

Free art collective

Open Letter

Open letter to the Engage International Conference, Liverpool 2016

Instructions:

Free invites you to participate in a spoken choir. In order to participate you need to:

- 1. Print off the pdf (hard copies are also being distributed)*
- 2. Underline every sentence that you agree with.*
- 3. Bring the pamphlet to the event and read out those sections that you have under-lined.*

Guiding principles on how to occupy the event:
Whose Art? Our Art!

An open letter to the organisers, curators, artists, participants and audience of the Engage International Conference, Liverpool 2016 and to all non-participating artists, administrators, curators and publics.

We cannot subscribe to John Jordan's political reductivism when he writes: "We have to stop pretending that the popularity of politically engaged art within the museums, and markets over the last few years has anything to do with really changing the world. We have to stop pretending that taking risks in the space of art, pushing boundaries of form, and disobeying the conventions of culture, making art about politics makes any difference. We have to stop pretending that art is a free space, autonomous from webs of capital and power. It's time for the artist to become invisible. To dissolve back into life."

John Jordan, "Deserting the Culture Bunker", *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*, no 3 www.journalofaestheticsandprotest.org/new3/jordan.html



We prefer self-reflexive critique to nihilist criticism, so we align ourselves with Gail Day, Steve Edwards and David Mabb when they write: "We are all for stickers, posters and warm welcomes for the IMF, but starkly contrasting activism to 'autonomous art' does not seem good enough, even when it is draped in the fashionable rhetoric of the Situationist International." 'What Keeps Mankind Alive?':the Eleventh International Istanbul Biennial. Once More on Aesthetics and Politics' Gail Day, Steve Edwards, David Mabb Historical Materialism 18 (2010) 135–171

The publicity material for the 2016 engage International Conference 'Whose Art? Our Art! is torn between activism and access, politics and careers. It should be given credit for its advocacy of activism and thereby becoming one of the most politically engaged international art events since the tenth Istanbul biennial. For the first time in a generation, there is the real possibility to take activism and political art seriously through a meeting between critical thinking and the long avant-garde!

This year the NCCPE annual conference has sewn together arts activism, art education and sustainable art careers, putting radical politics on the agenda as a resource for business as usual. Notions such as 'engagement' are being put to use as techniques for career building within neoliberal hegemony, simultaneously drawing on a radical tradition and riding roughshod over it at the same time.

We appreciate the support for participatory political action but we oppose activism being used as a managerial toolkit. We reject the superficial argument that art should have never existed as a separate category from life, which too easily smooths the passage of art's political and institutional instrumentalisation.

Therefore we are writing (and standing before you) to invite you to engage in the activism that you are promoting. Do not stop at activism in the streets, but bring activism into your workplace, not as a style of public engagement but as a form of enagaging with your own institutions. Collaborate with activists and not merely the professionals who are interested in activism as a resource for art's institutions.

Protest is beautiful because it transforms its participants into active social agents (in other words, individuals who have a clearer idea of what they can achieve collectively). It is also a practice that requires rehearsal, repetition and active engagement. The purpose of activism, therefore, is not to change the

world directly and immediately, but to change the participants of activist politics into historical agents of change.

We wonder whether the subtitle 'Access and Activism in Gallery Education' dilutes activism for the institutional targets imposed by neoliberal hegemony. We add the question: 'How can access be a transfer of power?' If access is nothing other than allowing the excluded to join in, then it is a form of social control. The only access that counts is access to decision making. Increasing visitor numbers extends the dominance of dominant culture. Radical access must transform art's institutions themselves and insert art into the apparatuses of unlimited democracy.

When the organisers ask 'how the arts can effectively engage with schools' it sounds like a client relationship is being developed by a well run business. If you want a relationship with schools – and not just access to a new generation of gallery goers – then collaborate with schools, put teachers in your curatorial teams, arrange for the teachers' unions to meet artists and curators on your premises, and above all, fight for the right to a free education for all and campaign against University tuition fees. It is through your activism for education as a right that you will cement the link between art and schools.

Art and education share the goal of setting people free. Both are strengthened by the transformation of individuals through collective action. We set people free in schools and in art, not by granting them access to laudable institutions but providing them with the facilities to take power. We cannot manage their freedom. We are not experts on their freedom. We cannot make them a gift of their own freedom.

The increased freedom of the excluded must be experienced as a loss by the included or it is nothing but incorporation.

While it seems impossible today to subject all economic exchanges to radical and unlimited democracy, it is feasible for all art institutions and all educational institutions to aspire to the infinite democracy. We call on everyone here to return to your institutions with one aim: to open every decision and every policy to the widest possible democratic participation.

When you think you've included everyone in decision making, ask who has been left out. When you think inclusion is full and equitable, ask where the power really lies.

We are in Liverpool today because we believe in art and activism and access to decision making.

We make this public declaration because we cannot defer social change to the government or to the long awaited revolutionary moment, but must be made now and in everything we do.

The personal is political but so is the public. To regard the public only in its capacity as a consumer or participant in what you offer, is to deny the political agency of the public.

***Join the resistance to the management of publics!
Reject access without the transfer of power!
Liberate yourself by collaborating with others!***

Let's prepare works and visuals (posters, stickers, badges etc.) as part of the unlimited extension of democratic exchange.

Let's produce ourselves together, not through management, but through agreement and disagreement!

Art belongs to each and every of us not just to consume but to produce and curate collectively.

***Long live art! Long live activism! Long live schools!
Long live art's institutions! ... but let's change them all!
Let's open them all up to the unruly demands of the excluded!***