

6. IMMERSIVE 2ND WAVE AND AFTER

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Adam: So, we've been tasked with talking about second-wave immersive theatre, what that might mean, and whether it seems at all useful as an idea. To give a bit of context, I wrote an article for the journal *Contemporary Theatre Review* in 2019 that was trying to identify what a second-wave might constitute. It was specifically focused on a very networked group of companies based in London, one of which is Lab Collective, but also COLAB, Parabolic, Half Cut, SPECIFIQ, Guild of Misrule, and differenceEngine, amongst others. It was really the latter, differenceEngine, that got me onto this thread of a second-wave, specifically their "voluntary" liquidation after they found themselves encumbered with £250,000 worth of debt that they were unable to pay off. I wanted to know what it was that got them into that situation as a relatively young company with only a few years' experience, and what it was telling us about risks within the sector and particularly the inequitable distribution of risk, as it seemed to me that companies that formed after the 2008 financial crash and the introduction of austerity measures in 2010 were more susceptible to falling foul of the whims of the market than companies that had formed prior to 2010. And I don't think that was just because of life experience, if we can put it that way.

That suspicion prompted a series of interviews with members of the companies I just mentioned. One of the more interesting things that came out of those interviews was a shifted sense of how the public sector was being viewed. My own prejudices, my own suspicions, have been that the public sector has been a bastion for protecting artistic freedoms, but interviewees who formed companies after the 2010s were turning to the private sector as that which is more likely to facilitate freedom of expression and creative enquiry. In other words, the prejudice itself had been turned upside down. I wanted to find out why that was.

Also, with regard to the funding climate itself, companies were no longer adapting to Arts Council policy, which Punchdrunk and others were having to do in 2010 with the publication of the Arts Council's *Achieving Great Art for Everyone* policy document. Punchdrunk were *adapting*, but younger companies forming after 2010 had to treat the impact of austerity measures in the UK as a point of departure. The very thing that *Achieving Great Art for Everyone* purportedly set out to achieve was to

build resilience within the sector, but I just didn't buy that, and neither did a lot of other scholars and practitioners for that matter.

I think the collapse of Difference Engine can tell us something about why that is. It's not resilience that's being produced; rather, precarity is being *exacerbated*. And added to that, there are a couple of other factors that I think introduce a different set of challenges that just weren't there in the 2000s. The first has to do with market saturation around the badge of immersive theatre. I think this is so important. This is not just about a particular form or technology being "saturated" in the creative and cultural industries, such as site-specific theatre, or head-mounted display VR performance. Rather, the traction that the term "immersive" had gained became a kind of rallying cry for both speculative investment in the immersive industries, and the interest and willingness of audiences to get on board with immersion. It encouraged a subcultural fandom that then became extraordinarily popular. So, this has to do not just with market saturation, but an evolving sense of audience expectations as well. The tastes and expectations of audiences had become more refined and "tuned in" to the possibilities of immersion in ways that attached those expectations to quite narrowly define forms of immersive theatre. "Oh, that's what Punchdrunk do," or, "Oh, that's what Secret Cinema does." And if things fall short of those standards or parameters or ways of working then bad reviews might end up coming through, which creates a vicious circle in the commercial sector especially, where theatre makers are so thoroughly reliant on reliable ticket sales. In other words, audience expectations can also end up plaguing the work of companies who try to innovate immersive theatre form.

And added to this, one last point, you have massive government and business investment in the immersive industries that was just not there in 2010, at least not to the same extent. The kind of work that gets supported through these schemes - for instance, through Innovate UK - tend to pull VR technology centre stage in the delivery of "next-generation" immersive experiences, but in ways that can be conceptually or experientially unsatisfying, or old hat. According to a publication that Innovate UK released in 2018, you've also got Goldman Sachs predicting that immersive entertainment is going to be a \$95bn industry by 2025. And you've got City predicting that it's going to be a \$569bn market by 2025. Speculation abounds about immersion at the moment! In the UK, you have these enormous government-led funds through their Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund which is looking at collaboration and innovation across science and business, with collaborations across the university sector and private enterprise that are ringfencing tens of millions of

pounds for the development of new immersive forms, immersive technologies, immersive experiences and so on.

