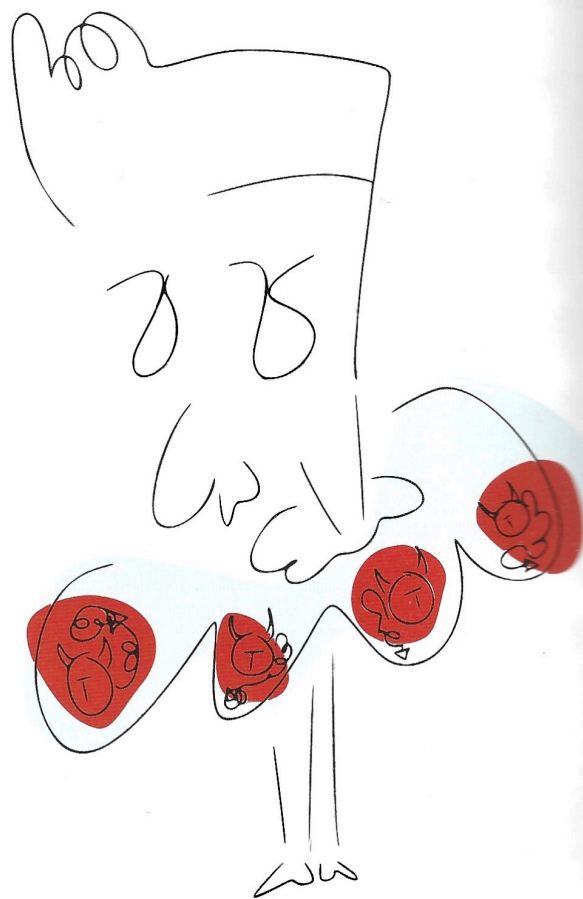


Otters, Bond and Bubbles – Artist-run as Fluffer

Joe Rowley



Illustrations by Joe Rowley

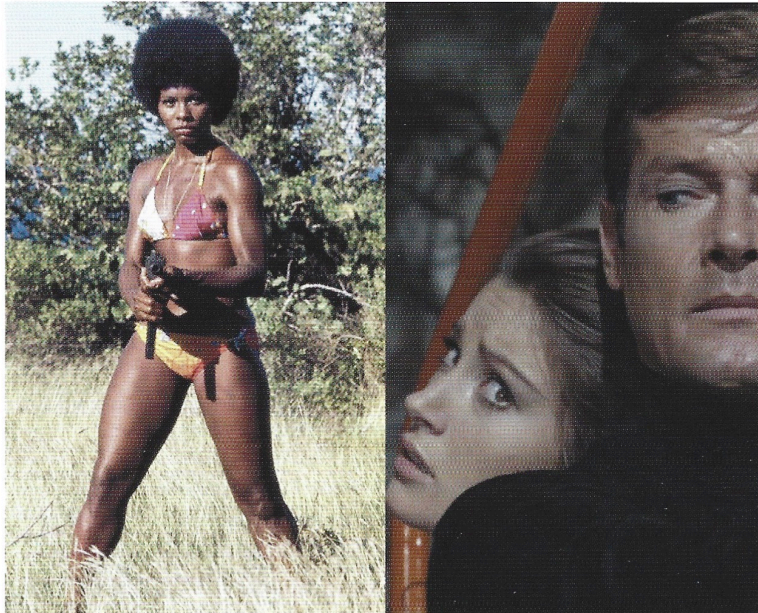


Image Collage - (left to right) Rosie Carver/Gloria Hendry, *Solitaire*/ Jane Seymour, James Bond/Roger Moore - *Live and Let Die*, 1973
Credit: MGM/United Artists Pictures

For those of you not aware, a fluffer is someone who works on the set of porn films whose job is to get and keep the male performers hard. They aren't the ones we see on screen. They are hidden behind the camera; a MacGuffin of desire, somehow sordid and often placed closer to a prostitute in the scale of sex work than a porn star. When you think about it though, fluffers are the ones with the real power over the actors and audience. The very success of the piece is firmly in their hands.

This text is going to place artist-run in the fluffer role, tracking the development of the character through cinematic references, soap-powder and the mechanics of cultural ecology, positioning big institutions as Bond Girls submissive to the normativity of our leading man, the policymakers, in contrast to the liberated fluffer characters of artist-run.

