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**‘I’m not being paid for this conversation’: uncovering the challenges of artist-academic collaborations in the neoliberal institution**

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**Abstract**

Artist-academic collaborations are fueled by increasing institutional pressures to show the impact of academic research. This article departs from the celebratory accounts of collaborative work and pragmatic toolkits for successful partnerships, which are dominant in existing scholarship, arguing for the need to critically interrogate the *structural* conditions under which collaborations take place. Based on a reflexive case study of a project developed in the context of *Tate Exchange*, one of the UK’s highest-profile platforms for knowledge exchange, we reveal three sets of (unequal) pressures, which mark artist-academic collaborations in the contemporary neoliberal academy: asymmetric funding and remuneration structures; uneven pressures of audit cultures; acceleration and temporal asymmetries. Innovations at the level of individual projects or partners can only mitigate the negative effects to a limited extent. Instead this article offers a systemic critique of the political economy of artist-academic collaborations and shifts the research agenda to developing a collective response.

**Keywords:** research impact, artist-academic collaboration, co-production, neoliberalism

As part of the search for impact outside of the academy and the rise of innovative, arts-based research, an increasing number of social scientists engages in collaborations with artists. Moreover, there is a history of academic-artist collaboration that precedes these developments. As Redi Koobak beautifully describes, many artists and academics have a desire to be enriched by each other’s tools and perspectives.

*“She is Art, I am Academia, both shifting and balancing between small and capital As. […] She sends me photos, I send her texts. […] She has what I have been looking for. She is what I have been looking for. A case study, an object/subject of analysis, ample material for testing theories and methodologies. I have what she yearns for with her body. Words, concepts, theories, explanations.” (2013: 119)*

A growing set of academic publications reflects on the results and nature of these engagements, usually framing them in a positive light. Many highlight that artist-academic collaborations support the production of alternative knowledge and methodologies allowing for different, often more effective audience engagement. They are considered to foster “deeper knowledge of the subject matter through artistic stimulation of the participant, the researcher, and the audience” (Smartt Gullion and Schäfer, 2017: 522). They form “empowering mode(s) of communication beyond writing, talking, mapping and survey” (Tolia-Kelly, 2012: 137) and constitute “representational challenges that are transformative”, enabling the “loosen(ing) the knowledge/power axis involved in knowledge production” (O’Neill, 2008). The potential of these engagements is particularly highlighted in relation to work on migration and mass displacement, when academics and artists join forces to intervene in public debates and develop modes representations that challenge hard borders and nativist thinking (Bickel et al., 2011; Wooley and Palladino, 2016; O’Neill, 2008; Erel et al., 2017). Publications reflecting on joint work capture the potential and actual achievements of these projects; they also need to be understood in a context in which collaborations are a relatively new(ly valued) activity, which need to be justified both to the academic community and funding bodies.

However, framing collaboration in an exclusively positive light presents an overly idealistic vision not only of what can be achieved but also what it practically means to work together. Even in cases when the limits of co-production are recognised – with art being neither “magical salve or vehicle for social change” (O’Brien, 2017) – the contexts within which these engagements emerge and structural pressures that shape them remain unaddressed. This is problematic as it puts unrealistic expectations on engagements and renders tensions that are inherent in most partnerships invisible. A second set of literature has started to break the silence, providing toolkits (Arts for Advocacy undated; or on community-academic partnerships cf. Banks and Armstrong, 2014) and management advice (Biswas, 2008) on how to work together. While identifying areas of contention, the scope of these publications is however limited: being concerned with achieving the best within established structures, their pragmatic approach simultaneously opens and closes the conversation by confining it to individual academics and artists within specific projects to find solutions.

Departing from both literatures, the article argues for a closer examination of the structural conditions in which these collaborations take place, shaped by precarious work structures, career imperatives and institutional logics of the neoliberal university and art sector. Going beyond celebratory accounts or encouraging partners to work even harder to solve problems, we aim to draw attention towards the structural contexts that shape artist-academic collaborative work and, as we argue, endanger the principles of dialogue, experimentation and the equity of partners often conceived as defining characteristics of the exchange. We specifically identify three sets of tensions and asymmetries in the areas of remuneration, structures of recognition and timeframes that put pressure on the partners. As academic careers come to resemble those of cultural workers (Gill, 2014), some of these pressures are shared between partners and can form the basis for mutual solidarity, albeit one not always easily translatable in collective action to resist these imperatives.

