

NETWORK OF AMBITIONS

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Ormston House is a meeting place for the arts in the heart of Limerick City. The Sustainability Plan (2017–) is a project creating resources to publish research on the expanded value of Ormston House and other non-commercial or non-governmental cultural spaces and programmes.

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It is the many conversations I had about leaving my position in Ormston House that remain with me now, having left. Not about me simply leaving an individual space, but regular and frequent conversations amongst peers about burnout and a pervading sense of futility amongst grassroots organisations like Ormston House and others of this kind that exist in the art world. As the price of the most expensive artwork hurtles closer to one billion dollars, why continue with this particular world defined by unpaid labour and underfunded projects? Why do it to ourselves? There's a long history of artists and other workers in the creative industries dropping out, or at the very least resisting while participating; whether in protest, as a deliberate conceptual artistic act, or out of necessity. But what of those who decide to stay, to fight on – attempting both to sustain the possibility of an alternative, as well as sustain themselves and these efforts in such a hostile environment?

Sustainability can often be equated with a kind of surrender. You start off young, hungry and full of ambition until you realise this doesn't work financially, and you become like everything you set yourself against, and secure a nice career as a result. But I believe it should be more than a code word for transitioning away from what you started out doing, or at the very least, we can hope for it to be. The output and legacies of grassroots projects are, at their best, tied up in ideas of ethics, care, equality, inclusion, activism and community. Paying people, slowing down, caring about quality over quantity; these are other sustainable modes of practice, and in the wider context of arts organisations, they are radical in sustaining not just individuals, but the very possibility of an alternative.

But before we talk about alternatives, let's first consider today.

At the time of writing, the most expensive artwork sold for \$450,312,500 million (I would like to apologise for how quaint this will sound to future readers living with prices exceeding one billion).¹ A look at the timeline surrounding this recent auction is revealing. The first named buyer was little-known Saudi Arabian prince Bader bin Abdullah bin Mohammed bin Farhan al-Saud – this was leaked to the *New York Times* a little under a month after the initial auction. That this prince was “from a remote branch of the royal family, with no history as a major art collector, and no publicly known source of great wealth” was suspicious.² He had worked previously as a political proxy for the king and crown prince. This included key positions within the media, cultural tourism, the energy industry, broadband development, waste management and real estate. The vast sums of money spent on the painting created problems for the crown prince, who, a fortnight before the auction, had ordered the crackdown on more than 200 of the richest Saudi princes, businessmen and government officials as part of a larger attempt to recover hundreds of billions of dollars from corruption and poor investments. An anti-corruption campaign was long overdue, but the selective nature of who was targeted suggested this to be part of a larger political power grab. In targeting displays of wealth from his rivals, the crown prince left himself partially exposed with this major plank of Saudi cultural policy. This connection between domestic politics and international partnerships didn’t simply spill over into the art world, but as artist Hito Steyerl describes, it is what makes it possible, writing:

*To brutally summarize a lot of scholarly texts: contemporary art is made possible by neoliberal capital plus the internet, biennials, art fairs, parallel pop-up histories, growing income inequality. Let’s add asymmetric warfare – as one of the reasons for the vast redistribution of wealth – real estate speculation, tax evasion, money laundering and deregulated financial markets to the list.*³

1. In just 19 minutes of bidding, the sale of Leonardo da Vinci’s painting *Salvator Mundi* (c. 1500), which was originally sold for £45 in the 1950s, broke public records. It was the peak moment in a culture of wild speculation and ever elaborate tax evasion through art – this heightened moment was born from the intensification of the art world as a proxy to state power within a tightly-knit global network.

