks and access to contemporary arts and culture on social mobility, an understanding of a contemporary working class experience needs to be more subjective, rigorous and accommodating in its definition. In an approach foregrounded by French theorist Pierre Bourdieu, it is useful to acknowledge that social class is affected not by economic advantage alone but by access to and accumulation of different types of ‘capital’. Bourdieu delineates these as economic, social, symbolic (relating to resources on the basis of honour, recognition and prestige) and cultural (such as education, dress sense, validated tastes, intellect and style of speech). Bourdieu’s work focuses on the processes by which resources are unevenly accumulated, considering ‘capitals, assets and resources’ (or CARS).¹⁶ This approach necessarily recognises that the sense of flair, entitlement and confidence which comes with access to cultural







capital is ‘not simply a matter of personality, but [is] fully implicated in the operations of class today through being accumulated and institutionalised.’¹⁷

In 2013 the BBC announced the results of The Great British Class Survey (GBCS), a widely publicised research questionnaire amassing over 160,000 responses. The process also drew on the work of Bourdieu, considering income, the quantity and social status of friends, as well as engagement with both ‘high brow culture’ (such as jazz, theatre and museums) and ‘emergent culture’ (such as video games, social networking and rap or rock concerts). An analysis of the survey results argued for a new class schema. Seven new social classifications from the ‘elite’ to the ‘precariat’ spoke of a complex contemporary landscape of contrasting access to social, cultural and economic capital.¹⁸ However, a persisting interrogation of the existing ‘working class’ terminology seems most relevant here, so as to continue to acknowledge the lineage of a maligned and oppressive history. It is also easy to recognise that despite its inherent complexities and subjectivities, it is the working class in its broadest sense whom contemporary art seems to have successfully disenchanted.

It takes just a short application with the history of curatorial theory to recognise a Western-centric narrative authored and preserved by a largely male and aching middle class demographic. It was within the bowels of higher education, studying for a Masters at the Royal College of Art at a moment devoid of government financial support, that I acknowledged in horror how severe structural inequality birthed homogenous curatorial practices with tastes, interests and agendas stratified along fault lines of privilege.

At best, historical milestones in curatorial practice have foregrounded identity-driven social issues rallying against the systematic exclusion of POC, female-identifying and LGBTQI artists within a male art canon. Artist-led feminist movements, particularly in the seventies, catalysed blockbuster exhibitions both in the UK and the US which sought to reject patriarchy. ‘Women Artists: 1550 - 1950’ curated by Linda Nochlin and Ann Sutherland Harris was hosted at Los Angeles County Museum (1976) and the Brooklyn Museum (1977) respectively, and was ‘the first large-scale museum exhibition in the USA dedicated exclusively to women artists from a historical perspective’.¹⁹ In 1993, Kate Bush, Emma







Dexter and Nicola White curated 'Bad Girls' at the Institute of Contemporary Art, capturing a more provocative, playful and repulsive approach to feminist practices. In its 110 year history, 2005 marked the first year that the Venice Biennale was directed by women. Whilst reception was mixed, the collaboration between Rosa Martinez and Maria de Corral witnessed a more globally representational curatorial approach, with a focus on gender discourse and the inclusion of a breadth of female artists.

Intersecting with feminist thought and artist-led institutional critique, later curatorial developments challenged Western-centrism and colonialist narratives. In 1989 Jean-Hubert Martin curated the now landmark 'Les Magiciens De La Terre' at the Pompidou Centre, Paris. Heralded as the 'first truly international exhibition', the group show explored the practices of artists in Asia, Africa and Latin America alongside contemporary works from the United States and Western Europe.²⁰ Although not devoid of criticism in relation to Martin's sole curator-as-author position, 'Les Magiciens' attempted to foreground a more globally connected approach which was necessarily inclusive of artists from non-Western centres of

cultural production. Other examples such as 'Mining The Museum' (1992-1993) by Fred Wilson at The Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore (USA), 'The Global Contemporary: Art Worlds after 1989' (2011-2012) exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Karlsruhe, Germany and the exhibitions programme at Theaster Gates' Stony Island Arts Bank, Chicago (opened 2015) all consider a culture of exclusion within institutional narratives by celebrating marginalised artists and cultural heritages. Today, unsurprisingly, the existence of colonialist era histories so often preserved within UK public collections are facing mounting criticism²¹ and a generation of digitally sophisticated visitors are prompting exhibition innovation within a curatorial remit of experience-led, multimedia and international blockbuster exhibitions.

