

CAN ART HELP US IMAGINE NEW FUTURES?

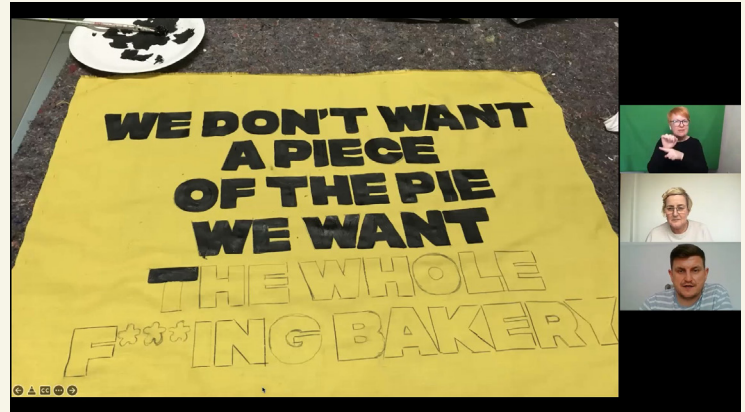
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Can art help us imagine new futures? is a text written in response to *Is context only half the work?*, the first of a series of six online *Constellations* ° *Assemblies*. The event took place on 16 March 2022 and was held within UP Projects' digital participation space, *The Hall*.

Is context only half the work? was moderated by Gavin Wade, artist-curator at Eastside Projects, and invited Jeanne Van Heeswijk, artist and curator; Tom Murphy, local resident and project manager of Homebaked Community Land Trust; and Arman Nouri, director of Kin Structures, to explore the role of context in socially engaged art projects.

The thinking for the event built on the legacy of the *Artist Placement Group (APG)*, an organisation conceived by Barbara Steveni in the 1960s that actively sought to reposition the role of the artist within a wider social context. As we were reminded by Gavin during the event's introduction, artists were also referred to as 'incidental persons', working for government, commercial and industrial organisations to bring alternative ways of seeing and thinking to the contexts they were placed in.

The title for the event takes APG's motto 'context is half the work' as its starting point, challenging the assumption that context only accounts for 50% of an artwork. To this end, the speakers were invited to reflect on questions such as: what does context mean for you? How much do you take social, political, historical, and geographical context into account when producing work? Do you use specific tools to understand and embed your



Jeanne Van Heeswijk and Tom Murphy -
Homebaked Community Land Trust,
Is context only half the work?, 16 March 2022



Arman Nouri - Orchard Gardens,
Is context only half the work?, 16 March 2022

work in new contexts? And what are the social benefits to bringing an outsider's perspective into an existing context?

Through the lens of these questions, the speakers presented two projects that use art and culture as ways to bring people together, build communities, and shape the place where they live and work: *Homebaked Community Land Trust*, a Liverpool-based project that began in 2012 and is located on the boundary of Everton and Anfield, and *Orchard Gardens*, located in Lewisham in London and coinciding with Lewisham Borough of Culture 2022.

During the panel discussion that followed the project presentations, Gavin noted that the speakers hadn't identified any separate elements of the two projects that could be described as art. So, what makes these projects art projects? If context is not just half but is 100% the work, do we still talk about art?

These community projects are representative of a fundamental shift in thinking: rather than delivering specific artistic outputs, both projects work with artists to ensure collaborative and creative processes permeate across the way people work, think and are with each other. Art plays a crucial, yet incidental role, empowering communities to shape what they want their future to look like.



Jeanne Van Heeswijk, Gavin Wade and Arman Nouri, *Is context only half the work?*, 16 March 2022

Artists and creative practitioners can assist community groups by nurturing their creative processes, helping them co-imagine futures and therefore advocate for alternative solutions. According to Jeanne, “art is part of our DNA. It is not half of something else. I see context as the work and art as the DNA”. She argued that art can help us restore our agency to become co-creators of our own neighbourhoods as we do not necessarily need to adapt our lives to a predefined idea of our future.

Building on the parallel between communities and living organisms, a point was made about the energy levels required to keep activism within communities alive, and the crucial role that art and culture play in maintaining that energy. According to Tom, building a variety of skillsets within community groups, including that of an artist which may not be as prevalent, “ensures there’s enough people to step forward to keep that momentum going. Not everybody has endless energy to give all the time”. Both projects highlighted the lack of provision in their respective communities in response to basic needs such as housing and healthy eating.

As Arman correctly pointed out, “you can’t create change on an empty stomach” whilst also acknowledging the role of the state and local authorities within these neighbourhoods. Given the precarity of these conditions, should we really be thinking about art? Can art be part of the solution to improving lives in communities? Gavin put forward the idea that he does not see art as separate from the human condition, inviting us to think of art as a way of collaboratively and creatively intervening in the contexts we experience and inhabit.

The first *Constellations* ° *Assemblies* event reminded us of the potential art has to renegotiate the conditions of our existence. The upcoming events from this series, as well as workshops and seminars attended by the *Constellations* ° *Cohort*, will continue to explore the programme’s **lines of enquiry**, as well as moving forward the conversation about context in the expanded field of public art. How can the ‘incidental person’ (historically placed within governmental, commercial and industrial organisations) operate beyond the public and private sectors? And what set of social practices and relations enables our work as artists, curators, and creative practitioners to be perceived as common good?

You can now watch ***Is context only half the work?*** as an accessible event recording with closed captions and BSL interpretation.

“Art is part of our DNA. It is not half of something else. I see context as the work and art as the DNA”

- JEANNE VAN HEESWIJK

Constellations is curated by UP Projects and delivered in partnership with Flat Time House and Liverpool Biennial, and is generously supported by Art Fund, Arts Council England, The Barrington Hibbert Associates Access Fund, and the *Constellations* Patrons and Supporters.