Focusing on the challenges of artist-academic collaborations, the article responds to recent calls to “pause on the continued proliferation of these engagements in order to extend and deepen reflection” (Hawkins, 2014: 1) on what they involve and to contribute to their “careful” and “critical” conceptualisation (Marston and de Leeuw, 2013: v). In particular we take up Hawkins’ demand for creative engagements to “take account of their own politics, not least how these intersect with the political economies of the academy” (2018: 7). This article contributes to this effort by bringing together scholarship on cultural production, the political economy of Higher Education (HE) and collaborations between academics, activists and communities as the basis for a situated analysis of collaborative practice.

The article is based on *Who are we?,* a week-long cross-platform event taking place as part of the Tate Exchange Programme at the Tate Modern in March 2017 and May 2018, developed by a consortium comprised of university partners, an arts organisation and 22 artists. While for the purpose of this article we treat artists and academics as distinct actors, we do not reify them as pure, entirely distinct categories of workers: several collaborators had hybrid professional identities, with some artists holding practice-based PhDs. The focus of the article is however not on professional identities but on the conditions within which they are enacted. Our project sought to “provoke questions around identity, belonging, migration and citizenship through the arts and public participation” (Who are we?, 2017). In light of the social justice agenda underpinning *Who are we?*, which included giving greater visibility to refugee and migrant artists, critical questions about the conditions under which artist-academic collaboration in neoliberal settings take place, were even more pressing. Methodologically the article adopts the approach of a reflexive case study (Lumsden, 2019), based on our own experiences of the collaboration, an analysis of correspondence, notes and working documents, archived on *basecamp,* a web-based project management tool. The analysis of project-related correspondence and working documents focused on key decisions and points of discussion within the project team and was combined with interviews and conversations with participating artists conducted in autumn and winter 2017/18. Questions centred on artists’ expectations and experiences of the project including what they perceived as challenges in the collaboration. While the article has been written by two academics, to work against a hierarchy of speaking positions, which privileges academic perspectives (Lumsden, 2019: 13), the writing followed an iterative process, with artists providing feedback on a first draft of the paper, further refining the argument.

**Considering collaboration in context**

According to Roberts “all art, within or beyond the studio, is subject to the discipline of the social division of labour. (…) The processes of collaboration are in the widest and non-contentious sense, then, constitutive of art as a social practice” (2004, 557). While art production always involves others – be it curators, technicians or critics – in some instances the social production is made explicit with artwork being consciously conceived as collaborative (Roberts, 2004; McNally, 2018): “Teamworking, sharing skills and ideas across disciplines, manipulating prefabricated materials (the labour of others), negotiating with various institutions and agencies, become the means whereby art’s place within the social division of labour is made transparent as a form of socialised labour” (Roberts, 2004: 557). Collaboration as a self-conscious and explicit process of production has not only consequences for the artist’s identity (Roberts, 2004), but also involves processes of negotiations that are subject to power relations and are affected by the institutional contexts in which it is situated.

Our analysis looks more closely at the process of collaboratively producing a cultural event at the intersection of (socially engaged) arts and academia. It is oriented on the ‘production of culture’ approach in sociology and cultural studies in that it explores processes of symbol production and how they are “situated within economic processes and forms of organization” (Du Gay, 1997: 8; cf. Peterson and Anand, 2004). Cultural production studies is a broad and theoretically heterogeneous field, overlapping with approaches in cultural studies, organisation and management studies and political economy analysis and has focused among other things on the organisation of work cultures, diversities and inequalities in the workplace and tensions between commercial imperatives and aesthetic, political and social values. Interested in unpacking the dynamics of cultural production, this work helps us to keep in focus both the “micro relations and cultural worlds within which the production of culture takes place” (Negus, 1997: 102) while aiming to contextualise how institutional frameworks and funding structures impact on collaborations. Since in our case the production of art work involves differently situated partners, as academics collaborate with artists, and is enabled by university funding, it is necessary to go beyond the traditional focus on cultural industries to expand the analysis to the “political economies of the academy” (Hawkins, 2018: 6). This involves analysing the collaboration in relation to institutional demands shaped by research evaluation frameworks and the general speeding up of knowledge production in the academy, well-documented in scholarship (cf. Mountz et al, 2006; Berg and Seeber, 2016). Work on cultural production has noted that the borders between production and external contexts have increasingly become blurred; this includes the blurring of the distinction between producers and audiences and an increasing range of linkages between HE and the cultural sector (Hesmondhalgh, 2012; Caldwell, 2015). The latter is usually examined in studies on the education of creative workforce in universities or the identities and work of cultural producers working in HE; however, cross-sectoral collaborations haven’t yet been analysed by the scholarship on cultural work.