The dichotomy between fluffer and star is illustrated well in the James Bond film franchise. Charles Burnetts looks at this phenomenon, identifying that pretty much all of the female characters in the, generally problematic, franchise fall into two loose categories – Bond Girls and fluffer characters or “Bad Girls” (Burnetts, C., 2015).

The Bond Girls are positioned as the object of desire which will be attained by the hero, an object to be possessed by the ambassador of colonial-patriarchal masculinity. They conform to “criteria of superior physical beauty and the promise of feminine virtue and passivity”² as defined and normalised by hetero-normative, hegemony.

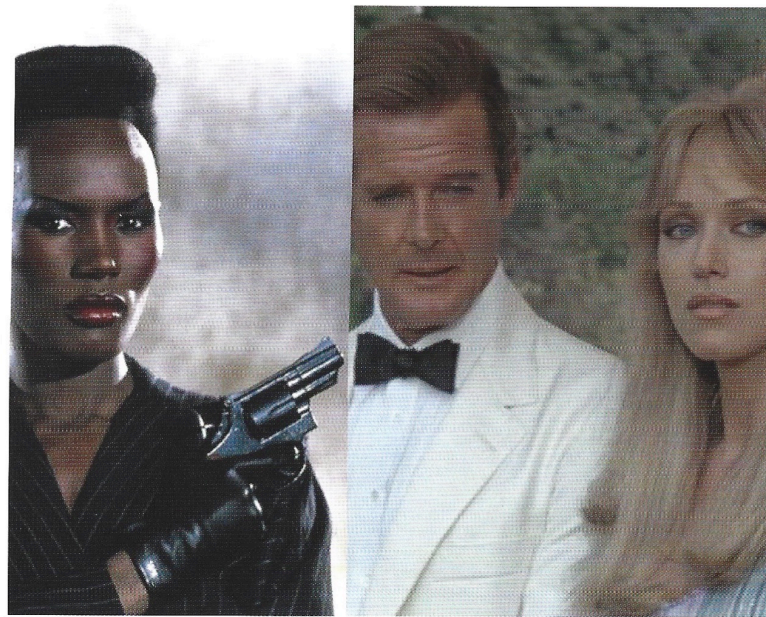
The Bad Girls in contrast are usually more closely aligned to the villain of the piece, fulfilling more diversely coded gender roles and narratives whilst at the same time being more disposable, less valued and regularly othered.

Burnetts identifies the kickback for these characters as a much greater degree of agency in contrast to the Bond Girl. Bad Girls are professionalised and “efficient women” (Bold, C., 2003) with unique skillsets and a greater degree of corporeal, spatial, social and sexual mobility and freedom than Bond Girls.

These Bad Girls are regularly racialised and othered in various ways, in a similar way as henchmen in the series, to identify them as nonconforming to the colonial-patriarchal norms presented in both Ian Fleming's books and the films. Burnetts identifies Rosie Carver (Gloria Hendry/*Live and Let Die*-1973) and May Day (Grace Jones/*A View to a Kill*-1985) as prime examples of this practice through traditional racial tropes and negative codings persecuted by Western subjectivities coupled with yearning for the “primitive” or the “dark Other” as positioned by bell hooks (hooks, b., 1992).

Grace Jones' scene-stealing May Day demonstrates this through being characterised by a degree of animalism, aggression and a masculine/androgynous gender coding, classic tropes in racial stereotyping, which spills into the realms of caricature. Gloria Hendry's Rosie Carver shows another side of this othering in the especially problematic *Live and Let Die* (1973), which puts Bond up against an all-black criminal conspiracy masterminded by black-nationalist Vodou caricature Dr Kananga (Yaphet Kotto) in an absurdly racist and exploitative reaction to the Black Power Movement. Carver is a CIA agent notionally working with Bond, but who turns out to be a believer in a “black ideology (coded: criminal)” (Burnetts, C., 2015) in the form of Vodou, which also stands in opposition to the Western Christian/Atheist symbol of Bond. This hits on another problematic coding: the rationality and purity of (white)

Image Collage - (left to right) May Day/Grace Jones, James Bond/Roger Moore, Stacey Sutton/Tanya Roberts - *A View to a Kill*, 1985
Credit: MGM/United Artists Pictures



Western Christianity in opposition to the hysteria and savagery of other possible belief systems, especially polytheisms (*Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) and *Apocalypse* (2006) are other great examples).

