

PUBLIC ART & LANGUAGE

By Elisabeth Del Prete, Senior Curator
(Learning & Live Research), UP Projects
1 December 2022

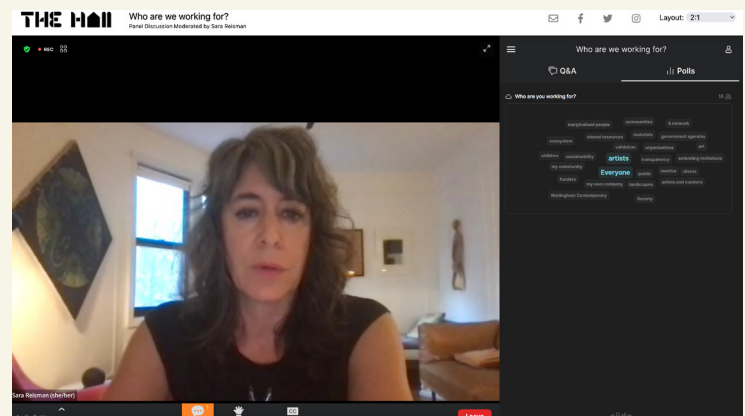
Public Art & Language is a text written in response to **Who are we working for?**, the sixth and final of a series of six online *Constellations* ° *Assemblies*. The event took place on 2 November 2022 and was held within UP Projects' digital participation space, **The Hall**.

Who are we working for? was the last event from the *Assemblies* series. Its curatorial development was unique in the context of the series as it was informed by the critical thinking, in-depth analysis and creative experimentation undertaken by the **Constellations** ° **Cohort** over the course of the *Constellations* 2022 programme. The event addressed a set of questions devised collectively by the cohort, and invited a curator, a commissioner and an artist collective to explore what it means to authentically respond to the needs of communities. *Who are we working for?* was moderated by **Sara Reisman**, Chief Curator/ Director of National Academician Affairs at National Academy of Design, and invited Farid Rakun, member of the contemporary art organisation **ruangrupa**, and **Binki Taylor**, founder of The Brixton Project as speakers. For more info on members of the cohort, please head to page 4.

Questions around failure and vulnerabilities have very much shaped the conversation, encouraging speakers to reflect on how practitioners can navigate the power dynamics that are inherent to all socially engaged art projects and how we can recognise our role within complex and shifting hierarchical structures.

To help us consider these questions, during her introduction Sara offered us a glossary of terms which included words such as

access, accountability, and storytelling, each accompanied by a set of precise and poignant questions. 'Who are we accountable to in the work that we do?' and 'How does this accountability affect the aesthetics and impact of public practice?', for example, helped further expand the meaning of the term 'accountability', hinting at the fact that words too need context. For the extended version of the glossary, see page 4.



Sara Reisman,
Who are we working for?, 2 November 2022

The glossary prompted me to think that often, despite using the same terms, we mean different things and this rings especially true when working at the intersection of different disciplines - such as art, architecture, design, performance, collaborative practice - and different agendas - whether artistic, social, urban, political, or financial.

As words mean different things to different people, could Sara's be the start of a growing glossary for the expanded field of public art where the meaning of its terms is in a constant state of negotiation? This is not about emptying words of their meaning but is rather about acknowledging their expansiveness. As language is in a perpetual state of flux, we can't afford to think of words as hermetic.

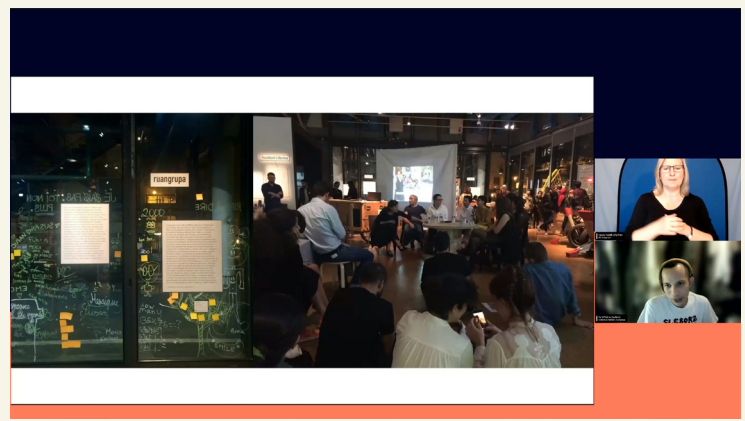
An example of this was immediately evident at the start of the event, when Farid introduced himself using the pronouns, he/ him.

