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Cronies, Cliques and Lovers: Queer Friendship as Anti-Institutional Practice in UK Live Art Festivals

Simon James Holton and Phoebe Patey-Ferguson

Abstract

In this article, we interrogate the impact of queer friendship on the organisational landscape of the UK Live Art sector. Using our own intimate insider perspectives, we examine two artist-led festivals: Buzzcut in Glasgow (2012-present) and Steakhouse Live in London (2014–2020). Influenced by Michel Foucault's 'Friendship as a Way of Life', we contend that the queerness of these friendships extends beyond sexual identities, shaping the artistic, economic, cultural, and social dimensions of Live Art festivals. Queer friendships inform anti-professional and DIY approaches in Live Art and emerge as a vital counterforce to institutional norms, providing an essential resource to experimental art practitioners enduring the precarious conditions of economic austerity in the UK from 2010 onwards. Friendship-led organisational practice holds all the challenges of managing a complex relational world, navigating the balance between the ideals of exchange and equality and the lived reality of difference and inequality. The formation of cliques, which aim for inclusivity and cohesion while potentially fostering exclusion, underscores a paradox inherent in the nature and operation of friendship in these contexts. Our findings emphasise that addressing conflicts and structural inequalities in queer friendship is pivotal, acting as a catalyst for revealing, contesting, and changing exclusions and inequities. We conclude that investing in and supporting organisations founded on queer friendships can potentially foster radical, egalitarian, and politically potent modes of artistic collaboration in the face of normative cultural production and oppressive political circumstances.

Keywords: Queer friendship; festivals; Live Art; austerity; DIY

> May this be an open invitation for more friends to join in the incompletion of this fucked-up world. Let's keep making something different. Together. Now. We all we got. And 'all' is all we gotta be.[1]

1. Zun Lee, 'Afterword: Home is Where we Displace Ourselves', in *All Incomplete*, eds. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *All Incomplete* (Colchester: Minor Compositions, 2021), 169–172 (172).

Prologue: An Open Invitation

If you are reading this, you are probably a friend. Or at least a friend of a friend. You might prefer the term acquaintance, but we consider you a friend. There is a chance you are reading this as an interloper in which case the hailing as a friend will have made you all too aware of your exclusion. This alienation might drive you to cast yourself as our enemy. Our easy familiarity might grate on your expectation of a critical distance and presumed estrangement. However, the likelihood is you will have met at least one of us already at that conference, party, afterparty, show, festival, talk, networking event or in the pub. It might be that we have shared a lover or are follower-friends on social media suggested by the algorithm. We are all people engaging with an academic journal's special issue on Live Art, an interest particular enough to instantly ignite a desire for friendship and hold all the possibilities for it. If we have yet to meet, we hope we can meet very soon.

We met (Simon and Phoebe) in the courtyard of Summerhall in Edinburgh in August 2014. Our mutual friend and Live Art producer Xavier de Sousa, who was working on several shows performed by other friends of ours at the Edinburgh Fringe, introduced us at a picnic table. Phoebe was working for In Between Time in Bristol as a touring producer and preparing to start their PhD at Goldsmiths the following month. Simon was the producer for Project O (Jamila Johnson-Small and Alexandrina Hemsley) and was waiting to start their masters at Goldsmiths. There were instantly personal crossovers and professional connections as well as a shared intellectual curiosity, caustic humour, desire for gossip and a sense of mischief. Since this first meeting, we have been close friends and scholarly confidants. We have shared toilet cubicles, cigarettes in the smoking area, bottles of whiskey at sunrise, hostel rooms, exasperated emails, karaoke microphones, heartbreaks, stages, platforms, vows, overnight drives across the continent, collaborative Google docs, seas, lagoons and pools, and many dancefloors. Our pronouns, the conception of our genders and sexualities and our political positions have shifted throughout this time, formed and re-formed with each other and others. There has been conflict, disagreement, long silences, disappointment, difficulty and heated debate. Our friendship is one of the most important relationships of our adult lives: personally, professionally, academically. It would not exist without the Live Art sector, and our friendship was built by and through Live Art events. Ours is not a unique story.

Introduction

We are examining queer friendships like ours which exist among and between the personal and professional; affective ties that challenge the boundaries of typical working practices. The UK Live Art sector would

not exist in its current state without these friendships; without thousands of moments of intensity that have forged networks of intimacy and encouraged experimentation, risk-taking, and unhinged ventures. We want to take queer friendship seriously when it is too often taken for granted to reveal how it sustains Live Art organisations, particularly during an era of austerity and continued precarity, and to consider the limitations of queer friendship as an organisational model. Drawing upon the field of the sociology of friendship which considers how friendship is influenced by the 'wider organisation of social life', we are attempting to extend and reverse this lens in order to consider how Live Art festivals in recent years have been shaped artistically, economically, culturally and socially by friendships.[2] What emerges from our insider observations is a lived understanding of how queer friendship structures the Live Art sector; containing utopian notions of inclusion and togetherness which have been necessary for these festivals and their organisations during a time of austerity and its associated precarity, but which also risk homogeneity and exclusion.

Our two case studies, Buzzcut in Glasgow and Steakhouse Live in London, are festivals we have attended multiple times together since meeting in 2014, allowing us to understand where our shared experiences align and differ, as well as being able to maintain our joint reflexivity throughout. For Buzzcut Festival in 2017, we co-organised 'Sideburns', a symposium and daily talks series that brought together artists and academics to discuss a wide range of subjects under the provocation 'Coming Together and Falling Apart'. Phoebe was first invited to curate this symposium for Buzzcut in 2016 as a friend of the then co-artistic directors, co-founders, and friends Rosana Cade and Nick Anderson, who had conceived and run the festival annually since 2012. The following year, Phoebe invited Simon to co-organise the symposium, as they were friends, and Simon was due to start their PhD at the University of Glasgow that year. Our friend Karl Taylor joined the team in 2016 and is now the organisational director of the organisation. From 2018–2022 there was no Buzzcut Festival, but Taylor and producer Daisy Douglas, and later creative producer Claricia Parinussa, regularly ran the performance nights 'Double Thrills' at Glasgow's Centre for Contemporary Art. Buzzcut returned to its festival model at the end of March 2023, guest curated by our friends Jamila Johnson-Small (as SERAFINE 1369) and FK Alexander. Through this work, it has continued to pursue an organisational ethos centred on 'sharing' and creating 'spaces that are super warm, super welcoming and super friendly'.[3] Phoebe and Simon attended the festival in 2023, excited to see and support the work by many of their friends, as well as to meet and make new friends and to engage with the joy of seeing the result of artistic collaborations explicitly fuelled by friendships including m.o.a.n (Moa Johansson and An*dre Neely, with live sound design by Phoebe's partner Nicol Parkinson), InXestuous Sisters (partners Giulia C and Niya B), Temitope Ajose and Leah Marojević, Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Balitrónica, and Lou Robbin '+ Friends'.