All of this feeds into the specific male gaze of James Bond. A kind of male gaze which could be placed in correlation to that of many institutional structures in the Global North/West. As a white Western male enforcer for the premier colonial nation-state (Britain), exemplar of toxic masculinity through the ages and forever coded with a very conventional hetero-normativity, Bond is the perfect poster-boy for the patriarchy. May Day is much more dominant sexually, adhering to the "wild animal sexuality" construct discussed by bell hooks in connection to the commodification of the black female body (hooks, b., 1992). This is mirrored not only in many of the other non-white female fluffers but is a general trope within female characters in Bond generally (Bold, C., 2003). It undermines the agency of these Bad Girls, subordinating them through "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey, L., 1986) to both an othering through the notion of forbidden or incomprehensible desire simultaneously with an othering based on nonconformity to gendered norms. The subjugation of the female-coded object by a male-coded subject flows through the core of the fluffer as a kind of container of instrumentalised agency.

We find ourselves again observing the fluffer as other and deviant. Somehow problematic. They are allowed to exercise their agency with the object of their desire but not wholly on their terms and with an object of desire which is simultaneously their enemy/oppressor.

What is present in this example from the film world (and others, see: *The Fluffer* (Westmorland & Glatzer, 2001) for a more "R" rated example focused on homosexual love, desire and obsession) is how the interplay of coded roles within the characters tells us, the audience, what we are supposed to want. This has a correlation to semiotician Roland Barthes. In his super-short essay in *Mythologies* (1958), *Soap-powders and Detergents*, Barthes identifies the damaging qualities of soap-powders and detergents and the semiotic tools advertising uses to cover this fact. Firstly there is the discourse of "whiter than white whites", an oldie but a goodie which is still with us in advertising for laundry detergents. He links into the idea of maintaining normative behaviours. This forwarding of a value system based a) on appearances and b) a very specifically male-coded kind of appearances also seeks to nurture a kind of neo-liberal competitive spirit; an encouragement of consuming this or that to outdo the appearances of your peers. It also, I think, links into the ideas I mentioned earlier around whiteness and purity and how that relates to non-white bodies and non-white cultures. The whiter your shirt the better and more rational and professional and clean and pure you are. It is marketed at a very white-western conception of the world.

There is also foam. Foam is the great enemy of clarity.

"As for foam, it is well known that it signifies luxury. To begin with, it appears to lack any usefulness; then, its abundant, easy, almost infinite proliferation allows one to suppose there is in the substance from which it issues a vigorous germ, a healthy and powerful essence, a great wealth of active elements in a small original volume. Finally, it gratifies in the consumer a tendency to imagine matter as something airy, with which contact is effected in a mode both light and vertical, which is sought after like that of happiness either in the gustatory category (foie gras, entremets, wines), in that of clothing (muslin, tulle), or that of soaps (filmstar in her bath). Foam can even be the sign of a certain spirituality, inasmuch as the spirit has the reputation of being able to make something out of nothing, a large surface of effects out of a small volume of causes (creams have a very different 'psycho-analytical' meaning, of a soothing kind: they suppress wrinkles, pain, smarting, etc.)."

(Barthes, R., *Mythologies*, pp36)

I am a big fan of the ephemeral but I also think there are different kinds of ephemerality that have different kinds of ethical durability. Foamy things are the least durable. They

are broken promises, press-release templates and virtue signalling posts made by bullshit pedalling corporations. Bond Girls are foam. They cover up the body in the bathtub that is our dear fluffer. They don't want us seeing the naughty bits but still want you to think they are hot. This is "the art of having disguised the abrasive function [of the detergent] under the delicious image" (Barthes, R., 1958, pp37). The abrasive function in James Bond films is an upholding of the norms represented by Bond. This is where the metaphor starts coming round to the culture sector. In a much more on-the-nose kind of way, the delicious image could be The Louvre in Abu Dhabi, a beautiful shiny new building full of beautiful objects with a famous name attached and the legitimacy that comes with it. It is a culture washing exercise that exists to obscure the actions of a policymaker in a cloud of pretty bubbles.

Artist-run often presents the alternative to that narrative – without the explicit connections to government or a private investment fund they have the agency to present their own narrative. This isn't to say that it is always a positive or healthy narrative, sometimes it is downright toxic sludge (see LD50 in London, 2017 - <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/feb/22/art-gallery-criticised-over-neo-nazi-artwork-and-hosting-racist-speakers>), but there is the freedom to exist outside of the normatively prescribed version of society.