2. David D. Kirkpatrick, “Mystery Buyer of a \$450 Million ‘Salvator Mundi’ was a Saudi Prince,” *New York Times*, 6 December, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/06/world/middleeast/salvator-mundi-da-vinci-saudi-prince-bader.html>

3. Hito Steyerl, *Duty Free Art* (New York: Verso Books, 2017), 78.

Steyerl outlines the reciprocal relationship between museums and nation-states, the ideals and realities of each shaping the other. Steyerl discusses when WikiLeaks revealed plans from the Syrian first lady, Asma al-Assad, to establish a network of museums to promote Syria's economic and social development, modelled on museums such as the Louvre and the Guggenheim Bilbao; when a municipal gallery in Turkey was temporarily no longer used to shape the national identity, but instead used as emergency accommodation for refugees from northern Iraq fleeing national disintegration. The gallery dramatically became a very visible refugee camp, instead of its usual shadow function as a tool to construct national identity and as gateway for the flow of foreign capital.

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A loose network of shadowy tax havens, advisors, experts and committees all culminating to generate the largest price achieved at auction is not the kind of art world I imagined I'd find myself in. It may feel like a distant fact; this kind of money, excess and connection to power is far beyond my personal experience and of those around me. The problem with participation in the art world at grassroots level, isn't that prices don't trickle down, of course they don't; it is how my participation supports cultural value to trickle upwards. Complicity isn't simply accepting a dodgy cheque, or a disreputable employer – or a whole host of activities where you benefit from and support the status quo. Complicity comes also through one's passive participation, being a step on the ladder, being in the same room, or similar rooms – hell, just making the room possible. There are many defences, excuses and reasons to alleviate our guilt. It's another art world, another world perhaps, but I've never been able to fully shake this spectre of complicity. I often wonder what I'm even doing here.

To want to give it all up seems in this context not only reasonable, but perhaps the only sane choice. Martin Herbert articulated a particular balancing act practised by a number of artists in his 2017 book, *Tell Them I Said No*. It's a portrait of a series of artists who have turned their backs on the art world and have withdrawn from the industry and its milieu of networking, socialising, and self-promotion. If there is a natural call in each artist to withdraw, there is also naturally this desire's darker cousin – the wish to see the art world collapse, crumble into dust so that

something else might emerge. Before we become so cynical and cheer for the collapse, let's think about what continuing participation can achieve. Ormston House was founded in 2011. This was a time when Ireland was still reeling from the effects of the 2008 financial collapse and was experiencing political shifts as well as witnessing ongoing social changes that continue today. Part of this upheaval brought about a resurgence of grassroots art projects in unused city spaces, and Ormston House in Limerick City was one such story.

Much writing from this period has given significant weight to the Creative Limerick scheme from Limerick City and County Council, which facilitated art projects in disused buildings, yet it was the energy and vision of individuals behind projects (those who pushed the possibilities of the scheme) who are often overlooked. By filling a gap or providing an alternative, these independent artists and curators typically resist commercial interests through spending money, time and effort in a way only possible in the short term, all in a desperate bid to make something particular happen. And when these short-term attempts at an alternative collapse and in turn reaffirm what they set out to overcome; these brief moments of independence become a contested territory.

While this may happen outside the commercial and institutional circuits of the formal art world, it can feed and support the same system. To begin at the grassroots typically comes out of a kind of furious urgency, a self-appointed sense of necessity. To do something you feel you have to, or to tackle a gap others aren't. This individual level of ambition and drive is admirable, typically coming with much personal sacrifice. But beyond the conscious intents, interests and objectives of the participants there is the effect and reach of the legacy of the activities. A grassroots art space can kickstart an individual's career and can also be part of a city's corporate identity, a regional development plan, an Arts Council pitch or a talking point in a political debate. An independent project can at once be a catalyst for an artist's progress, a gentrifying force in the community, a significant critical break, and a local council's justification for intensifying neoliberal policies all at the same time.

The proposition that independent, grassroots or alternative spaces and voices are some kind of break or escape from the status quo as it exists ignores this. Those on the outside can quickly be appropriated and instrumentalised

– their acceptance of and opposition to the mainstream isn't necessarily a problem. Despite the often noble intentions of participants, there is a significant responsibility that comes with participation regardless if people recognise this or not. The buying and selling of art isn't the issue, but the ensuing system of commodification, exploitation and precarity that it fosters is. Commercial galleries, significant institutions and major museums all rely on this network of grassroots spaces for their activities; they are part and parcel of the same system even if those on the bottom feel removed from it.