Steakhouse Live was co-founded in 2013 by our friends Katy Baird and Louise Orwin, both artists and producers, and sustained through the cooperative efforts of producers Aaron Wright (friend and Simon's

2. See Graham Allan, *Kinship and Friendship in Modern Britain* (Kiribati: Oxford University Press, 1996); Graham Allan and Rebecca G. Adams. 'Sociology of Friendship', in *The Handbook of twenty-first Century Sociology*, eds. Clifton Bryant and Dennis Peck (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006), 123–131; Robert Milardo and Barry Wellman, 'The Personal is Social', *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 9, no. 3 (1992): 339–342; Steve Duck, *Social Context and Relationships* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1993); Liz Spencer and Ray Pahl, *Re-Thinking Friendship: Hidden Solidarities Today* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

3. Buzzcut, 'About', https://www.glasgowbuzzcut.co.uk/ (accessed December 1, 2023).

long-term partner for several years) and Mary Obsorn (friend). Baird and Wright formed a close friendship as colleagues at LADA (Live Art Development Agency) which acted as an unofficial base for the organisation, and Osborn's position as their friend and producer at ArtsAdmin (where Taylor also worked before moving to Glasgow) meant Steakhouse Live events were often held there. Wright told Simon friendship was always important for Steakhouse Live: 'You got to work with your friends, [...] it was a social thing – we liked doing it, [...] It was exciting'.[4] During its fluctuating period of activity which was ended by the coronavirus pandemic in early 2020, other friends, as producers and artists, often informally or formally supported these events which also included the 'Live Art Christmas Party' *Tits and Tinsel*, which Phoebe worked the door for alongside Neely (who they married as a friend in 2017).

Buzzcut and Steakhouse Live were two of the most significant Live Art platforms that were formed and sustained by friends in the UK during the 2010s amidst catastrophic cuts to the arts made during the devastating programme of austerity enacted by a Conservative-led government that persisted throughout the decade. This period is characterised by the precarity of marginal arts practices as funding was reduced or eliminated and many publicly-funded organisations, venues and established festivals ceased to exist. Those that survived had to reduce or limit their support for experimental work, instead prioritising work that was perceived as more commercially viable.[5] These conditions provoked a renewal of DIY organising and grassroots events that were instigated by pre-existing friendships, sustained by friendships as a key resource, and which brought people together to generate more friendships.[6]

Intimate Insiders

Through these examples we examine particularly (peculiarly) queer friendships that are personal, professional, expansive, and exclusive, which have emerged in these spaces through our experiences and observations using an intimate insider methodology. That is, we examine these friendships and social groups from within them, drawing on interview material from Simon's thesis as well as both of our lived experiences of attending these festivals as involved, initiated audiences. Alongside this, we attend to our social entanglements with those we are examining. Jodie Taylor examines both the 'benefits and dilemmas' of an intimate insider approach in ethnographic research. The significant advantages that Taylor finds in her survey of the literature include 'deeper levels of understanding', 'closer and more regular contact with the field', being 'easier and better informed', and 'quicker establishment of rapport and trust between researcher and participants'.[7] Taylor finds there has been less attention paid to the potential problems and drawbacks of such a position: warning that one should not 'presume that as an insider, one necessarily offers an absolute or correct way

4. All quotations from producers in this article are from Simon James Holton's thesis: 'Producing Performance Collectively in Austere Times (UK 2008–2018)' (PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 2022).

5. The Arches in Glasgow closed in 2015 and between 2006–17 58% of queer venues in London closed, see Ben Campkin and Laura Marshall, 'LGBTQ+ Cultural Infrastructure in London' (London: UCL Urban Laboratory, 2017); Pre-existing Live Art festivals such as SPILL, IBT (In Between Time) and Fierce reduced the scale of their programming and the regularity of their events during the decade.

6. In addition to Buzzcut and Steakhouse Live, there were a plethora of informal or collective DIY Live Art endeavours such as Low Stakes Festival, Live Art Bistro (Leeds), Forest Fringe, Femmetopia Festival, Limewharf, The Chateau and Performance Space.

7. Jodie Taylor, 'The intimate insider: negotiating the ethics of friendship when doing insider research', *Qualitative Research* 11, no. 1 (2011): 3–22 (6).

of seeing and/or reading the culture under investigation'. She notes that 'as an insider one does not automatically escape the problem of knowledge distortion, as insider views will always be multiple and contestable, generating their own epistemological problems due to subject/object relationality'. Of particular relevance, Taylor writes of 'the grossly undertheorized impact that friendships may have upon the processes of perception and interpretation within and of the field under examination'.[8] By acknowledging and foregrounding friendships as the subject of our research, we intend to theorise through the dangers identified by Taylor, while also keeping the reader critically aware of how our intimate positions may compromise the objectivity of our work.

8. Ibid.

Working from an intimate insider perspective poses (and has posed in the writing and publishing of this work) a series of ethical problems for academic research. Having pre-existing relationships with our subjects, and being in a position of pre-existing 'rapport and trust', means that Simon's interviews required particularly stringent ethical procedures. Aware of the potential for pre-existing friendship and intimacy to inspire confidence that could be harmful to interviewees, Simon included an extra step of consent over and above that which was required by the University of Glasgow, sending interviewees all quotes used from their interviews to allow them to check and redact any that might do professional or personal harm.

In addition, we have had to be cautious about navigating consent to share what we already know as friends and what we have experienced as people who have been workers and participants in these events, which often exists outside of sanctioned or public narratives. For us, this is a queer problem. As José Esteban Muñoz observes: 'The work of queer critique is often to read outside official documentation'.[9] We draw on the anecdote as knowledge that is formed through experience and gets handed down through stories and conversation. Jane Gallop identifies the anecdote as knowledge which evades theory's 'considerable will to power' while also able to constitute theory of its own.[10] Anecdote is suspect, particularly in academia, due to its proximity to the personal and to gossip. Gavin Butt has argued for 'adding in gossip to the category of evidence' to 'deconstruct the bases of authoritative constructs of truth' for queer artistic communities. Identifying gossip as '*dangerously*' holding the potential to 'displace so-called veritable truths from their more positivistic frames of reference and to render them instead [...] as projections of interpretive desire and curiosity'.[11] However, the ethics of this are messier when dealing with a contemporary rather than a historical landscape, as our subject's careers and lives – as well as our own – are potentially (or dangerously) influenced by us writing about them. There is a significant amount of knowledge we are required to exclude from this article, which might only be disclosed through the anecdote shared between friends. Where anecdote is used here, we follow Gallop and Butt in understanding it as not just source material or evidence, but as a tool that can do theoretical work, and even reshape what theory can be.

9. Josè Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 149

10. Jane Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 20.

11. Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948–1964* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 7.