First, let's frame out artist-run a little. When talking about artist-run I am talking about non-profit based collectivised practices, autonomous or at the very least semi-autonomous from institutional (state or private) frameworks and controls, initiated and cultivated by artists (I'll get to them later). In *Artist-Run Spaces* Gabriele Detterer and Maurizio Nannucci position this trajectory as coming out of the



Global North/West avant-garde movements of the 1960s and 70s, especially driven by global collaborative practitioners and collectives like *Fluxus*, more publication driven platforms like *Printed Matter* (New York-based collective-run bookshop and publication project: Edit DeAk, Sol LeWitt, Lucy Lippard, Walter Robinson, Pat Steir, Mimi Wheeler, Robin White, Irena von Zahn), and *General Idea* (artist group based in Toronto, Canada, who initiated *File Magazine* to extend their *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) approach to a printed media: AA Bronson, Felix Partz, Jorge Zontal) and the project space movement within the field of exhibition as led by pioneering project spaces and galleries spaces like PS1 in New York.

Artist-Run Spaces focuses on North America and Central Europe with *Artpool* (initiated in communist-ruled Budapest, Hungary in 1979) a kind of anomaly in the mix. The idea was proliferating across Western and Northern Europe and the ideas of many at the vanguard of the artist-run revolution, particularly *Fluxus* with their more ephemeral and gestural practice, quickly establishing themselves in cultural hubs globally. By the 90s artist-run had become kind of old hat, meshing neatly with existing artist studio formats, night-life and queer culture, underground music and subcultures in a more general sense to become a kind of plankton bloom of micro to mini-projects. Some of the vanguard organisations were either subsumed by or took on institutional forms, PS1 is a great example of this, now standing as one of the leading institutional spaces in New York. Others withered and died leaving spaces that were quickly filled up by the next bright young things. In whatever circumstance artist-run initiatives tend to emerge to cover a perceived lack within the resources and options available to a community of folks working with

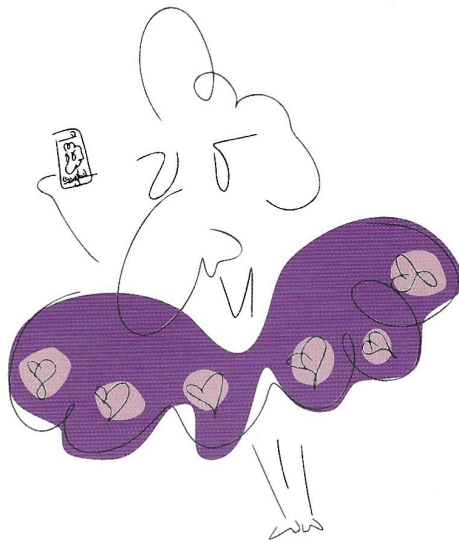
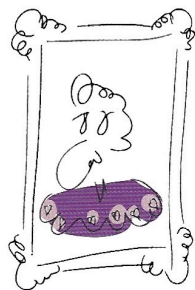
various forms of cultural output. No studios?- make a studio. No gallery opportunities for young artists or artists from marginalised backgrounds?- make a gallery/project space. Nowhere to screen print?- set up a print shop. etc.

A possibly contentious term in all this is *artist*. There are questions as to what is and isn't qualified artistic practice in the broader academic discourse around artist-run. I feel like *Mousse Magazine's* publication anthology *The Artist as Curator* (ed. Filipovic, E., 2018) is a good exploration of the complex interactions between artist-curator-institutional-body and that particular subject has enough in it for several books worth of content so I'm not going to get bogged down with it here.

A growing level of transdisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity and intersectionality between artistic-artistic fields and artistic-non-artistic fields which has further greyed this area, the curatorial boom from the 90s to now has made it both impossible to define what is and isn't an artist. It has also, in my opinion, rendered it a moot point. For me, the character of the *artist* within the artist-run doesn't need to be a specialist in visual arts or any kind of arts. Instead, I would define it as someone with an ethos of agency and drive when approaching a collectivised project which loosely (or very firmly) fits in the culture sector. By this I mean they are committed to using art, or culture in a more nebulous sense, to express their concerns and passions both as an individual and within a collective.

Ephemeral Care, for example, I position as artist-run.