But I would argue that whilst that is benefiting a particular kind of company that's open to business collaborations, private enterprise and that's already quite well-established to make relevant funding bids viable, again, you have this second-wave that's at risk or even a third-wave that's at risk of being left out, because their interests or status just doesn't chime with the interests and values promoted through these various schemes. I'm worried about what that will mean for the enduring resilience of the sector.

So, to sum up, second-wave immersive theatre refers to changing economic conditions rather than some kind of immersive theatre aesthetic. It's not immersive theatre aesthetics that's necessarily interested me in the kind of innovation at stake here so much as the material conditions that support the production and reception of immersive theatre and how those material conditions have been shaped by austerity on the one hand, and emerging, large-scale investment in immersive technologies on the other.

Perhaps we could start with Lab Collective. What do you make of this idea of the second-wave and some of the arguments that are underpinning the framing of it?

Natalie: So, I think there's something really interesting about public/private funding and the kind of binary nature of, you know, the Arts Council doesn't embrace that sort of joint sort of private investment. You know, not necessarily the philanthropy but private investment as well as being supported by public funds. And I think both types of funding compromise your work in different ways, right? And in fact, sometimes in the same way.

So, it compromises the work that you really want to make from both sources. You need to make something that's popular, that's risk averse, that will sell, that has commercial interests if you're receiving investments. And those investors, they're expecting returns.

But you also might be sort of compromising the risks that you want to take with money from public funding as well in order to make sure that you are meeting those funding aims and getting those boxes ticked in terms of your wraparound activities, the content, the form.

So, I think in some ways both sorts of funding stymie risk and innovation just in different ways. Although the Arts Council's latest Let's Create strategy is trying to address that. But it is kind of like a footnote on the

very last page. Which is quite interesting. And so, I think both forms can make companies be risk averse but also take risks in an organisational way which might harm them. Difference Engine is kind of such a case.

And I think you're right in your summation that the second-wave is kind of more susceptible to this, mainly because they're sort of nobody's child. You know, they haven't necessarily received the kind of MPO funding that might encourage them to expand or experiment in their form, if with the safety net of the Arts Council underneath them. But nor were they necessarily able to access the kind of level of investment that kind of very experienced and kind of West End producers might have.

Joe: I also think that's something that I find really interesting about this article and about the idea that second-wave is... I know that when the second-wave sort of started, the concept was about non-commercial or non big boy. So, actually, we viewed a lot of the first wave as being very well-established, being able to afford these big sets, being able to do these big experiences. And we would sit there and say, "We don't want to be commercial." And I find it interesting that it has actually fallen into being more commercial through that. I think it's also a difference between- So for instance, we really started at 2008.

Natalie: We graduated in 2007. Height of the financial crash.

Joe: And being able to come out and start our practice with gallery commission and being able to start that type of work with things that were more artistically led. I mean, we haven't, as the Lab Collective, actually sought out private money. We tend to look at public funds quite a lot actually or research funds through universities. Or R and D funds through different research groups.

Natalie: I mean, the thing is we haven't accessed ACE funds since 2012.

Joe: No. That's also the other thing. We've not had that to play on.

Natalie: But we have access funds, you know, from the Arts Humanities Research Council, from the Wellcome Trust, from University of East London, University of Manchester. So, our funding streams or through things like the Barbican Pit Lab or directly ACE funded, you know, with the town hall at Latitude. We are *indirectly* publicly funded.

Adam: The distinction you're drawing here between direct and indirect public funding seems really important.

Natalie: You look at people like the SPECIFIQ, for example. You know, they do work in schools. They do work in museums. They're also indirectly receiving public funds. But the difference is that you choose what commissions that you want. You choose what risk you take. You look at projects that you might already have started thinking about and moulding and shaping them to those different contexts according to your brief.

But, you know, in any of these cases, your work is always in some way controlled by brief, private investors' agenda or the agenda of the government. And, you know, I think what a lot of people see in this idea of like risk or making the work you really want to make is the purity of form and idea. Whichever way you look at it, no money is clean, right? And everyone has their own agenda.