Queer Friendship

We examine queer friendship as friendship between queer people, but we also explore how friendship can be *queering*. Our theorisation of queer friendship draws on Michel Foucault's interview 'Friendship as a Way of Life' – which, by foregrounding queer subjectivity, constructs a vision of friendship that is entrenched in a real relational fabric, that is not idealised but creates a community that 'coheres not in identity but in a more radical being in common'.[12] This 'being in common' is a feeling both of us have experienced as queer people at these Live Art festivals, and has been reflected by many of those interviewed in this research. As queer people we are placed at odds with the heteronormative structures of daily life and as queer cultural workers we are also at odds with the heteronorms of the wider arts and cultural sector. Creating alternative or DIY spaces is driven by a desire to experience this 'being in common' otherwise denied to us. Tom Roach, in writing on Foucault's friendships as well as his published works on the subject, identifies this as the creation of a 'friendship of shared estrangement' in which queer people have sought to communally invent a mode of 'biopolitical resistance that breaches boundaries of gender, race, class, and generation and that encourages radically democratic forms of citizenship and civic participation'.[13]

Jennifer Doyle describes 'queer friendships [...] as a form of attachment that can disturb both the presumption of an "us" and "them" and the opposition of desire and friendship'.[14] Like Doyle, we contend that the '"queerness" of queer friendship is composed of more than the sexual identities of its practitioners'.[15] In our experience, the majority of people working in Live Art are queer, but even when this is not the case, their proximity to it, or engaging with it as a practice, *queers* them.[16] Doyle identifies Foucault's argument that homosexuality's 'threat to the dominant social order has far less to do with the sodomitical sex act than it does with the queerness of the forms of relationality which surround the act'.[17] Homosexuality is not only about desire, but is desired or desirable because it offers a 'way of life' that allows us to reimagine sociality; where becoming queer is a political project that challenges the structural underpinnings of institutions. We recognise how this queerness emerges in the forms of relationality that surround Live Art. As Cade states in the Live Art Sector Research report

> I think of Live Art as a queer form because it has this fluidity within it. To me, queerness is about imagination and invention outside of received or normative ways of doing things. Here's this form or this practice that asks you to think of new ways of doing things that are going to challenge the status quo.[18]

Queer friendship's 'threat to the dominant social order' is concerned with experimentation: re-inventing modes of sociality; creating social spaces outside of sanctioned institutions; imagining alternative futures; engaging with counter-cultural and anti-hegemonic ways of doing

12. Tom Roach, *Friendship as a Way of Life: Foucault, AIDS, and the Politics of Shared Estrangement* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012), 12; Michel Foucault, 'Friendship as a Way of Life', in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984 Vol. 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: The New Press, 1997), 135–140.
13. Roach, *Friendship as a Way of Life*, 12
14. Jennifer Doyle, 'Between Friends' in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Studies*, eds. George Haggarty and Molly McGarry (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 325–340 (325).
15. Ibid., 329.
16. The Live Art Sector Research report notes that 'Artists and organisations working with Live Art and queer culture have been particularly prominent in the UK Live Art sector'. Cecilia Wee, Elyssa Livergant et. al., *Live Art Sector Research: A Report Mapping the UK Live Art Sector* (London: Live Art Development Agency, 2021), 103.
17. Ibid., 329–30.
18. Rosana Cade, quoted in Ibid., 157.

things; offering new ways of understanding the body and the self; and challenging established norms at live events as well as in the forming the structures to support those events.

While queer friendships can and do exist in other fields, the experimentalism, marginality and precarity of Live Art, and the unstructured and collective practices of DIY approaches, make it a site where they are particularly generative. As a 'workplace', Live Art holds the radical potential of a community of interest with shared values, created through social processes. Following Miranda Joseph's *Against the Romance of Community*, queer friendship as a complex mode of community formation can also be understood as a series of 'social relations and social activities mobilized for particular political and economic purposes' which understands these friendships as a process and a strategy, rather than a static concept.[19] The process and strategy of queer friendships guide these festivals, which then generate more queer friendships which form within them. The generation of further friendships at these events is through the lived experience of communitas, as defined by Victor Turner to describe times of heightened collective activity and emotion with 'a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties'.[20] This is closely related to Emile Durkheim's earlier phrase 'collective effervescence', which describes a similar phenomenon in which 'the very fact of assembling is an exceptionally powerful stimulant' and 'proximity generates a kind of electricity' which is amplified as it passes between those assembled, bringing people together and creating strong connections between them.[21] Live Art festivals, as concentrated moments of intense sociality, are key to sustaining this process of forming and re-forming queer friendships.

19. Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xxxii.

20. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1969), 96.

21. Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 [1912]), 162–163.

Friendship as Anti-Institutional

Foucault writes that friends 'have to invent, from A to Z, a relationship that is still formless, which is friendship: that is to say, the sum of everything through which they can give each other pleasure'.[22] Buzzcut and Steakhouse Live were both conceived with this spirit of invention in the informal spaces between friends with shared interests. Cade and Anderson co-created Buzzcut to fill in the gap left locally by the planned conclusion of the NRLA (National Review of Live Art) in 2010, and by the closure of the company that ran it in 2011, following the discovery of 'financial irregularities'.[23] Buzzcut was subsequently instrumental in the creation of Steakhouse Live. As told to Simon second-hand by member Mary Osborn, when friends Baird and Orwin went to Buzzcut 'they were both struggling to get their work seen. [...] And they were like, fuck it. Let's just put our work on, in a program that we put together, and invite some other artists that we like'. This 'fuck it – let's just do it ourselves' is a typically DIY impulse that emerges from shared frustrations between friends leading to initiating projects together. The type of work that Baird and Orwin were

22. Foucault, 'Friendship as a Way of Life', 136.

23. Phil Miller, 'Police called after Scots arts company wound up', *Herald Scotland*, December 13, 2011, https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/13042507.police-called-after-scots-arts-company-wound-up/ (accessed July 27, 2022).

making was seen as outside the established or traditional modes of theatre which meant they were thrown together in a professional, as well as personal, shared estrangement.

Buzzcut and Steakhouse Live were both created out of necessity in difficult economic conditions by friends who found that there was no institutional context for them and did not find professional invitations forthcoming for their practice. In these cases, friendship became the essential mode of organisation – the only resource that was available in generous amounts. In 2010, under David Cameron as a newly elected Conservative Prime Minister, unemployment figures were high and rising, with 2.57 million unemployed people and youth unemployment at over twenty-one per cent, the highest rates since 1988.[24] In 2011, there were riots in cities across England sparked by racial injustices perpetrated by the police force, whilst the welfare system was further dismantled and public services rapidly privatised. A brutal policy of austerity was designed to shift the political economy of Britain towards a more competitive and individualistic neoliberal society. The Conservative-led coalition began an attack on what they considered to be the negative impact of the public sphere in all areas of British life, including the arts, which would set a trend for the next decade until the present day.[25] Real terms public investment in the arts in England decreased by 31% between 2009/10 to 2020/21.[26]

Friendship is essential and instrumental in precarious conditions to sustain experimental art practice which is less likely to have commercial appeal. In 'Friendship in Commercial Society', Allan Silver outlines how before commercial capitalist societies, friendship was a relationship occasioned by necessity and was instrumental to a social structure and economic exchange. After commercialism becomes dominant, friendship is no longer necessary and is replaced by what the 'father of capitalism' Adam Smith considers a morally superior form of friendship that is 'free' to be based on 'natural sympathy' rather than the 'coercion' of necessity.[27] Conditions of austerity-driven precarity and failures of our economic system reverse this trend, particularly for those who are already marginalised in society. Neoliberal capitalism intensifies the processes of individualisation – what Stephen Greer calls 'neoliberalism's forms of compulsory individuation' – that place emphasis on self-sufficiency and entrepreneurialism.[28] The paradox of individualism promoted by neoliberal capitalism is that it inadvertently drives a mode of friendship that recovers its ancient instrumental character as individuals are driven to depend on each other to survive a system of scarcity. Moreover, friendship becomes desirable as an anti-institutional mode of organising against the dominant mode – a route of political resistance.