However, Connor Brazier and I are the only two involved in the project in possession of a formal art-making background, neither of us are still practising but we do have certificates that tell us we are artists. The other members



come from art history/curating/arts management, literature/critical whiteness studies and governmental environmental policy. For me, they are no less artists. Not everyone will agree with that and that is fine, the point I am trying to make is that I am not super interested in fighting over labels and definitions of what a person is or isn't, I'm interested in their contribution. Many of the most exciting projects come from cross-disciplinary practice and experience, every painter inserts some of their lived experience into a painting, every person involved in an organisation does that same.

I am of course from that definition using artist-run as a catch-all for a broad set of "job titles" so to say. It is also pertinent to point out that artist-run in this context concerns presentational practice. Either in terms of providing a platform for presentation or being the presenter itself, the field of artist-run is inherently driven by output: exhibition. To clarify this, I position the exhibition as anything made public, from the Latin *exhibere* - to hold-forth or hold-out. It could be a performance in the street, a painting in a gallery, a reading in a coffee shop, a publication in paper or digital form, a desk in a shared studio, attendance at a residency, a post on Instagram; whatever – use your imagination. As long as one other person sees it, even if that is just a studio-mate who passes by your desk and looks over your shoulder; it's public, it is exhibition. Whilst that may seem a little fuzzy I think it is paramount in understanding several of the points in this text. I also hope it doesn't lead to a retreat to the artist's garret and the delusion of masterwork or genius.

What I would like to counterpoint this field with is the more traditional museological/academic realm of presentational practice. Here again, I want to stress that I am thinking about the exhibition aspect here, but again maybe it is worth expressing what I am covering in that. Any published academic research or any outwardly facing research methodology (focus groups, seminars, lectures, interviews) for me would constitute an exhibition. An exhibition, as we all should be familiar with in artist-run, is still an exhibition if there is only one visitor. When considering the more institutional side of the cultural sector we often encounter a more constrained vision of possibilities than we may find in artist-run. Institutions are more inherently shackled to the whims of board members, stakeholders, regional government, and the demands of funders. With their greater resources, and to a degree recourses, comes a constriction of agency and nimbleness. These aren't agile jerboas able to change direction in a flash, they are more like elephant seals, stranded on land, flailing and lumbering. There are also larger questions of prestige and the constraints of social norms to consider for these bodies which can further stagnate the offering. They are conventionally attractive, appealing to the broadest denominator of consumers and whilst often easy on the

eye is just as often pretty one dimensional.

In an effort to mitigate stagnation institutional bodies often look towards artist-run for inspiration. They may take ideas, people and concerns from this pool to act as a kind of foam covering their inactivity and disinterest in making actual changes. Zarina Muhammad has written two great texts for *The White Cube* highlighting the use of freelance non-white creatives by major institutions to create a facade of inclusion, diversity and representation (*The Problem with Diaspora Art*, Muhammad, Z., 2018, *The Problem with Representation*, Muhammad, Z., 2019). Also worth a look on the subject is Jade Foster's text *Art, Curating, Systems and Stuff: Black Performativity Thriving in Spite of*, for *Ephemeral Care's* publication *The Exhibition is in Transit* vol.1 (2021).

Here we start to see the correlation to the position of the Bond Girl presented earlier. Institutional bodies are, to all intents and purposes, submissive to the patriarchal and normative James Bond of policymakers. They operate as foam for these policymakers; concealing, luxuriating, purifying. There are of course always exceptions to the rule and the latitude of the institution generally reflects the local and national politics of the country it is in. There is also the grey area of established institutional spaces with strong connections to and consistent backing from government funders but which are technically independent. These often come out of artist-run organisations which have managed to persevere, spaces like Gasworks (London), Röda Sten Konsthall (Göteborg), Index (Stockholm). In Sweden there is a particular history with socially collectivised institutions (Fotograficentrum in the case of Index for example but also regional networks like Konstfrämjandet) popping up in the 1970s which feel as though they may have superseded the kind of artist-run activity that was happening contemporaneously in the UK and USA. This different basis for collectively driven cultural spaces has concurrently altered the approach to artist-run from both sides. Policymakers seem (at least in my experience) more keen to back things with a connection to these older structures or which are established, even in regards to funding directed at initiating projects. From inside artist-run it feels like these structures have encouraged a reluctance to exist outside of a certain level of comfort, which could also be read as a more concrete understanding from those involved in the scene about their rights and worth than is present in the UK, for example.