And so, the work you make will always be in some way indirectly shaped by that source of funding. You know, if you were going to go real kind of purist about it, the only way of making work that is what you want to make, in the form you want to make it, with the content that you want, in the way you want, is to do it with nothing. Because there is then no agenda but the artist's.

And that's always existed. Even artists in the 19th, 18th century, you know, with their private philanthropy sponsors, donors, caretakers, you know, they were then having to make work for those commissions that, you know, might not have been what they wanted to make.

And so I think, you know, most artists' work probably sits in the back of a cupboard for a really long time until they're dead and then, you know, comes out. So, I think the purity of art and making it is a bit of a unicorn.

Joe: Same. Just to add on one more thing on this actually. I find it interesting that the difference between first wave, second-wave and then we're going into this-

Natalie: Third wave?

Joe: - larger wave, is the concept of IP. Again, that second-wave, we didn't necessarily look at like big popular television shows and things like this. I mean, the Secret Cinema sort of kicking off in one direction and not really anybody else is looking at it really.

I mean, you had people adapting different stories or different plays or different pieces. But the idea of, yes, taking a television show and turning it into a more experience like *Peaky Blinders Festival*, for

instance, those sort of ideas weren't really kind of looked at. We were trying to make something new that was fresh.

So, even if you look at *Heist*, for instance, it's based on a concept of spying and sneaking, but it is an original...

Natalie: Concept.

Joe: Original piece. So, I think that's something that's quite interesting to talk about is what the shift between those forms as well.

Natalie: And beyond that, the language that sits around it in terms of who is actually making the work, so, you know, I think it's very clear in very well-established organisations that are MPO funded that there is a top-down relatively conventional, sometimes quite traditional set-up in terms of how work is conceived and directed.

And then amongst the second-wave, I think what you've got is a lot of concept-driven directors who don't necessarily direct work in the same way. And actually, a lot of performers who generate content, drive ideas and often, I think a lot of the time feel quite miffed that that traditional form is kind of being imposed on them, but actually they are the creators as equal to the concept makers.

Joe: Yes. Because you spoke about here about the idea of the artist being affected by the economic sort of constraints of the company. Especially when looking at things like, well, looking at Difference Engine and how those artists are losing money. But a lot of that content is created by them. So, do they have a stake in that financial, should they have a stake in something like that? Should they have a say in the decisions that make their company?

Natalie: And do we need to rethink how we talk about the people who make this work? I mean, you know, what was interesting again in the Let's Create thing is that the difference between an artist and a creative practitioner, you know? They're saying that the public perceive artists as people who work in opera houses, as people who, you know, at the National.

Whereas they perceive people who maybe work in more participatory work as creative practitioners. And I think there's something a bit canny in that. You know, obviously it's trying to sort of make it less elite so the language is easier for people to understand and less threatening when they encounter creative practitioners and artists.

But also, I think for creative practitioners and artists who make, you know, I think there is a build-up of resentment amongst performers in our

industry who bear the brunt of creating content. You know, we had a massive fight on our hands last year when we were like, okay, so the way we want it credited is slightly different. We don't want a director listed. We just want a list of collaborators including the director and the performers. And our marketing person was like, "Absolutely not. No way. I can't send your press release out without a clear indication of who your director and who your creative producer, who's doing what role basically."

And I think there is a resistance to changing how we make the creative process more equal and equitable and how we make sure that we're representing our workers and the people who make the work in a really fair and balanced light. You know? Sorry, I'm waffling.

Jo: Really interesting and multi-layered things that are coming up in this conversation already. It strikes me that there are two strands to this that are interrelated; the idea of risk in operational structures -

Adam: Yes.

Jo: - and strategies versus risk-taking in form. This involves an understanding of how those operational structures might then impact, positively or negatively, on risk-taking and boundary-pushing in form. How operational strategy and structure impacts artforms and outcomes; what is done, the way it is done, what the outcomes are. Considering form also opens up reflection on how the form itself is directly responsible for any consequent interpretations of the audience in regard to a perceived or actual encounter with risk within the immersive experience. The dramaturgical and aesthetic shaping of the event impacts on audience response *within* that work and in any subsequent interpretation; what the audience take away from that work, if you like.