He did so by caveating that in Indonesian language there is no gender differentiation and that often Indonesians, as well as people from many other cultures, unintentionally switch from one pronoun to the other to adapt to the mechanics of the English language. After the event, Lili-Maxx Hager, a former colleague at UP Projects, pointed out to me that the absence of gendered terminology in a given language requires nuanced strategies when translating to languages that don't have those societal terms for gender representation. This example made me reflect on our work as public art practitioners. Working across cultures also means creating spaces for lexical variations to be explored in an inclusive way. How do we retain complexities when translating from a different language, culture, discipline or agenda into another?

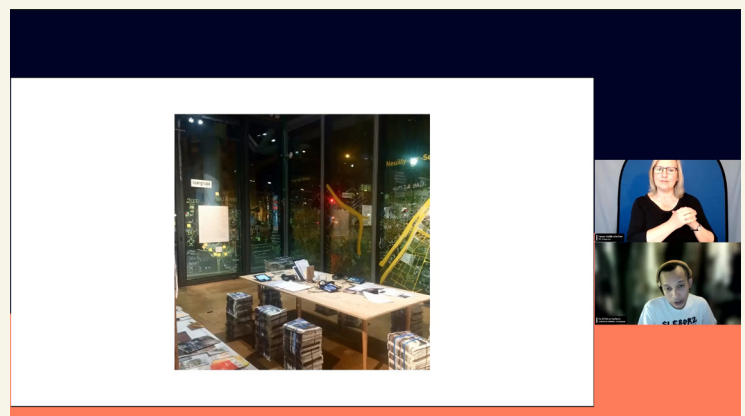
A similar point about lexical gaps came up in an interview published on ArtReview about a month before the *Assembly* event. The interview, *Who's Exploiting Who? ruangrupa on documenta fifteen*, was between ArtReview's Mark Rappolt and J.J. Charlesworth and ruangrupa's Farid Rakun and Ade Darmawan. One of Mark's questions in the interview pretty much sums up some insights from Farid's presentation during the *Assembly* event, which touched upon ruangrupa's role as Artistic Director of **documenta fifteen** in Kassel.

Mark: "In terms of this not being a *documenta* about individual artworks and individual geniuses, did you set out, when you were planning it, to introduce a different model? To what extent is that model an attack on the prevalent model in, let's say, Western museums or even places outside the West that adopt Western models?"

Farid: "Being 'anti-something' is a way of thinking that got imported into Indonesia; in our language there's no word for 'anti'. We are not against objects, of course. We like beautiful objects, beautiful videos, beautiful sculptures, all that kind of stuff, paintings... The question is just how do they function in real life as well, or in other people's lives?" ^[1]