By policymakers, I don't just mean those in government who are expressly dealing with culture. Yes, the folks making the decisions in local and national culture departments are involved in this group though it also includes a vast amount of other people involved in steering social, political and economic direction and priorities. This also includes more tangentially those lobbying government on behalf of various companies, charities and interests.

Policymakers exercise control through economic means, dictating, what is acceptable to distract the herd of the general population with (Chomsky, N., 1988), whilst concurrently blinding said herd to the injustices placed upon them and serving the polemic of the perceived public (politicians) as upholders of a specific status quo. They allow nods to the real concerns, acting as a pacifier for some disgruntled elements through their foams, just enough to look good but never quite enough to be good. We also should look back to Barthes here and consider the positioning of peers in a relationship of competition. In the same way as there is an insistence on pitting the most economically unstable/disadvantaged element of society against itself (Jones, O., 2011), we see the pitting of the most economically unstable/disadvantaged element of the culture sector against itself.

Whilst policymakers have a firm hand on the leash of institutions they also have a decent hold on artist-run, which if they want to get paid are generally beholden to the same funding avenues. This encourages a normalisation and formalisation of process, format and themes through an economic incentive for those toeing the party line. If the big state institutions are the "delicious image", the "abrasive function" here is the upholding of a set of social norms dictated by a global social elite with a dedication to prioritisation of whiteness, patriarchal hegemony and disorganisation amongst the oppressed.

With our Bond (policymakers) and Bond Girl (institutions) cast that leaves only the role of Fluffer open to artist-run. What a relief!

From everything we have looked at so far we should be starting to see that whilst the fluffer may not get much screen time, is marginalised and discriminated against, it is the fluffer who dictates the direction and tempo of the plot. The fluffer is the one with the agency to make or break the whole shebang and the more the fluffer realises that, then the more power the fluffer has [ed. Well...until viagra comes]. An artist-run initiative is in an excellent position in contrast to other fluffers. Artist-run as a field has the latitude to make its own rules, its own opportunities and, as evidenced by the past fifty or so years of art history, is an increasingly potent force in dictating and shaping how cultural ecosystems evolve. Latitude and possibility do not automatically mean socio-economic independence from the whole capitalist shitfight we live in but it does mean a degree of socio-economic agency. We can choose to do something without state funding, without any funding if needs be. I'm not advocating that artists (or anyone) should be content to work for free, and on the other side of that coin, you of course have an equally powerful agency to choose not to do certain things. But I would say however that as an artist-run you have the power to decide in a way a state or private (corporate) institution does not. They are contractually obliged to pay a set rate, they are obligated to

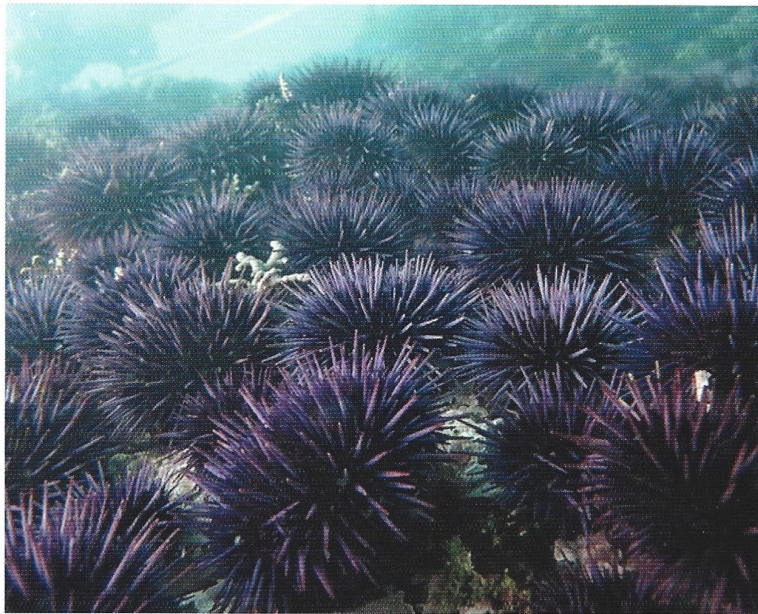
follow the dictates from culture policymakers at various levels of government or shareholders and trustees in the case of public or private institutions respectively. Artist-run can work between the lines a little more, be a little more nimble and whilst perhaps not having the choice to sink thousands of currency units into production can at least make a choice over exactly who and what they stand for and how they want to stand for it.