This political resistance is about foregrounding our dependency and interdependency on others. As friendship presupposes mutual exchange, the survival resources it provides, the learnings, and the benefits are not unilateral but exchangeable. In writing on Foucault, Roach argues that:

> Friendship is an immanent alternative to an institutionalized – hence concretized, deadened – form of union. Whereas marriage enacts the

24. Office for National Statistics, *Labour Market Statistics, October 2011* (London: Office for National Statistics, 2011).
25. Adrian Harvey, *Funding Arts and Culture in a Time of Austerity* (London: Arts Council England; New Local Government Network, 2016), 5.
26. This statistic omits the skew of the Cultural Recovery Fund (CRF) as an emergency arts investment given due to the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic and its associated lockdowns, from 2009/10 – 20/21 the reduction is 21% and for 2009/10-20/21 including the CRF it is a reduction of 12%. Eliza Easton and Salvatore Di Novo, 'A new deal for arts funding in England?', *Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre*, January 12, 2023, https://pec.ac.uk/blog/a-new-deal-for-arts-funding-in-england, (accessed December 1, 2023).
27. Dennis Rasmussen, *The Infidel and the Professor: David Hume, Adam Smith, and the Friendship That Shaped Modern Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 12; Allan Silver, 'Friendship in Commercial Society: Eighteenth-Century Social Theory and Modern Sociology'. *American Journal of Sociology* 95, no. 6, (1990): 1474–1504 (1481).
28. Stephen Greer, *Queer exceptions: Solo Performance in Neoliberal Times* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 2.

> privatization of relational pleasures and practices, friendship remains properly communal, in common.[29]

29. Roach, *Friendship as a Way of Life*, 14.

The art institution mirrors the ordained institution of marriage: private, traditional and legitimate. Conversely, the friendship that structures these collectives creates a shared sense of communal ownership, of both the organisation and of the events they produce. Friends are generated in common and regenerate the common. As Roach summarises: 'The friend is neither possessive or possessed, neither owner nor owned'.[30]

30. Ibid., 15.

Fred Moten and Stefano Harney posit friendship as the opposite of the logic of ownership and propriety, a 'constant and general economy of friendship – not one that will have been given in one-to-one relation but the militant preservation of what you (understood as we) got, in common dispossession'.[31] For Moten and Harney, friends who are 'being in common' by writing and thinking together, friendship is an exchange which opposes an '(anti)social contract' which is haunted by an economic contract based on a 'claim to ownership of oneself, others and nature that is always tied to what one can make of, which is to say accumulate in and through, oneself, others and nature'. Whereas the exchange of friendship is a

31. Moten and Harney, *All Incomplete*, 35

> practice that prevents accumulation at, and as the elimination of, its source – the self-improving individual. [...] exchange, given in and as the differential and differentiating entanglement of social life, even under the most powerful forms of constraint and regulation, is about social optimum.[32]

32. Ibid.

Social optimum is defined by Moten and Harney as recognising that together as people we have 'social wealth' derived from creative exchange with each other which we can draw power from even when 'under absolute duress'. This is a process of creating friendship as well as the 'preservation in friendship of the socio-ontological totality'.[33] Practices of queer friendship as embodied in creating and experiencing these festivals refuse the accumulation of capital in individuals and invest it in the relations between them. They resist institutional, normative, and transactional relationships between artists, organisers, and audiences in favour of complex networks of ambiguous and unstructured entanglements of communal exchange.

33. Ibid., 36.

This complexity and ambiguity pose a problem when negotiating the pre-supposed structured boundaries between personal and professional fields, fun and work, friend and colleague. The position of festivals as both a part of, and separate from, the everyday and its social structures, is what lends festivals their aesthetic and affective power and their limitations. Phoebe, in their thesis on the London International Festival of Theatre, argues that neoliberal 'principles interpenetrate the field of cultural production to the extent that limits the possibilities of festivals achieving their full social purpose'.[34] Simon argues in their thesis that in the case of Buzzcut and Steakhouse Live, rather than limiting their possibilities, engaging with and contesting neoliberal principles, and

34. Phoebe Patey-Ferguson, 'The London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT) in Context, 1947–2016', (PhD diss., Goldsmiths, University of London, 2019).

the social structures and tensions that they produce, actually constitutes the social purpose of these festivals.[35] The liminal position in which these festivals exist, between their radical ideas and their context, is illustrative of their DIY, anti-institutional practices, which produce tensions between professionalism and antiprofessionalism. A central part of these practices is their constitution from, and their encouragement of, unstructured, formless and anti-institutional queer friendships.

35. Holton, 'Producing Performance'.

Friendship as Antiprofessional

If friendship offers a different economic mode, it also engenders a different behavioural mode in this 'social optimum' of exchange and togetherness. Professionalism requires a limitation of emotions, personal expression and intimacies where correct behavioural norms are coded, contracted and legislated, with clear boundaries between workers. These are privatized and alienated relationships, concretized and deadened, as in the institutional bond of marriage. Foucault argues that we should 'fight against this impoverishment of the relational fabric' which is imposed by 'society and the institutions which frame it' which 'have limited the possibility of relationships because a rich relational world would be very complex to manage'.[36] Fighting for a richer relational world entails the creation of new ways of communicating and new forms of community. The advances made in legitimising Live Art in mainstream institutions, and its experimental modes of audience relation, have been limited and fragile. These institutions often involve regulations, requirements and working practices that are majoritarian and heteronormative, directly countering the working modes of experimental, risk-taking artists. Thinking through friendship as an organisational, producing principle can open doors to different, queerer worlds.

36. Foucault, 'Friendship as a Way of Life', 158.

Our two case studies' resistance to normativity is a chosen position as what Keren Zaiontz calls a 'counter-festival', in resistance to the 'rigidifying conditions of artistic production' as well as in response to the failures or shortcomings of established institutions.[37] For example, Steakhouse Live resisted its institutionalisation somewhat by being nomadic and flexible. This is a result of both choice and necessity, as the organisers had to fit Steakhouse Live's activities around their other professional commitments. Rather than trying to find and provide a fixed home for their festival and other events, the festival's spatial practice was fluid and responsive, exploiting connections and possibilities across multiple institutions. Steakhouse Live ran events in various venues and contexts, both regular and one-off. As well as not having a fixed venue, they did not have a fixed format or regularity for their events. As Baird says, 'we're very [...] fluid, so we can adapt easily. [...] we do what we want when we want. [...] The festival's changed dates every year [...] every year it's been different – 2 days 1 day 3 days half a day [...] there's not set things'. Working irregularly across multiple spaces is a consequence of Steakhouse Live's personalities, professions and organisational

37. Keren Zaiontz. *Theatre & Festivals* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 15–16.

practices, and this lack of structure, as well as being tactically advantageous, also enables them to resist the normativity and pressure of audience expectation.

