

Brief report: The Partisan Social Club, ‘On being together; memberships, collectives and unions’, Beaconsfield Gallery Vauxhall, September–November 2018

My time spent being a part of The Partisan Social Club at Beaconsfield Gallery Vauxhall, London, was an opportunity to participate in the production of collective artworks that reflect upon a shared understanding of community, membership, citizenship and collective action. Rather than addressing typical technical and aesthetic concerns of visual art projects — producing artworks and experiences that art audiences might commonly expect in a gallery — the like-minded team of over 35 educators, researchers, architects and artists (including myself) investigated radical ways of working and being together in order to bring about new practices and alternative values around art, publishing, design and architecture.

Initiated within the nurturing environment of Beaconsfield Art Gallery over several days, the provisional group devised interdisciplinary and cross-organisational strategies pertinent to the creation and performance of collective values. This was refreshing. First, the daily workshops inside the gallery were steered by a programme of talks that focused on collectivity, art, protest, solidarity and sloganeering — delivered by architect Sean Griffiths (University of Westminster), artists and academics Mel Jordan (Royal College of Art) and Andy Hewitt (University of Northampton), and Jonathan White, Professor of Politics (London School of Economics). These opening presentations helped to frame activities among team members through which to explore further the intersection of art and politics. Ideas around political

forms of ‘membership’ and collective opinion formation, especially within differing social and cultural contexts, were jointly-defined and debated. Second, and adding to the explorative nature of the workshops, the ancient Chinese divination principles of *I Ching* (Book of Changes) was introduced in order to deploy ‘chance’ as a disruptive element in the development process. Confronted with uncertain, unexpected and sometimes playful outcomes, team members necessarily engaged in processes of negotiation — agreeing and disagreeing over methods, materials, language, form and artwork construction — while eliciting shared opinions and values that could be embodied by the group and expressed through collective decision-making. Last, the group developed temporary structures, props and slogans in response to this discourse, improvising with collaborative and informal techniques of working *in*, *on* and *with* the gallery spaces. By the end of the three-day workshop, members had fabricated and installed a range of different ‘social sculptures’ inside and outside of the gallery, including a large slogan devised by several members that was erected above the gallery itself.

Even though collective ways of working are not without challenges — an individual member necessarily does not claim authorship or ownership over artworks produced — the agreement between participants to commit to a project and to promote an expression of shared principles according to an emergent notion of ‘public good’, produces conditions in which social and political opinions and ideas can be negotiated, bargained and similarly renewed. This entailed a declared self-interest of individual members (or partisans) that become made known through forms of collective opinion formation. To this end, the first iteration of The Partisan Social Club was able to explore alternative collective methods for art practice, operating beyond traditional notions of studio and object-based practices. Furthermore, the group imagine these ideas intervening and (re)shaping the public sphere through subsequent iterations of The Partisan Social Club and through further actions, interventions, art-making and publishing. As one member noted, the art world in London is becoming increasingly precarious and fragmented. This observation certainly holds true for the rest of the UK, a situation exacerbated by the economic downturn, sweeping arts funding cuts and failing cultural policy. Thus, thinking about and working towards social and structural transformation by way of collaborative and collective art practices has acquired an expected political urgency.

(The knowledge, experience and interpersonal connections earned as a provisional 'member' of The Partisan Social Club will be without doubt invaluable to me when I pursue doctoral and research opportunities in the fields of contemporary art practice and public sphere after graduation.)

Christopher Daubney, October 2018