Cultural ecosystems, just like biological ones, are locational and express the relationship of energy transfer in that location. In biology, we have food-webs that basically tell us what eats what. In culture, it is the same except, as we know, it's dog-eat-dog (insert punchline drum track). What food-webs tell us is how an ecosystem is structured and they can also explain to us how things exist in balance. For example, we know from observing food-webs that if you take the main predator out of an ecosystem it will destabilise the whole structure. No sea otters mean too many sea urchins which eat pretty much everything else. That means the ecosystem becomes a monoculture of urchins – not good.

The same is true if you take anything else out from the food-web too. No kelp still means a monoculture. This is also true in culture. If you were to take out the largest institutions everything else would destabilise. Same result in the case of no artist-run. In the same sense, we can position a food-web with various levels of complexity and detail from a very direct kelp-urchin-otter tripartite to a more nuanced net of contingencies and influences with attached caveats for the influence of species (almost always humans/specie humans introduce) from outside of that food-web. In a cultural sense, this is where things like lobbying organisations that have an impact on a set of policymakers can have an impact on every other part of the ecosystem.

In a biological food-web the energy moving around is the stuff that keeps everything alive. In a cultural food-web, it is memetic energy. By this, I don't mean the meme as in the image and caption combo but instead, the concept as originally established by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (1976): a unit of cultural information transferred by imitation.

Artist-run, as a broader field, would probably cover everything in the diagram from phytoplankton and kelp to Abalones. Artist-run organisations can range in size and complexity but ultimately hold the greatest energy mass within the web. This isn't to suggest that they are the primogenitor of cultural energy but instead that they are plentiful and intrinsic in keeping that energy moving around. They are, without fail, the spaces which have the most agency to do what they want, to follow their desires (perhaps where the comparison with plankton derails slightly) and articulate those things that are actually



Californian kelp forest
ecosystem food-web, photo: Joe
Rowley

important to developing sustainable societies. There are problems with resources of course but when has that ever kept a good idea down?

Artist-led is not of immaterial foam but fluff. Material, vital and here to stay. Artist-run is the dangerous, deviant, obsessive, over-skilled and under-paid mass.

Deviant in that they don't, and have no intention to, conform to a set of social norms which are damaging to society. Identifying and speaking out about issues within society has been done through culture for centuries; from music to political cartoons, poems to paintings. Where a large scale public institution is to a degree hamstrung by the political situation that it is attached to artist-run has more latitude to speak out. Whilst artist-run is a proprietary space for many cultural professionals it is also a proprietary space for the ideas and politics they will carry with them through their careers.

Obsessive in that they are passionately engaged with driving change and supporting concerns instead of creating an illusion of responsibility, diversity and representation. There is something in passion and commitment to an idea, method or cause that can often be deemed obsessive but that is generally only when folks want to oppress that idea or those people. We've seen this in various movements for social justice from suffrage to #blacklivesmatter. The pursuit for justice in many areas has been deemed obsessive (coded: insane) repeatedly through history until that cause eventually becomes a social norm.

Dangerous in that if artist-run as a global field wanted to, we could eat policymakers alive. They may not be scared of us, but in the same way as I am not scared of bears but appreciate I wouldn't win that fight, they have a healthy

respect for the power that a unified artist-run scene can have. Artist-run and subcultural spaces under various guises have been the seat of activism, organised collective actions and protest throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Policymakers know the power of culture, of images, of music and literature (just look at the insane constraints on school literature selections in the UK) and as with all things the existing power structures would prefer to control the means of production through economic drip-feeding and encouraged normalisation.

The big take away I think is that I'm not training to position this as a good vs. evil scenario. In the same way as the food-web for the California kelp forests, we need a bit of everything for a healthy ecosystem to exist. Hand in hand with that is the importance of everyone having an equal opportunity and an equal voice. Artist-run gives that opportunity so much more readily than larger institutional structures. If you don't feel like you are being represented, change that, present the art and culture you want to see, that you feel represented by. To close on cinema, as we opened, watch *Amatörer* (Pichler & Lundborg, 2018); think of the latitude and skills you have, think of the way you want to be represented and want to represent your communities, stay passionate about the causes you care about. Take lessons from larger structures and get that funding for sure, but always do it with an eye to your own agency and your own desires.

Embrace flufferhood. Fluff the way you wanna fluff.





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HOLY FLUFF

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