Due to the lack of situated analyses of academic-artists collaborations we find it useful to draw on the rich literature on collaboration between academics and communities in community arts projects as well as between academics and activists (i.e. Stoecker, 1999; Stahl and Shdaimah, 2008; Choudry, 2013; Banks and Armstrong, 2014; Facer and Enright, 2016). This literature is relevant as it examines practices of cross-sectoral collaborations in detail, reflecting both on opportunities and challenges and showing how power asymmetries and institutional contexts can constrain potentials and undermine principles. It alerts us to the tensions that might arise when different forms of knowledge, with different degrees of recognition, meet. Secondly, it asks how goals from different stakeholders relate to one another and more generally reflects on the roles that partners take in the collaboration. The question who participates in what ways, who has decision-making power and who defines the project outcomes have been central to critical discussions of community arts projects. Authors have stressed that despite the desire to work against hierarchies, tensions often emerge as part of the division of labour, asymmetrical time pressures, epistemological hierarchies, funding dictating project agendas and the general unpredictability of knowledge production (Stoecker, 1999; Stahl and Shdaimah, 2008; Choudry, 2013; Banks and Armstrong, 2014; Facer and Enright, 2016). Where institutional rationales hierarchically value contributions from different groups, there is a risk that one group becomes a client and the other the gatekeeper of institutional legitimacy, funds and reputational benefit. Research has also problematised how the realisation of collaborative work “belies the aspirations of policy and that the perceived success, or otherwise, is contingent upon broader socioeconomic processes” (Pollock and Sharp, 2012: 3065) and can be constrained and coopted by political agendas, undermining and domesticating their potential (see Bell and Pahl, 2018). We thus need to focus not only on principles and ambitions of collaborative work but conduct a situated analysis of their actual realisation taking into account the relations between partners and wider institutional contexts in which they are embedded.

***Who are we?* Co-producing critical interventions for Tate Exchange**

*Who are we?* was a large-scale collective endeavor involving a consortium of multiple partners, including the Open University, Loughborough University (involved in the programme in 2017), Warwick University (2017), the University of York (2018), and Counterpoints Arts, a national organisation in the field of arts, migration and cultural change. It was developed as a series of events for one of the highest-profile platforms for knowledge exchange, Tate Exchange at Tate Modern. Spanning visual arts, film, performance, seminars and learning labs, our project sought to reflect on the multiple crises of identity and belonging in the UK and Europe and to create alternative imaginations of being together through arts and public participation. Following the principles of co-production, 22 artists from 17 countries worked together with academics and the wider public to create a “space for encounters between people and communities often kept apart by binaries: artists versus audiences, academics versus artists, migrants versus ‘natives’, and activists versus publics” (Who are we?, 2017).

Tate Exchange, the platform for which the programme was developed, was launched in September 2016 on the 5th floor of the new Switch House (now: Blavatnik Building) at Tate Modern.[[1]](#footnote-1) It is based on collaborations with organisations such as health care trusts, universities and community groups who as Tate Associates curate public engagement programmes around a year-long theme (2016/17: Exchange; 2017/18: Production). With museums remaining “heavily eschewed in favour of the well educated, the wealthy and the white sections of the population” (Belfiore, 2016), Tate Exchange was explicitly designed to include a broader range of voices in the production and discussion of art. The platform thus provided us with an opportunity to grant migrant and refugee-related work greater visibility and to interrogate established conceptions of identity, belonging and citizenship within an iconic arts organisation, even if the question over their influence on longer term developments and institutional structures remained open (see also Wilmot, 2018: 14).

While the high profile of Tate Exchange and the large scale of *Who are we?* made it more visible than similar collaborative projects, with over 5,000 visitors attending the event, we argue that its project-based nature, the pressure to produce outputs and measure impact within a relatively short timeframe and a tight budget make it emblematic for wider tendencies in the sector. Although in our case the project was relatively well funded, a substantial part of the budget went into the fee that partners needed to pay to become Tate Exchange Associates, putting pressure on the budget available for programming and artists’ fees. Financial costs were also mentioned as a critical issue in the programme’s evaluation report: “[while] the majority of Associates felt the partnership with Tate Exchange is ‘worth the time and cost’ given the benefits that accrue (…) an increasing number (albeit still a small minority) raised the cost as an issue which for some was felt to be unsustainable” (Wilmot, 2018: 13-14). The following sections will develop a substantive analysis of structural challenges, using our case to highlight what we see as common tendencies of artist-academic collaborations.