The core organisers of Buzzcut and Steakhouse Live came together in shared desires to challenge dominant modes of cultural production. Friendship becomes a method of organising, but the intimacy of friendship resists and often undoes any attempts at professionalism. Foucault writes that

> The institution is caught in a contradiction; affective intensities traverse it which at one and the same time keep it going and shake it up. [...] Institutional codes can't validate these relations with multiple intensities, variable colours, imperceptible movements and changing forms. These relations short-circuit it and introduce love where there's supposed to be only law, rule, or habit.[38]

38. Foucault, 'Friendship as a Way of Life', 137.

Those involved in Steakhouse Live illustrate this well when they talk explicitly about 'embracing unprofessionalism', a concept that is both a part of Steakhouse Live's identity and one that aims to make the festival more accessible, with a more relaxed social and affective space. Embracing unprofessionalism becomes a tool for deconstructing opaque, overly serious performance institutions, which elide or obscure the emotional ties that the people who work in them have for each other and have a normative, exclusive code of behaviour for the appreciation of art. In this way, resistance to professionalism is part of a desire to make performance more accessible or democratic.

For Wright at Steakhouse Live and across his producing work, 'professionalism goes hand in hand with being corporate, toeing a party line. [...] And it's often about opaqueness'. Cade asserts that at Buzzcut they tried to 'cut out as much bureaucracy as possible' and attempted to be 'antiprofessional'. As Pierre Bourdieu established in *Distinction*, the appreciation of art, and the correct behaviour in doing so, is inextricably tied into class domination, and the social structure from which these festivals seek to depart.[39] Both Wright and Baird are working class and queer and have experiences of feeling excluded by an art world that is, as Wright says, 'still middle class'. As Osborn says of her and Baird: 'If we were in an organisation together, we'd probably both be fired for shouting at each other'. Although we might not necessarily perceive shouting as a desirable mode of conflict resolution, these are relationships in which strong emotions can be expressed without the risk of hierarchical disciplinary action, and personal agency can be retained. Steakhouse Live's resistance to professionalism opposes the class domination inscribed in heteronormative working practices and spectatorship. DIY approaches value amateurism, and resist professional standards as applied to artwork and its curation and presentation, in large part because of the 'affective intensities' which imbue an organisation and its work with the love friends hold for each other. At its best, these intensities are channelled into attempting to establish more intuitive, accessible structures which allow space for experimentation, risk and

39. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010 [1987]).

failure through the trust, honesty, respect, support, generosity, mutuality, understanding, and acceptance that friendship offers.

However, being led by friendship and affective intensities in this way can also be exclusive. The intensities of festivals and their necessity for creating or sustaining friendships can exclude those who are unable to exist so easily in crowds. Harry Josephine Giles notes that the Buzzcut crowds were 'huge, loud, and intense', and that she found them 'immensely difficult and draining'. In these conditions, Giles argues that trying to include as many people as possible has the potential to limit 'access for people with mental and physical disabilities', despite Buzzcut's efforts and resources devoted to accessibility.[40] Intense festival spaces, though they might work to intensify affect and multiply queer friendships, are not equally accessible to everyone. This is a valid critique of Buzzcut's practices, but it needs to be held in perspective; these are structural problems which Buzzcut did not have the resources to solve. As Giles admits: 'I do not know how I would resolve this contradiction, apart from giving the producers all the space and money they could need to achieve their wildest goals, because I believe they have the right intention and effort, even when it fails'. Buzzcut's approach in trying to include as many people as possible was also in response to increased need. The organisers felt increasingly pressured to perform a role for the Scottish Live Art and performance community, particularly after the closure of the venue The Arches in 2015. Cade says, 'we had such a big hole to fill in Scotland each year [...] we just stretched ourselves too thin'. As precariously and under-resourced organisations step into the gap left by regularly-funded ones, as one festival comes to fill the gap left by multiple organisations, it is no surprise that problems like these arise.

40. Harry Josephine Giles, 'Shock and Care', https://harryjosephine.com/2016/04/24/shock-and-care/ (accessed December 11, 2023).

The problem of operating through diffuse, informal relationships and a universalizing notion of trust means that a lot is potentially ambiguous or left unsaid and a departure from formal hierarchies tends to instead rely on informal hierarchies of social capital. Where artists or organisers work for free or low fees in order to perform or work with these festivals, and therefore trade financial stability for social or cultural capital, those who already have some financial security or these forms of capital are best able to progress, and therefore have the most influence in the sector – intensifying socio-economic and class inequalities. There is a lack of accountability to professional scrutiny or protection from harm wielded through various modes of privilege and a lack of structure can cause intensely negative feelings and affects.

In the assumption of unstructured, equal collective practice, power structures grounded in existing social relationships are often left unspoken. As Cade states: 'equal collaboration without set roles is something that is actually way more complicated than it sounds'. Cade reflects on the difficulties that arose when the group sought to invite others to join Buzzcut's work who were not initially as closely embedded in the intimate friendships shared by the rest of the team, but who were hired on the shared assumption that they would be an equal member of the collective. This dynamic was complicated by a reluctance to adopt

more conventional hierarchies, expressed in terms of roles and job titles that might have reflected differing levels of professional expertise, because doing so felt contrary to Buzzcut's ethos and the aspiration of working as a 'free organisation' in which everyone was equal. Similarly, Osborn references the expectation of an equal collaboration which turned out not to be the case. After disagreeing with one of Baird's programming choices and being overruled, Osborn questioned the arrangement, saying: 'if this is a collective but ultimately, the final say lands with you, that's cool [but] I don't want to be a part of a collective that says it's equal and it's not basically'. After Osborn and Baird discussed this, Osborn says that 'it became way more equal', suggesting that revealing, naming, and addressing differences, tension, and hierarchy is more conducive to their diminishment than pretending they do not exist. However, Osborn could do this due to her pre-existing friendship with Baird where there was confidence in entering these difficult discussions. Though equality is important to these organisations, and they seek to enact it in their practices, this remains a horizon: not something that can immediately be achieved in present conditions amid wider power imbalances in the neoliberal field of cultural production. An assumption of equality implicit in being considered a friend conflicts with the social and affective reality which members of these groups experience, with different levels of expertise, investment, and needs for support. These problems are caused by the difficulty of managing a rich relational world, and of balancing a desire for equality or equity with a lived social reality of difference and inequality.

Cliques: A Closed Circle

At Buzzcut Festival 2017, the last festival before the organisation entered a period of change, we watched *Cock and Bull* by friends Nic Green, Laura Bradshaw, and Rosana Cade, a movement piece which uses and repeats ad nauseam the empty gestures and rhetoric of Conservative politicians. It was first devised for the eve of the 2015 general election, the mid-point of what has become at least fourteen years of austerity, precarity, rising inequality and division under an increasingly right-wing Conservative-led government. Usually performed as a one-hour show, this edition was a seven-and-a-half-hour durational version performed by only Green and Cade. They stretched the physical and vocal phrases almost beyond recognition, embodying exhaustion, hopelessness, and hopefulness. In the programme, it was described as 'part protest, part catharsis, part exorcism [and] in part, a demonstration of togetherness'. Simon was exhausted with sleeplessness and anxiety about their work co-organising and leading on hosting Sideburns. Phoebe was exhausted after their four-hour wrestling and noise show *THERESAMAYSMACKDOWN* with Femme Feral (a group comprised of friends and lovers including Parkinson, Anna Smith, Ray Young, Reed Rushes, Freddie Wulf and FK Alexander), a 'response to the systematic violence of our current political reality', itself partly inspired by previous iterations of *Cock and Bull*.[41] As the final show of the Festival,

41. *THERESAMAYSMACKDOWN* was first created for Wright and his partner Alex Lawless' club night Knickerbocker in London in 2016, a programming decision made during a party at Orwin's flat. Femme Feral purposefully drew its company from friends who are artists also including Orwin, Jo Marius Hauge, Demi Nandhra, Lou Robbins, Alicia Jane Turner, Kitty Fedorec, Chiron Stamp, Jen Smethurst and Sian Baxter.