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I struggle with questions of complicity because imagining an alternative can feel so bleak. How do you address the economic, political and social infrastructures of the art world that you're embedded in, and, on some level, aspire to be further embedded in?

To be ambitious or to hold an ambition is a curious state of being. It's the desire to have either achieved something, or to look forward hopefully to what can be achieved. It is both a past and future vision that we hold in the present. At different levels of art production, different ambitions can be held and realised, restrained and guided by individual tastes, interests and competencies, as well as commercial or institutional frameworks.

Looking back to my time at Ormston House in Limerick, there is so much that feels anecdotal and off-the-record that any kind of account offered will always be partial. But a local art history is always constructed in this way, built through fragments of exhibition press releases, articles, artist's statements, documentary photographs of installations and artworks, and attitudes that get recorded. There are certain aspects of my memories of Ormston House that remain consistent throughout: the leadership and mentorship of the founder Mary Conlon; the staff largely being students from the local art school, Limerick School of Art & Design; the building and its Italian palazzo-inspired Georgian façade, which connotes an historical legacy while also making the space itself feel physically cold; but there was also a sense we were providing something that was urgent and necessary, but that wasn't possible within what existed before.

In the end, I couldn't sustain my position at Ormston House. I was able

for a period, initially one day a week during my studies, and then full-time through a government-backed internship scheme that added to my unemployment benefit and eased the pressure from the department's 'activation measures'. When this time was over, the lack of other employment opportunities forced the issue. I couldn't remain in the city, I couldn't continue with Ormston House. I had to emigrate like many others, and I eventually found a stable job and far more freelance work than was available to me previously in Ireland. While there is much to criticise about the commercial and institutional worlds, they provide paid employment in a way the grassroots organisations largely can't.

Despite this, I find solace in the continued existence of such grassroots spaces, and particularly how the alternatives they propose come up against dominant commercial and institutional drives. Sustaining this alternative requires both a confrontation and a compromise with these forces, fighting for and establishing a place that has worth within this wider network of ambitions. Different economies circulate within this network, the financial as well as the social and cultural. We are part of the cycle in many ways: as gentrifiers, as those taking the first step of a career, as those who create an alternative that releases pressure on the status quo. I find this solace in grassroots organisations because of how they push for an alternative in the midst of all of this. To enter into this system ethically and bear this responsibility demands a clear purpose, a larger vision.

Against the drive for bigger sales, the push for bigger audiences, media hype or critical prestige, the conversations at Ormston House centred on the art, the artists and the art workers. Of course we were also led by our unseen biases, tastes and skillsets. To focus on the art is not the fantasy of a neutral, abstract space for art, but rather a pushing aside of the drives for profit, or the institutional quantitative impulse, to make room for the considerations that get pushed aside or seen as secondary. At its best, this is a space for what isn't possible elsewhere.

When I think about the circulation of financial and cultural capital within this network of ambitions, the question of sustainability is inseparable. The network could be compared to an ecosystem. With the grassroots, commercial and institutional organisations all depending on each other to varying degrees. And while this dependency is extended throughout, so is a responsibility for participation. The relationship within this

ecosystem describes both a dependency and a responsibility. But it is also a demand. Ambitions bring with them responsibilities. Different levels of art production privilege different responsibilities – the gallerist navigates the buyers and sellers, while the institution courts audiences, formerly elite and select, now diverse and populous, working with stakeholders, previously patrons, and now a mixture of the state and corporations. The grassroots organisations can bring something else. Sustainability brings this idealism into action by proposing and experimenting with alternative forms of discourse and practice, imagining different possibilities, while balancing the reality of their present conditions.

Chris Hayes is an Irish writer and editor based in London. He is a former co-director of Ormston House, currently working across editorial and communications projects, including three issues of the *Emotional Art Magazine: Tory Hate, Haunted* and *Future Fatigue*. His writing on art and contemporary culture has appeared in numerous publications including *CIRCA*, *Paper Visual Art*, the *Visual Artists' News Sheet*, the *Irish Arts Review*, *Dazed*, *Huck* and *Time Out* amongst others.



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