**“I’m not being paid for this conversation”: equity of partners vs asymmetric remuneration structures**

On 28 September 2016 the seminar room in the Clore Learning Centre at Tate Modern was brimming with excitement. The consortium partners had met regularly to prepare for the upcoming Tate Exchange event but this was the first time the artists joined. They had been invited to the meeting by the arts organisation based on their work’s relevance. What was meant to be a round of short introductions, quickly turned into a pitch with artists taking much longer than initially planned to present their work to academics. Not only the shared investment in questions around migration, belonging and citizenship made *Who are we?* an exciting project to be involved in, but also the high profile of the Tate Modern which added value to the CVs of academics and participating artists, some of whom would unlikely have had access to this institution through conventional routes due to entrenched racial, gender and class hierarchies. After the meeting, artists were asked to submit formal proposals, responding to a call developed by the consortium. The artists’ proposals – from all artists present plus others who could not attend the meeting – were subsequently discussed by the consortium in relation to their content and the politics and ethics of representation, while maintaining an openness to the artists’ visions “allowing the artist’s work rather than our agenda to dominate the curatorial frame” (Who are we? notes, 10.11.2016). The consortium eventually decided to include all artists into the programme in order to multiply the voices as well as giving artists the visibility that participation in Tate Exchange offered. Artists were paired up with individual academics based on common interests to develop their plans. Artists also received feedback from Counterpoint Arts concerning the feasibility of the submission, including questions concerning scale, the number of days spent in the exhibition space and the available production budget (notes 10.11.2016). While they had included a budget estimate in their submissions, it was the consortium partners who allocated the funds. The decision to include the maximum number of artists put pressure on the already relatively tight production budget and meant in several cases that the budget for submissions needed to be cut, creating disappointments among artists who had hoped for more substantial funding, a longer involvement and thus also better pay.

As Facer and Enright (2016: 106) have noted, “participation in collaborative research […] is rarely entirely free from economic considerations”, with different stakeholders experiencing different pressures. With public sectors, including the arts, being affected by austerity, artists need to look for alternative funding channels. Universities and art institutions funded by public money are increasingly under pressure to demonstrate their value for society, with value being “recast in terms of measures of productivity, ‘economic efficiency’ and delivering ‘value for money’”[[2]](#footnote-2) under the influence of audit cultures (Shore, 2008: 281). Moreover, successful demonstration of research impact is rewarded under the UK Research Excellence Framework with central funding. Increasing concern with impact in the academy has also meant that specific funds have been made available, including from internal university funds as well as external funds like the dedicated Connecting Communities programme by the British Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). Whereas these funding structures are key for enabling artists and academics to realise collaborative projects, the nature of the funding, the length of the funding period and the budgetary decision-making powers created by them, affect the nature of engagement and stakeholders’ satisfaction (Facer and Enright, 2016). Decisions over the allocation of financial resources within the team created discontent among several artists and, as the work on our project progressed, put the idea of equity of collaborating partners at risk. *Who are we?* was financed largely by internal university funding that the university partners successfully accessed alongside external money for research, impact and knowledge exchange activities secured from UK funding bodies. Funding structures for artist-academic collaborations usually involve academics writing funding applications for the realisation of the collaboration including financial compensation for the artists. While being common practice, this division of labour creates asymmetries as it means that it is the university partner (in our case, together with the arts organisation) who administers the funding and makes decision over its allocation.