Cock and Bull ended with Green and Cade holding each other tenderly repeating 'good luck everyone, good luck everyone'. Originally connected to hope for change on the eve of the previous election, it took on an almost unbearable pathos when viewed in retrospect, after this hope was lost. Friends in the audience, including Phoebe and Simon, drew each other close in a group hug and many of us cried. We held each other for what felt like a long time. It was a significant and beautiful moment in our shared lives, one that demonstrated deep affective ties of friendship, togetherness and support. However, it was exclusive and did not extend beyond pre-existing friends into a shared collectivity of the audience. The group hug was a closed circle.

A clique is defined as this closed circle, with a high likelihood that members will consider themselves mutually and sociometrically connected.[42] One of the efforts of this article is to indicate how close and mutual these relationships are. Walking into a room where people are engaging in a group hug, or realising you are the only person in an audience who does not have affective ties with everyone else, is a clear indication of an in-group/out-group relations where the intimacy shared (physical or otherwise) between the 'in-group' denotes an exclusivity, cohesion and implies a hierarchy of popularity associated with cliques. As sociological research has shown, inclusionary dynamics (all of us can be friends here) form the basis for the attraction of cliques; but exclusionary dynamics (you are not yet a friend) reinforce cohesion.[43] Live Art from its founding as a strategy aimed to be inclusive of modes of performance-making and art-making that were excluded from institutional tastes, but in doing so inevitably a new defining taste emerged in order for Live Art to be cohesive. Similarly, these festivals aimed to be inclusive, but in creating affective ties and close bonds reproduced through increasingly strong friendships, they also reproduced that exclusion for the sake of cohesion and togetherness.

For Buzzcut and Steakhouse Live, power dynamics emerged even when unwanted or worked against. By design, a performance festival cannot include everyone if it has any mode of curation, and there will always be people who have the time, funds, resources and capabilities to attend and those who do not. As Peter Blau notes in his work on organisations and cliques, initial entry into cliques often occurred at the invitation or solicitation of clique members. Those at the centre of clique leadership have the most influence over this process and they define potential members as acceptable and accepted. In this process, the clique embodies a system of dominance whereby individuals with more status and power exert control over other's lives by applying dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. This process described in sociology is also the process of curation in all cultural fields, where some are invited, commissioned and accepted into a space, while others are rejected. In Live Art festivals this parallel is made more apparent by the significant crossover of artist and audience member (where they are often one and the same) and by the relatively small size of the sector which concentrates these interpersonal dynamics of non-acceptance.

42. Charles Hubbell, 'An Input-Output Approach to Clique Identification', *Sociometry* 28 (1965): 377–399; Edmund Peay, 'Hierarchical Clique Structures', *Sociometry* 37 (1974): 54–65.

43. See Patricia Adler and Peter Adler, 'Dynamics of Inclusion and Exclusion in Preadolescent Cliques', *Social Psychology Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (1995): 145–162; Patricia Sias, 'Social Ostracism, Cliques and Outcasts', in *Destructive Organizational Communication: Processes, Consequences, and Constructive Ways of Organizing*, eds. Pamela Lutgen-Sandvik and Beverley Davenport Sypher (London: Routledge, 2009), 161–179.

While Steakhouse Live adopted a more typical curatorial model of programming artists based on the perceived artistic quality of their work as decided by those running the organisation, Buzzcut took several steps to attempt to address and limit concentrated power among its organisers. Every edition of the festival was curated through a free 'Open Call' process which only required a relatively simple application. It also included options of applying with video or audio files to increase accessibility several years before large institutions and organisations with more financial resources such as Jerwood Arts began to take up this practice. Buzzcut also moved to organised panels of diverse, mostly Scotland-based artists to review and recommend which applications should be successful, although the final decision still remained with the central organisers.[44] They attempted to be transparent about the criteria on which applications would be chosen, based on ideas of feasibility, relevance (to the local landscape), experimental qualities and whether the work was likely to be programmed and supported by other Scottish organisations (for example, a work that had already been shown at the Fringe Festival in Edinburgh would be more likely to be rejected). In 2023 the panel process was replaced by two artists as guest curators who had different types of practice, positionalities and tastes to each other, as well as to the core team. Buzzcut also sought to address the issue of cost for audience members by having a 'pay what you can' policy for all shows, which has remained a defining quality of the organisation. Such a policy often causes economic difficulties, particularly for small organisations. Most artists performing at Buzzcut would receive free accommodation through the hospitality of the local community, some free meals and travel costs but no substantive fee for their work. For 2016 and 2017, the festival paid each artist attending (whether in a solo or group work) £100, a practice which sought to create a sense of fairness and equality. The main reward for being part of Buzzcut was being included and the experience of connection. Despite all these steps being aimed at reducing the power of the organisers as 'artistic directors' (a label which all organisers have attempted to distance themselves from), inadvertently, these steps also increased their personal social and cultural capital. Since these actions proved they were individuals with desired attributes and beliefs, they became more popular and desirable as friends, therefore increasing their status and dominance in the field as tastemakers. This trap is unavoidable among groups with a shared ethos, as those who are visible in enacting what are identified as positive qualities in their field (such as being inclusive, welcoming, politically outspoken, anti-institutional and experimental in their practice) will gain hierarchical power as more popular friends.

These festivals act as spaces of intense socialisation in which social and cultural capital is developed, and this reproduces exclusions of the wider field: the more people one knows or connections one has in a space the more capital one has, and those who are relatively unknown have very little. As Charles Arcodia and Michelle Whitford argue, this is a central purpose of festivals: 'festival attendance develops social capital by providing the community with specific opportunities for accessing and

44. Although these were mostly comprised of local artists, Phoebe was invited to participate in one of these panels in 2015 as they were working in Scotland at the time.

developing community resources, improving social cohesiveness, and providing a focus for celebration'.[45] Access to festivals, the social capital necessary to work with them (for little financial reward or at personal cost) or attend them, and the access to the social capital they help many to develop, is unequally distributed. As one casual attendee of Cambridge Junction's DISRUPT Festival of Live Art in 2022 reportedly said to a member of the front-of-house team, 'it doesn't seem like I'm meant to be here – everyone else already knows each other, it's all friends'. In the opening quote, Zun Lee captures this 'all friends' as 'we all we got', that feeling that all of us here are friends, against the world. But if you are not already included in this 'all', entering such an environment places you on the outside as excluded from both the social and artistic event. Those who have no pre-existing social capital at these festivals are perceived as, and recognise themselves, as strangers. In Ahmed's conception, a stranger is not 'the one we simply fail to recognise, [...] simply any-body whom we do not know', but rather 'those who are, in their very proximity, already recognised as not belonging, as being out of place'.[46] In this formulation, those who are not friends are not simply not known by the other artists and attendees of the festival, they are recognised as not belonging, and this profoundly impacts their affective and social experience of the festival. Further, as Ahmed continues, 'Such a recognition of those who are out of place allows both the demarcation and enforcement of the boundaries of "this place", as where "we" dwell'.[47] That is, the creation of this space for a particular group relies on the presence and exclusion of such a stranger, one who, however good and kind their intentions are, risks being hailed as in *Mean Girls* by a shout of 'she doesn't even go here!'[48] Though these festivals try to undercut these dynamics of exclusion, this is a fundamental way in which these social and affective spaces are constructed. This suggests that exclusion is something which must be continually reflected upon and disrupted, necessitating a reflexive and iterative approach.