Even within British identity-driven exhibition histories, academic and curatorial considerations of the intersections of social class are scarce. Published this year, the activist and rallying curatorial history charted by Maura Reilly's 'Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating' is evidential of the canonised preservation of institutional exhibitions and projects which have challenged masculinism,






sexism, white-privilege, Western-centrism and homophobia. However, the relative omission of class and the compartmentalisation of these histories of exclusion has replaced generative dialogues which consider how ethnicity, race, gender and sexuality converge with social class to perpetuate intergenerational inequalities.


'...the reemergence of class analysis has taken a distinctive form, namely by focusing principally on the white working class, and more on their cultural or social exclusion than on how structural inequalities deny the working class (white or otherwise) access to opportunities, resources and power'
— Omar Khan and Faiza Shaheen.²²

Amongst an increasingly divisive global reality, a demonising and racial political narrative continues to problematise and categorise the country's most vulnerable, stoking anti-immigrant sentiment and counter-referencing a homogenous 'white working class'. How then, can contemporary curatorial practices empower individuals and communities to tell their stories differently? With the characterisation of a culture of oppression inherently individual

and local, a sense of working class identity in Luton is not the same as it is in Sheffield, nor is it the same for a child of the Windrush generation as it is for a white British working class woman in the same postcode, and so on. To offer a necessarily more subjective and multifaceted analysis of working class culture, inclusive of black and minority ethnic experiences, curatorial practices must challenge and rupture the historical compartmentalisation of identity-based exhibitions. To quote the 'Race and Class in Post-Brexit Britain' report commissioned by the Runnymede Trust in 2017, conversation around social class needs to 're-focus working-class identity in a way that cannot simply be nostalgic about the past'.²³

Unlike radical archival, artistic or pedagogical recent histories, there is a paucity of curatorial practice which welcomes sustained, localised debates, exploring the complexities and subjectivities of working class identity. This is not to say that any inclusion and profiling of working class voices must demand identitarian, autoethnographic or simply autobiographical work. But there is a need for curatorial practice to react against both a prevailing demonisation of the working class as well as a pervasive,





sectoral fetishisation and co-option of working class aesthetics by creating spaces and opportunities for marginalised voices to have ownership over institutionally supported creative expression.

Enduring attempts to transcend the sector's reputation as exclusive, esoteric and high brow should challenge the persisting hierarchies of taste to nurture a more productive mobilisation of shared interests and agendas. In the last five years I've had the privilege of working with spoken word artists, textile designers, DJ's, activists, mothers, ex-prisoners, families, producers, dancers, musicians, beatboxers, painters, sculptors and health and social care workers. The most wide-reaching and generous projects, such as those delivered in partnership with all-female dance company House of Absolute and Youthscape (Luton's largest youth charity), were defined by collaboration and demanded a dismantling of exhibition norms and a commitment to reciprocal learning.

My optimism for the potential of innovative curatorial practice is indebted to those who have acknowledged both the politics of power and the culturally legitimising role of curators who have utilised their positions to create space, readdressing the

omission of marginalised voices, such as the team at Create London under the Directorship of Hadrian Garrard; Sophie Chapman, the Learning Curator at the Whitstable Biennale; and Niamh White and Tim A Shaw of Hospital Rooms (to name a few). Whilst the contemporary art infrastructure faces ideological and economic threat in Britain today, significant and considered attempts to engage the disengaged through solidarity, collaboration and representation can only strengthen the scope of the field's critical potential and thus its economic sustainability.