The tension between the equity of all partners and the asymmetric decision-making process was exacerbated by basic structural differences in payment, something that became particularly visible in the follow-up interviews with artists. Many artists working on the project came from migrant, refugee and ethnic minority backgrounds and had previously been subjected to racialised and gendered hierarchies in payment. As socially engaged artists they also found their work being generally undervalued and undercompensated (Cox et al, 2015). In contrast to academics working on the project, artists were paid on a daily rate (according to Arts Council standard fees) and, in addition, compensated in kind with material designed and provided by award winning Architecture and Interior practice *Universal Design Studio*. The calculated day rates have been developed by the Arts Council to set a standard for fair pay in short-term contracts and were meant to take into account the time needed for the development of proposals, research and studio time. However, the actual work usually took much longer. One artist stressed that she ended up with less than the minimum wage per hour for her engagement; another one mentioned that she didn’t take any time off for several weeks as she needed to make money elsewhere due to the lack of adequate remuneration. As McRobbie (2002: 524) has noted artists are not even anymore in “serial jobs but multi-tasking” with creative work being “simply low pay work except for those at the very top”. Handling different jobs and assignments at once also means that artists had to make careful considerations over their involvement. Whereas their decisions were not solely based on financial considerations, artists were always pressed to consider finances: does an engagement pay off? Does it lead to future, more financially sustainable engagements? While working on our project could bring new insights and important visibility for their work, remuneration was key to artists’ understanding of what a good collaboration was: a collaboration that, as one expressed, is “paid properly so that I don’t need to ruin my health! Paid properly so I don’t have to be worried and scared and seen as complaining about my conditions.”

The structural differences between academics and artists became even more apparent when two artists directly addressed the fact that they were not being paid to reflect on the project in our follow-up conversations for this article. Whereas they accepted to meet or speak over the phone, their remarks demonstrated the unequal contexts for our engagement: even if we ourselves agreed to speak to artists on weekends or evenings, we did so while being in salaried employment, whereas the artists had received a one-off fee to cover all their engagement. While their willingness to still engage in a follow-up exchange was largely dependent on the affective relationships we had built with each other by then, personal relationships also risk being jeopardised by these inequalities.

Artists whose submissions for *Who are we?* involved work they had developed previously or who could combine projects expressed more satisfaction with the collaboration. Some were able to draw on work done as part of different residencies and assignments which together offered sufficient compensation. Others who developed new work and thus required more time reported that some of their work was not paid for and meant they needed to reconsider and negotiate the extent of their involvement. For example, one artist refused to write a text for the project as the compensation was not adequate to cover the time the writing would require her. Remuneration structures thus directly affected the possibilities for exchange as they favoured the submission of existing work and required either the minimising of engagement or self-exploitation from the artists.

Of course, the asymmetric distribution of financial vulnerabilities is not a given in artist-academic collaborations. Indeed, as a rising number of publications show (Gill, 2014; Puar, 2012; Luka et al., 2015), the precarisation of employment has long extended beyond the arts and cultural production. As Gill notes, due to a casualisation of workforce as well as the intensification and extensification of work there are significant “continuities between the increasingly well-understood conditions of the creative ‘precariat’ of artists, designers and (new) media workers, and the experiences of academics in the neoliberal University” (2014: 13). Several of the collaborating academics were on fixed-term contracts and also experienced uncertainty over their future. Such experiences of precarious employment (past and present) can increase the sensibility towards artists’ precarities – and we ourselves tried to make space for these issues in conversations with artists during and after the project –, however, the basic structural difference of artists being paid by daily rates in contrast to academics full-time, if temporary, employment cannot be bridged by this sensibility or expressions of solidarity deriving from it.

**“Success is not measured in how inspired we are”: collaborating and delivering for the audit culture**

One of the ambitions of our project was to conceptualise the collaborative work as an open-ended process, from which all sides could learn:

“Our curatorial approach activates the values and methodologies of the ‘Creative Case’ (initiated by Arts Council England), where diversities are an intrinsic, organic part of the creative process enlivening the aesthetic; working towards possibilities of solidarity and equality while acknowledging uncertain outcomes. The architecture and design of *Who are We?* willoperate as an open incubator, where ideas and projects are seeded, co-produced, and co-curated with *participation* as a core guiding principle.” (Who are we? proposal)

The open-ended nature of the exchange meant to acknowledge differences between partners and to see them as productive for the work, as an opportunity to jointly develop ideas, to reflect on the implications of aesthetic decisions, to make connections to scholarly debates and develop tools for capturing public imagination. Such exchange can “generate impacts in itself (…) including the sharing of knowledge and skills, capacity building, comprehension and empowerment among participants, and iterative dissemination and impact” (Pain et al. 2011: 186). However, this process needs to be situated against the backdrop of the “audit explosion” (Power, 2000: 111), producing institutional imperatives and internalised logics well captured by Andrew Thompson’s statement as chief executive of the AHRC that “we need rigorous ways of understanding and measuring that elusive thing we call ‘cultural value’” (in: Crossick and Kaszynska 2016: 4). Therefore, a tension can be identified between the envisioned openness and the need to translate the work into specific deliverables whose success is subsequently “measured and registered in accounting systems” to make it ‘count’ at institutional and individual levels (Berg and Seeber, 2016: 72).