*ruangrupa - documenta fifteen,
Who are we working for?, 2 November 2022*

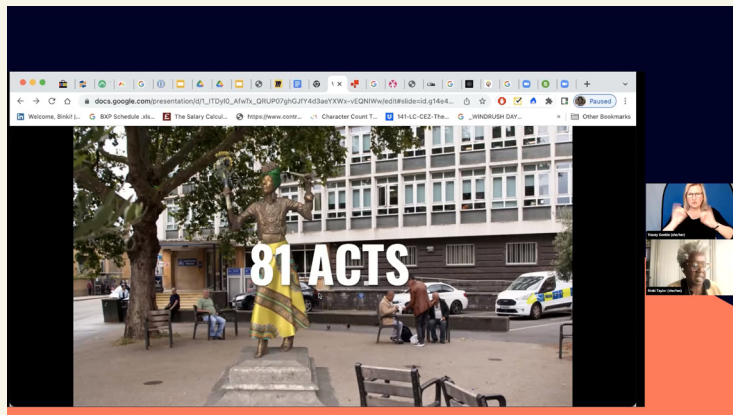


*ruangrupa - documenta fifteen,
Who are we working for?, 2 November 2022*

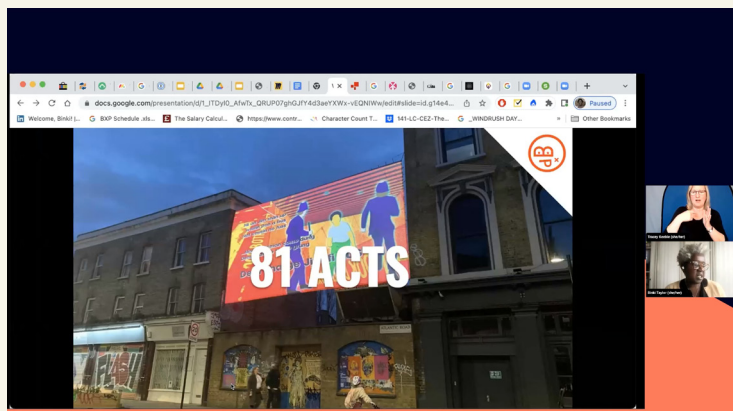
The point here is not simply about creating space for opposing views to be voiced and understood, in this case the opposition is between object-based art and process-based art, artists as individuals and artists as collectives. The argument Farid is making is about introducing a new practice, which ruangrupa defines as 'lumbung', that foregrounds the sustainability of cultural networks through connections, alternative collective economies, shared resources and equitable distribution. Regardless of its medium or whether produced individually or collectively, what is the impact of the artwork on the 'ekosistem', namely the structures within the collaborative network? During the *Assembly* Farid also acknowledged the difficulty of this approach in the context of *documenta fifteen*. This involved sharing an open account of where he thinks ruangrupa might have failed, such as extending the invitation to participate to over 1500 collaborators which has impacted on the visitors' ability to experience the totality of the exhibition.

What happens, however, when you translate concepts that don't naturally belong to one context into another? Is failure inevitable, and how can it be perceived and experienced safely? How much time does it require for that new model to be understood, let alone be adopted, across different systems? And what freedoms does creativity afford us in the process?

As public art practitioners working creatively across disciplines and differing agendas, these are urgent considerations that align with the questions raised by the cohort. With an understanding of indigenous as pertaining to local communities, 'how do we make space for indigenous knowledge?', was one of the questions put forward by the cohort, which Binki's presentation spoke directly to. Similarly, to ruangrupa's approach to sustaining networks, the Brixton Project works with a network of creative residents and community organisations in and around Brixton and South London using creativity to initiate positive dialogues and exchanges.



Binki Taylor - 81 Acts, Holding the Flame, Who are we working for?, 2 November 2022

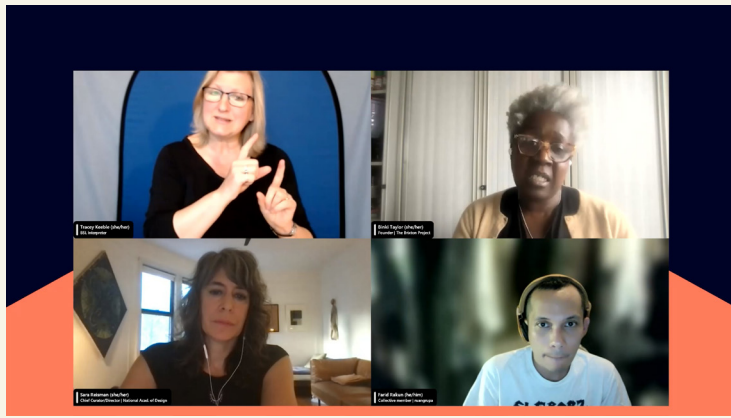


Binki Taylor - 81 Acts, Who are we working for?, 2 November 2022

As a case study, Binki spoke specifically about **81 Acts of Exuberant Defiance**, a project realised in 2021 that invited individuals, community groups and organisations to explore and creatively respond to the local history when, in 1981, Black communities in Brixton rose up in bloody confrontation with the Met Police against a backdrop of racism, severe economic recession and high unemployment.