45. Charles Arcodia and Michelle Whitford, 'Festival Attendance and the Development of Social Capital', *Journal of Convention & Event Tourism* 8, no. 2 (2007): 1–18 (15).

46. Sara Ahmed. *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London: Routledge, 2000), 21–22.

47. Ibid.

48. *Mean Girls*. Directed by Mark Waters. Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2004.

Mean Girls

The risk of exclusion is particularly present in artist-run festivals like these that seek to depart from accepted institutional practices, and thus rely on unwritten rules, previous experience, confidence and social capital for audiences to know how to behave. For example, Steakhouse Live's Wright recounts receiving feedback from an audience member that *Tits and Tinsel* 'felt incredibly alienating because it felt like one big in-joke [...] that they weren't welcome to be a part of'. This is in part to be expected; *Tits and Tinsel* was originally conceived as a semi-private Christmas party for the Live Art community, and it therefore performs a subtly different function to their more public events. However, though friendships and intimacies at these festivals might be accelerated for many, particularly those who already have some connections to the Live Art sector or might have had the opportunity to study it in

Higher Education, for those who have no connections, who are new to the performance world, not cultural workers, have no specialist education, or are distinguished by an identity factor – older people, those from a different racial or cultural background to the majority – this access to friendship was more difficult.

Audience feedback to Steakhouse Live also stated that this exclusive behaviour was 'perpetuating a culture of whiteness'. All the founders of Buzzcut and Steakhouse Live were white, and although programmes of artists were ethnically diverse, the audiences for the events remained predominantly white. It is important to note here that this critique applies to these festivals as they interact with wider structures of exclusion and domination beyond their control. We are interrogating how dynamics of queer friendship can be exclusive in the wider Live Art sector, not just in these festivals. This is particularly important to remember when considering under-resourced festivals whose work is often unpaid or paid very little. Aspirations of radical inclusion are limited by these economic realities. In these festivals a professional responsibility for inclusion is distributed more widely: where organisers are unpaid and artists and audiences are largely comprised of friends, it is the responsibility of all involved to reflect on and resist these exclusive dynamics.

Structuring organisations through friendships biased towards sameness reproduces the exclusions of wider society by tending to include those who are already included. In contrast to aims of inclusion and acceptance, clique formations impress an importance on conformity.[49] Conformity represents an opposing force to self-awareness and can even lead to 'groupthink' where there is a reduction in the capacity for critical reflection.[50] Friendships tend to confirm more than contest conceptions of self because we are prone to befriend those who are similar to ourselves, those more 'self' than 'other'. William Rawlins's in-depth study of friendship in the United States showed how this begins from when young children typically have playmates of the same age, gender and physical characteristics. Teenagers are most likely to have friends of the same race, age, class and popularity.[51] As adults, we are more likely to develop friendships within the same cultural, educational, marital and career status and class position as our own. Rawlins posits that this means friendships are most likely to 'reinforce and reproduce macrolevel and palpable social differences than to challenge or transcend them'.[52] Following affective ties and social similarity can lead to the collusion of a white-dominated field which excludes, ignores, or restricts the possibilities of artists of colour. As the majority of organisers were queer, white and non-disabled – so were their audiences, including both of us.

In artist Jamal Gerald's contribution to the Live Art Sector Research, entitled 'I Hope', he details personal experiences of social exclusion experienced by the 'Mean Girls' of the Live Art community, which he wrote was typified by a 'you can't sit with us' attitude where 'a lot of them bullied me because I didn't think like them'.[53] Gerald writes that as a queer Black artist, he had not been permitted to 'make mistakes' to the same degree as his white peers and was held to an 'unrealistic expectation of the perfect "woke" person' after he shared

49. Adler and Adler, 'Dynamics of Inclusion'.

50. Edward Diener, 'Deinviduation: The Absence of Self-Awareness and Self-Regulation in Group Members', in *The Psychology of Group Influence*, ed. P.B. Paulus (Hillside, NJ: Erlbaum, 1980), 142–63; Janis Irving, *Victims of Groupthink* (Boston: Haughton Mifflin, 1972).

51. William K. Rawlins, *Friendship Matters: Communication, Dialectics, and the Life Course* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers) 77–79.

52. Ibid., p.274.

53. Jamal Gerald, 'I Hope', *Live Art Research*, 2021, https://www.liveartresearch.uk/commissions/i-hope/ (accessed December 11, 2023).

a range of deliberately provocative content on social media, intended to challenge the limitations of tolerance among queer leftists as a research experiment for his show *Dogmatic* in 2016.[54] When a complaint like this is made, Sara Ahmed contends that friends find it more difficult to address these issues with each other or to step outside of their shared viewpoint. As Ahmed writes in her work on the dynamics of the complaint in academia, 'a culture is tricky because friends are sticky; they tend to stick together'.[55] This means that 'the affection between white friends is how racism is not heard, or if it is heard, it can be how racism is either deleted or deflected as an injury to those accused' and also how the 'white friend' is stopped from recognising racism by the assumed sameness that is implied by friendship.[56] The white friend, as described by Ahmed, 'operates from a sense of entitlement; it is about who is at home, who gets to be at home', and this 'history of entitlement, a colonial as well as patriarchal history' is 'not just about what happens in hostile institutions' but 'about what happens in spaces we might otherwise experience as warm and intimate. A hard history can be between friends'.[57] Gerald highlights how conflict or political disagreements are not experienced or felt equally; inclusion, or security in inclusion, is unequally distributed.

Gerald's intervention shows that inclusion, even when based upon principles of equality and diversity, can require one to follow a set of ideological norms which may work to exclude while they ostensibly seek to include. These norms are not revealed until they are broken. Claire Bishop, in 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', argues that the social harmony present in participatory arts spaces is 'predicated on exclusion of that which hinders or threatens the harmonious order'.[58] An assumption of equality or an assumption of inclusion throughout the Live Art community is to some extent predicated upon the 'good behaviour' of those who are included – and the exclusion of those who cause conflict. To create fully inclusive spaces conflict must be included and accounted for – conflict is how the bounds of the community, its expected behaviours and norms, are contested and constructed. In this case, the inclusion of Black artists like Gerald within the Live Art community required he adhere to a white liberal conception of identity politics, wokeness, and what is sayable online. The belief that it is possible to assert or performatively construct a space of equality, inclusion or unstructured relation conceals the existence of exclusion based on social structures such as race. Attempts to overcome social structure as embodied in queer friendship cannot be allowed to erase the social structure and differences, like race, that remain. At the same time as attempting to overcome exclusive social structure and hierarchy, paradoxically, structures must be put in place to allow for more equal participation in the anti-structural nature of these festivals and queer friendship.

The structural inequalities of the Live Art sector, which relate and intersect with the wider cultural sector and academia, were confirmed by the Live Art Sector Research report, which found that

54. Ibid.

55. Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 421.