All three university partners had made commitments to produce impact case studies for the UK Research Excellence Framework, the national system for assessing research quality which had introduced the measurement of research impact as an additional assessment category in 2014. Furthermore, the fact that the academic partners were largely responsible for funding generation also meant that the reporting duties (with “begging” being followed by the imperative of “bragging”, i.e. delivering on the – perhaps necessarily overly ambitious - promises (Huws 2014: 64) fell largely on their shoulders. The Tate Exchange programme and the arts organisation involved in the collaboration also required an assessment of the success of the project, making impact a multi-party concern. The Impact agenda has been critically discussed by a growing number of scholars for its orientation on quantifiable deliverables – in which the size of audience, clicks, revenue streams, concrete effects on policy making act as indicators of success (Luka et al., 2015) – as well as its unidirectional conception of impact, with academic knowledge affecting change and impacting on others (Pain et al, 2011; Darby, 2017). In our collaboration we actively worked against this limited understanding by valuing the ideas and contributions of all partners as well as valuing the process of collaboration itself rather than solely the outputs (Pain et al., 2011; Darby, 2017). As part of our strategy we made the process of collaboration visible and turned it itself into an output, documenting the exchanges between artists and academics in published conversations on the project website and a special feature on the media platform *openDemocracy*. While this was a highly rewarding exercise, it needs to be recognised that the pluralisation of forms of output can also lead to increased work pressures, as discussed in more detail in the next section. Despite the attempts of redefining impact, significant attention and time went towards measuring the success of the event, as this was the way to evaluate the project from the perspective of funders and institutions. As one artist remarked, “Success is measured not in how inspired we are but measured in a very peculiar way by quantifying how many people are being reached and changed”, reflecting a broader concern with the effects of audit cultures damage[ing] local cultures of first order practice (Power, 2000: 115). Ultimately it was not the time spent together or the depth of our thinking that was evaluated but a limited conception of audience reach and perceived change, documented largely through questionnaires and feedback forms.

Secondly, alongside with being measured the collaborative work needed to be translated back to fit careers and structures of recognition of different sectors. Both academics and artists have highly individualised careers (Gill, 2014) and need to frame the knowledge that has been produced as part of the collaboration within their CVs. Artists found it comparatively easier to do so. One commented that she generally perceived collaborations with academics as favourable; they came with the hope of future paid assignments and could also foster recognition of her work as an artist. Academic publications were not as important as for collaborating academics but could contribute to the exposure of work as well as opening up further avenues of an academic career, which was relevant for artists who were already half inside academia, holding PhDs and teaching experience. In comparison, academics perceived it as more challenging to make the collaboration “count”. While *Who are we?* was perceived as institutionally valuable, evidenced by university’s senior management attendance of the event and the use of the Tate partnership in university promotional materials, at the individual level we felt that collaborations remained “peripheral to traditional academic systems for recognition and advancement” (Luka et al., 2015: 178-9, cf. Stocker, 1999). While impact and public engagement have become part of what academics ought to do and are included in promotion assessments, this work is usually seen as additional to research with recognition predominantly relying on peer-reviewed publications and the ability to secure substantial research funding (Ivancheva, 2015; Luka et al., 2015). One of us was advised by a senior academic not to spend too much time on the project. As part of her academic probation she was required to engage in impact work but as she experienced herself in a review meeting, ‘impact’ was largely considered a box to be ticked, whereas the reviewer’s remarks centred almost entirely on her publication record, which was seen as decisive for the successful completion of probation.