The point around mediating language was also crucial to Binki's presentation, when she explained that specific elements of the project required lengthy conversations with the police and local authorities, some lasting as long as one year. Presented as part of **81 Acts of Exuberant Defiance**, **Holding the Flame** was a temporary augmented reality statue of a woman called Marcia Rigg who is a social justice campaigner and the sister of Sean Rigg, who died of a cardiac arrest in police custody. Despite *Holding the Flame* being an augmented reality piece and therefore not being visible for most of the time, a year's worth of conversations was required with the police and local authorities to get that piece in place. The work led to the development of a memorandum of understanding with the local council outlining the support that the council was prepared to give to the people involved in the project.

"It's just really an amazing piece of work in itself. The conversations that we were then having with high level police really changed the tone. They made us reflect on how we can use the memorandum of understanding internally to help our staff understand what exactly the job is that we need to do to repair and to heal and to offer a new level of allyship". From Binki's response, it is clear that carefully navigating hierarchies, scrutinising language and establishing new ways of working, turned into a generative and expansive experience, despite the length of time this required and the difficulties it entailed. How do you communicate safely in such a contentious environment, where diversity of opinion is rooted in past traumas?



Sara Reisman, Binki Taylor, ruangrupa,
Who are we working for?, 2 November 2022

Building on the initial glossary, Sara pointed out how new terms were introduced during the event. Sustainability being one that links both practices in a meaningful way, along with the importance of the invitation, decentralised ownership, authorship and power dynamics, and foster collaboration and participation. What other terms should not just be added, but renegotiated, exchanged or traded for new ones that better reflect the need for our work to be locally meaningful yet globally relevant? How do we ensure our language retains meaning without becoming hermetic?

Glossary in relation to line of enquiry created by Sara Reisman:

- **Access:** Who has access to the work that we're doing? Who is our intended audience?
- **Accountability:** Who are we accountable to in the work that we do? How does this accountability affect the aesthetics and impact of public practice?
- **Agency:** As we think about how public works are funded, how are agency and autonomy maintained by the artists and cultural producers during the commissioning process?
- **Conditions:** Under what conditions is an artwork being brought into a community? Is it in response to a historical event, a local conflict, community challenge or something much more positive?
- **Equity:** How do artists and cultural producers facilitate equitable public engagement? Is it even their responsibility to do so?

- **Funding:** Who pays and what difference does that make?
- **Legibility:** How can research-based art projects be legible to local community members?
- **Representation:** Who is represented in public artworks? What are some of the constraints or challenges inherent to cultural representation in the public realm?
- **Storytelling:** Whose story is being told and by whom?
- **Temporality:** How is the lifespan of public artworks determined and by whom? Who has to live with the work? What are some of the benefits and challenges of staging permanent long term, or conversely, short term projects?

The *Constellations* ° Cohort is a group of artists, curators, producers, and practitioners active and/or interested in the expanded field of public art. The *Constellations* ° Cohort 2022, who took part in regular activities over the course of nine months, are Amina Lawal Agoro, Benedict Rutherford, Jordan Rowe, Kate Mahony, Laura Eldret, Manon Awst, Monica Tolia, Nisha Duggal, Rebecca Moss and Taey Iohe. You can read more about their individual practice [here](#). The seminars attended by the cohort during the programme were peer led by individuals within the cohort, facilitated by Harun Morrison with support from Jack Newbury.

^[1] Rappolt, M. Charlesworth, J.J. (2022, September 26) *Who's exploiting who. ruangrupa on documenta fifteen* [accessed online on 2022, December 2]

You can now watch ***Who are we working for?*** as an accessible event recording with closed captions and BSL interpretation.

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.