- 1) <https://interferencearchive.org/donate-materials/>
- 2) www.tmtprojects.com
- 3) 'Royal Opera House Regional Report' (2012). <http://static.roh.org.uk/learning/bridge/documents/Royal-Opera-House-Bridge-Regional-Report-2012.pdf>
- 4) Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 'What is Poverty?' <https://www.jrf.org.uk/our-work/what-is-poverty>
- 5) The Beveridge Report was presented by its author, Sir William Beveridge, to the British parliament in November, 1942. The report led to the establishment of a system of social security and the National Health Service after the end of the war.
- 6) Philip Alston, 'Statement on Visit to the United Kingdom, by Professor Philip Alston, United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights' (2018). https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Poverty/EOM_GB_16Nov2018.pdf
- 7) Destitution means going without the basic essentials: a home, food, heating, lighting, clothing, shoes and basic toiletries. The Joseph Rowntree

Foundation defines destitution as 'when people have lacked two or more of these essentials over the past month because they couldn't afford them; or if their income is extremely low – less than £70 a week for a single adult. This definition is also based on what the general public agree destitution to be.'

8) National Audit Office, 'Homelessness' report (2017). <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Homelessness.pdf>

9) Dr Orian Brook, Dr David O'Brien, and Dr Mark Taylor, 'PANIC: Social Class, Taste and Inequalities in the Creative Industries' (2018). <http://create-london.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Panic-Social-Class-Taste-and-Inequalities-in-the-Creative-Industries1.pdf>

10) Create London's research project makes use of the National Statistics Socioeconomic Classification (NS-SEC). A full and extensive discussion of the NS-SEC is available from the ONS: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/otherclassifications/nationalstatistics socioeconomicclassificationns-secbasedonsoc2010>

11) Hettie Juda, 'The Art World is Overwhelmingly Liberal But Still Overwhelmingly Middle Class and White - Why?', *Frieze* (2018). <https://frieze.com/article/art-world-overwhelmingly-liberal-still-overwhelmingly-middle-class-and-white-why>

12) Geoffrey Crossick & Patrycja Kaszynska, 'Understanding the Value of Arts and Culture: The AHRC Cultural Value Project' (2016). <https://ahrc.ukri.org/documents/publications/cultural-value-project-final-report/>

13) Liz Hill, 'Cultural Value' is being misrepresented, report claims', *ArtsProfessional* (2016). <https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/cultural-value-being-misrepresented-report-claims>

14) Dr Orian Brook, Dr David O'Brien, and Dr Mark Taylor, 'PANIC: Social Class, Taste and Inequalities in the Creative Industries' (2018), p.20. <http://create-london.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Panic-Social-Class-Taste-and-Inequalities-in-the-Creative-Industries1.pdf>

15) Mike Savage, 'The Role of Cultural Capital for Understanding Race, Ethnicity and Class' in Runnymede Trust, 'Minority Report: Race and Class in post-Brexit Britain' (2017), p.17. <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/Race%20and%20Class%20Post-Brexit%20Perspectives%20report%20v5.pdf>

16) Mike Savage, 'Social Class in the 21st Century' (2015), p.46.

17) Mike Savage, 'Social Class in the 21st Century' (2015), p.51-52.

18) Mike Savage, 'Social Class in the 21st Century' (2015), p.169.

19) Maura Reilly, 'Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating' (2018), p.44.

20) Paul O'Neill, 'The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Cultures' (2012), p.56.

21) Agence France-Presse (2018). <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/20/easter-island-british-museum-return-moai-statue>

22) Omar Khan and Faiza Shaheen, 'Introduction: Analysing and Responding to Racial Inequalities' in Runnymede Trust, 'Minority Report: Race and Class in post-Brexit Britain' (2017), p.4. <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/Race%20and%20Class%20Post-Brexit%20Perspectives%20report%20v5.pdf>

23) Omar Khan and Faiza Shaheen, 'Introduction: Analysing and Responding to Racial Inequalities' in Runnymede Trust, 'Minority Report: Race and Class in post-Brexit Britain' (2017), p.6. <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/Race%20and%20Class%20Post-Brexit%20Perspectives%20report%20v5.pdf>