**“Are you on holidays? Hope so and that you are not reading emails”: temporal (a)symmetries and acceleration**

This section further delves into the issue of time, alluded to above in relation to remuneration and overtime. Studies on academic collaborations with community groups have shown that time is an important component for success: “collaboration is hard. […] And real collaboration takes a lot of time – for meetings, for accountability processes, for working through the inevitable conflicts – that may be in especially short supply for community group members” (Stoecker, 1999: 845). However, research grants and residencies that enable collaborations are often based on short interactions and have defined outcomes rather than being aimed at “elicit(ing) naturally evolving (longitudinal) grammars, practices and interdisciplinary theory-culture” (Tolia-Kelly, 2012: 137). Research into academic-activist collaborations has also highlighted the different temporalities governing each field (Beckwith 1996; Stoecker 1999). For those engaged in more practical work, academic meetings and reflections can at best be “time-consuming” (Stahl and Shdaimah, 2008: 1616) and at worst be a “waste of time” (Ibid.: 1623). Since not all meetings were adequately remunerated, this adds to these concerns. Artists’ strategies to deal with financial precarity by working from earlier material or aligning their outputs with other simultaneous or future assignments, also impacted the timeline of collaborations. On the one hand, the timeframe was easier to handle for artists who brought in work that they had already started, but this foreclosed certain opportunities for academic input and co-production and thus hindered the production of original and truly collaborative work. On the other hand, artists who started without preconceived work to maximise open collaboration, were subsequently faced with stringent time frames and both partners felt left with insufficient time to co-produce work. One of the artists in the latter category reflected on this in a phone conversation:

“It was only in November-December 2016 that I was asked to contribute […]. Once this happened, I had to rush to create a project proposal. I expected to have more time in general for preparation and talking with the academic I was paired with in order to see if I could have used their data or research as a starting point. […] And because I had to rush a proposal together I felt it wasn’t fair on the academic to feed into a ready-made proposal, even if our conversations did impact my work in a major way helping clarify and shift the focus and questions in the piece.”

The work of academics and artists usually is seen as being shaped by different temporalities; the time lapse between the writing of academic texts and their publication does not neatly synchronise with more immediate artistic output. However, while academic work was traditionally characterised by slower pace and longer-term project cycles, it has increasingly accelerated. While this acceleration means that artist and academic temporalities have become more aligned, this alignment exacerbates rather than alleviates pressures. The impact of acceleration on collaboration can be illustrated by the following email exchange:

“Hope all is well with you. I have also just got back from a conference, so just a quick question, whether you would like to add a sentence or so to describe the project and have a look through the article to comment on/correct any other bits. I think it shouldn’t take more than ten minutes. I hope that all is well with you and your current project is going well.”

“Lovely to hear from you – I am in the middle of filming at the moment – I will sort this out over the weekend if that’s OK.”

While we communicate our interest in each other’s work and wellbeing and show an investment in the relationship, the ‘out of breath’ tone of the exchange – expressed in terms like “quick question; no more than ten minutes; sorting it over the weekend” –reflect the pressures of acceleration. Artists and academics shared regular work in weekends, evenings and holidays. One of us, for instance, received the following typical email from an artist: “are you on holidays? Hope so and that you are not reading emails. I saw this and it might not be the right thing but I am thinking of a possible writing collaboration.” This overtime is not only linked to exploitative work conditions in which it is expected to work more hours than being paid for, but also produces stress. As Mountz et al. (2007) observe, the restructured neoliberal university requires “real sacrifice of personal time” (1242) and is characterised by “overwhelming demands [which] exact an isolating psychic and physical toll that is neither reasonable nor sustainable” (1237). This condition in academia “mirrors that of the global economy, a primary goal of which is to reduce the power of labor” (1237). The costs of these pressures have to be considered from an intersectional perspective, with some bodies being more affected than others, based on the racialised and gendered power structures shaping work life (Mountz et al. 2007), the unequal distribution of caring responsibilities outside of work and differential access to caring support based on e.g. financial status and proximity to family or other social networks. This was relevant in the context of a project, which made a conscious effort to showcase the work of migrant and refugee artists – some of which was highly personal and addressed traumatic experiences of displacement and discrimination. Many of our conversations were characterised between the tension of on the one hand being mindful of this physic and physical toll, making a conscious effort to care for others and ourselves, while on the other hand, being caught in a logic of performance which meant that we needed to ask each other to deliver more and respond quickly. Even in moments where we took the time to comfort one another, address each other’s anxieties, tried to alleviate pressures, we were caught in a trap where taking these individual responsibilities did little to change the structural conditions under which we worked. Instead, the affective labour arguably helped to continuously make possible further exploitation of already overtired workers.