56. Sara Ahmed, 'White Friend', *feministkilljoys*, May 19, 2019, https://feministkilljoys.com/2019/05/31/white-friend/ (accessed December 11, 2023).

57. Ibid.

58. Clare Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October* 110 (2004): 51–79 (69n49).

> a number of factors contribute to the term 'Live Art' having less currency for ethnically diverse artists and practitioners, including the power to define, present and promote Live Art being shaped by white-majority organisations, the continued whiteness of academia, and institutional racism in the performing arts.[59]

59. Wee et. al., *Live Art Sector Research*, 100.

As we have demonstrated, friendship is embedded in all of these areas which are identified as prohibitive to inclusion. These structural or interpersonal exclusions need to be addressed through the work of enacting a consistent anti-racist and decolonial praxis which reveals and contests when whiteness is centred not only in established institutional practices but in personal social relationships, more transient DIY cultures in Live Art and across the cultural sector. Paying attention to friendships as necessary parts of organisations allows us to consider a deeper, reparative mode of exchange that can lead to a greater dedication to equity. Black-led collectives and organisations with strong ties of friendship which centre Black artists, artists of colour and diverse audiences have been enacting this transformation including The Cocoa Butter Club, Toni Lewis' Contemporary Other and her associated Satellite project and Yewande 103 founded by Alexandrina Hemsley – but when Live Art is still 'shaped by white-majority organisations', these endeavours need even greater resources of friendship as well as greater financial and structural support.

In our friendships, it is important to pay attention to the structural inequalities between us, however loving these relationships are, and ensure we are also working as comrades and accomplices in addressing oppression. In a period of extreme precarity for experimental practices, organisations in the Live Art sector remained more ethnically diverse and concerned with accessibility than large cultural institutions with significantly more resources.[60] The intimacy of friendship allows us a faster exchange and a greater concern when our actions might cause harm to others, and friendships are more likely to be the support that encourages us to address abusive behaviours and oppression than the source of it. In recent years, institutions such as the Tate Modern have been asked repeatedly to take action in response to complaints about institutional racism and sexist abuse, such as those made publicly by Jade Montserrat since 2017.[61] When Montserrat's friend and artist Amy Sharrocks was asked by senior powers at the Tate not to include her in a year-long commissioned programme of Live Art in 2020 due to being labelled as 'hostile' to the institution as a result of her previous complaints, Sharrocks withdrew the whole programme in solidarity and together they sued the Tate. Sharrocks and Montserrat were successful in making their claim of victimisation, discrimination and harassment and received a six-figure settlement.[62] When affective ties are politically minded and acutely aware of structural inequalities, friendship can be the resource for holding those in power to account and fighting for larger social transformation.

60. One of the key diversity findings in the Live Art Sector Research report was that 'Individuals participating in the UK Live Art sector are diverse in relation to ethnicity, race and disability, and the sector does better than the creative and cultural industries as a whole'. Ibid., 103.

61. See Cristina Ruiz, 'Meet Jade Montserrat, the Black artist who took on the British art establishment', *The Art Newspaper*, May 27, 2021, https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/05/27/meet-jade-montserrat-the-black-artist-who-took-on-the-british-art-establishment (accessed December 1, 2023).

62. Ben Quinn, '"They moved to silence and erase": artists who sued Tate speak out', *Guardian*, August 7, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/aug/07/artists-who-sued-tate-speak-out (accessed December 11, 2023).

Conclusion

In writing this article, we have sought to examine and celebrate the positive effects and radical potentials of queer friendship in Live Art. But such effects and potentials cannot be taken for granted, and nor can we allow our affective entanglements with these festivals and queer friendships to conceal their problems. We have had to balance our insider experiences of deeply valued inclusion and joy with critical perspectives. The dream of queer friendships imbued with solidarity which embrace difficulty and difference is mirrored in the dream of Live Art as a coalitional form of practices estranged from artistic traditions. Queer friendship was vital to creating and sustaining Buzzcut and Steakhouse Live, as well as generating more and closer friendships that hold the potential for further transmitting Live Art practice beyond and between institutional limitations. Like queerness, Live Art is, at its best, a set of practices that seek to question and transgress pre-established social and artistic norms, including those inherited from an ableist, homophobic, transphobic, imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy. However, Live Art can also be troublingly complicit with these norms, because it relies on, for its very existence, practices, institutions, and traditions within which they are embedded. In lived reality, heteronormativity permeates queer sociality, but queer organisations seek to experiment with processes and strategies that can eliminate or diminish these pervasive norms.

In contesting such norms, truly inclusive festivals necessitate some form of conflict, just as for Bishop, social harmony indicates the exclusion of those who might threaten that harmony. Steakhouse Live and Buzzcut aimed to bring a wide range of different kinds of people together with limited material resources. As Taylor of Buzzcut says, 'one of the cores of that festival was this celebration of radical performance in amongst this community and trying to negotiate some kind of new thing. That's tense and that's full of friction, and that's going to have its problems'. The tensions of these festivals are a consequence of the need to balance inclusion and cohesion, even when the hierarchical dynamics of clique formation are resisted. The tensions that arise from friends working together to try to do things differently are not an unfortunate by-product but are how problems are identified and addressed, and how change is propagated in the wider field. In providing important meeting points for a specialist community, as well as attempting to open these spaces up to wider communities and groups, these festivals function as a public sphere for the field of Live Art, a space in which the practices of these communities, and the practices of performance festivals, can be contested and changed. They act as a space in which the boundaries of this cultural public sphere, and who has access to it, can be renegotiated by revealing tensions and

differences that would be concealed in more professional or institutional contexts. When conflicts arise, they need to be attended to with collective care, with an understanding of the complexities of friendships forged through shared estrangement and an effort to connect beyond sameness. Conflict in these festivals is part of an iterative process of trying and failing to resolve irresolvable differences.

Queer friendship is not, and should not, always be easy. Foucault writes that we have to allow unease and allow 'everything that can be troubling in affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie, and companionship' since these are the very things that 'our rather sanitized society can't allow a place for without fearing the formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force'.[63] This mode of organising relies on friendship and depends on it to not be a closed circle but an outward-facing and constantly expanding process of outreach. This means an effort to embrace the difficulty of a friendship of shared estrangement, where our estrangement may be unequally distributed. We have to be willing as friends to address tensions and conflict. Differences are not removed with a simple affirmation of equality and friendship; but in revealing them, the exclusions and inequalities of performance in the UK are made available to contestation, discussion, and action.

63. Foucault, 'Friendship as a Way of Life', 137.

Queer friendship holds the potential to be a more radical, egalitarian, honest and productively antagonistic mode of organisation. If greater funding and investment were given for these organisations to exist without having to bend to the requirements of professionalism, their political potential could be expanded and sustained. However, given the potential it holds for destabilising pre-existing categories, this investment is unlikely to be forthcoming from those currently in power who benefit most from the status quo. Our friendships with all those in Live Art named in this article, as well as many others, have been built through countless moments of exchange. Our ephemeral, intense, intimate moments together have allowed us to hold the potential for continued artistic and political experiments towards future imaginings while surviving in the present. Like Live Art itself, queer friendship is nebulous and difficult to define, but the experience of it opens the possibility to reinvent sociality and to make something different, together.

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