The drivers of acceleration are the same drivers that also lead to hypermobility, since the increasing precarisation of academic and artist jobs places high demands on artists’ and researchers’ (international and national) mobility (cf. Ivancheva, 2015). This hypermobility also affected the temporalities framing collaboration. While [Loacker](https://scholar.google.nl/citations?user=SIQH9rAAAAAJ&hl=nl&oi=sra) and [Śliwa](https://scholar.google.nl/citations?user=SRckPJAAAAAJ&hl=nl&oi=sra) summarise the mobility imperative as “moving to stay in the same place” (2016: 657), Mendick (2014) draws on Lewis Caroll’s tale *Alice through the Looking Glass* in which Alice finds herself out of breath and running, but having stayed exactly in the same location, to describe the speed of academia. Artists and academics share an intense mobile disposition, partly as necessity, partly as choice ([Loacker](https://scholar.google.nl/citations?user=SIQH9rAAAAAJ&hl=nl&oi=sra) and [Śliwa](https://scholar.google.nl/citations?user=SRckPJAAAAAJ&hl=nl&oi=sra), 2016) and also in our collaboration, artists and academics expressed excitement as well as anxiety about extensive travel as well as relocation. As Gill (2014) has noted, understanding the conditions of cultural and academic workers requires thinking privilege and exploitation together. The fact that both artists and academics engaged in extensive travel during the collaboration facilitated mutual understanding of the challenges involved and accommodation of different time zones, provision of virtual access to meetings, and quick catch-ups on the way to airports. However, it also posed real challenges that could not be easily mitigated such as a reduction in face-to-face meetings, exhaustion through long travel times, and the additional stress linked to the preparation of incessant travelling. And while shared experiences of transient life styles led to mutual recognition, the short-term nature of projects and the pressure to be simultaneously engaged with multiple projects can pose a real barrier to long-term collaboration. This is at odds with the fact that “one of the key features seen as necessary for managing this emotional labour and building trust [is] a commitment to research collaborations for the long term” (Facer and Enright, 2016: 73; Choudry, 2013: 143-144).

**Conclusion**

This article has opened the “black box of little understood processes of collaboration” (Banks and Armstrong, 2014: 37) by shifting away from the aims and outputs of artist-academic collaborations and the innovation these produce in terms of research impact. Instead it focuses on the current structural conditions under which collaborative projects between artists and academics take place. Many artist-academic collaborations, including those established in the context of *Who are we?*, are pleasurable and enriching experiences. However, this should not detract from the fact the mutual interest and desire to collaborate is not sufficient to address the structural challenges emerging from the conditions under which such collaborations take place. Furthermore, as we have shown, the benefits of collaboration for one partner can be parasitical on the exploitation of the other and what counts as ‘beneficial’ in the first place is often predefined by projects and funders rather than based on collaborators’ needs. Finally, our affective relations make it difficult to remove ourselves from the collaboration, even if on other levels it is not good for us.

We have therefore argued that we need to take seriously the challenges of artist-academic collaborations, stemming from funding structures and precarity, uneven forms of recognition, temporal asymmetries and acceleration. While some of the tensions that we have identified are inherent to intersectoral exchange, others have been introduced or exacerbated by the neoliberalisation of academic and art institutions such as the need for marketing academic and artist output and the acceleration that has further compressed competing timelines. Many tensions within artist-academic collaborations are *symptoms* of larger structural conditions that have uneven – racialised, gendered and classed – effects. To understand tensions within projects we need to broaden our analysis to take into account the political economy within which collaboration emerges and move beyond piecemeal individualised strategies that only remedy the worst excesses of unequal collaborations. Due to the systemic nature of many challenges sustainable solutions often lie beyond individual collaborative projects and require a push-back against unreasonable demands. As we have suggested, this is particularly pertinent when collaborative work is inspired by social justice concerns. As artists and academics participating in these collaborations, we should show solidarity by refusing to follow the celebratory success scripts that many funders require to instead formulate collective demands to ameliorate the conditions necessary to develop more equitable partnerships. This should at least include calling for higher, sustainable standards of remuneration, institutional valuing of the experimental character of the collaborations and the outputs they produce, as well as incentives by funders to democratise decision-making processes and foster longer-term collaboration. It is time to shift the onus back to the institutions that profit from collaborations rather than the individuals who make these possible despite the odds.

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1. As this article focuses on the conditions of collaboration and the tensions these generate, we will refrain here from a more extensive discussion of the wider politics around Tate Modern as an institution (cf. Dean et al, 2010, Chong, 2013) or the Tate Exchange as a specific programme for audience engagement (cf. Sitzia, 2018: 81).  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The AHRC’s funding application, for instance, includes a ‘Value for Money’ section: https://ahrc.ukri.org/peerreview/peer-review-resources/reviewerguidance/valueformoney/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)