And it's that that perhaps invites deeper reflection on how operational strategy and structure ultimately influences the creative practice itself in terms of a movement forward or further waves; how that impacts what possible futures might be.

Another point I wanted to pick up on in response to Nat mentioning the idea of the purity of the art and in regard to Adam referencing Punchdrunk: While compiling *The Punchdrunk Encyclopaedia*, where the original core creative team were looking back on their history and the way in which they had been part of a 'first wave' in British immersive practice, I'm reminded of the wistfulness, the joy with which they talked about the necessity of originating core creative principles. The joy with which they talked about seeing that magic evolve, being scavengers for

space and materials; about having to create the work from their own back pocket, funding it for themselves. Begging, borrowing and stealing to create this form that met something that they were each looking for in their own artistic experiences. I think there is something in that in regard to, as you were saying, Adam, about how this rise in popularity in immersive experiences grew out of a subculture. Within that very subculture, there was a different approach to outcomes, aims, missions and so, by necessity and design, to operational structures.

This work evolved from club nights, underground events. Secret Cinema was equally part of that, generating a massive audience that was looking for something closer to a club night experience with rave methods of galvanising that audience. Secret Cinema's mission was ultimately about bringing a lot of people together for a great time, while simultaneously selling tickets and making money. I wonder whether some of the other companies we've mentioned as part of 'the new wave' have been primarily influenced by that. There seems to be a desire to produce work that is convivial and seeks to create an artistic experience that might have great aesthetic standards, interesting interactive approaches and that values audience engagement where a good night is had by all but I would argue that there are ultimately different aims and outcomes in the intentions behind that work. And I know that's something that you and I have often talked about, Adam, and that's represented in the way that we write about those practices; about artistic or economic intention and the conditions that support or thwart those intentions.

These are interrelated strands within this conversation that highlight the connection between intention, operation, and the type of work that's produced. In turn, how that then generates or manipulates an audience for those events which in turn has some bearing on the experience of that work.

Joe: I think it's interesting the thing about the creation for creation's sake and the kind of the experience of making. Because again we talked about Theatre Deli in here. And many of us started at Theatre Sooke but something that's not mentioned here is the movement of Marylebone Gardens in Marylebone which was actually a huge moment of-

Natalie: Community.

Joe: Community building for experiences. It was in that network. So, there was a period of time in which Lab Collective, Stamp Collective, Half Cut were running along with Dan Simon who used to run the Oubliette.

Natalie: Arthouse. The Squatters' Arthouse.

Joe: The Arthouse. And we originally ran that building for space. And we would administrate it. We would put things on. We would build interactive sculptures. We would put things on at night. We would do all sorts. We were pretty much creating 12 hours a day every day. And we went in every day to work in that place.

And that's where so, like for instance, John from Difference Engine came to see one of our shows there. And then we had the conversation. Martin Coat from Boomtown & Dank Parish came there to talk to us about a project and then really enjoyed our company and decided to go Boomtown. Half Cut did Shelf Life. And then of course, Difference Engine then came later with Becky Brown who then created SPECIFIQ.

So, it was a big hub of making for making. And also, people like Kat Heath, designer, who was working there who is now doing a lot more design work for immersive works. And it did feel like a real kind of golden age. Especially for me and Nat and these second-wave artists of like being able to go somewhere and work somewhere.

The shift happened, I'm not sure when the shift happened, but it moved to a more... Almost as if the focus shifted at some point and it became, maybe even in response to the success of Heist, that it started to become about commercial. I don't think I know when that happened.

Natalie: I think when that shift happened, for me, that's about like growth, right? It's like when there is a period of exponential growth organisationally, your response to that is to formalise. And also, beyond formalising, the desire to continue the growth of that.

And we look back at times like Marylebone and like Theatre Souk with this sort of wistful nostalgia. And, you know, I think it's kind of like having a baby, right? You forget the pain because what you've got is so wonderful. And so, there is this sort of wistful nostalgia that sits around it. But actually, at the same time, there is also poverty. The making of poor theatre. There is poverty and there is want and there is uncertainty and, you know, looking down the path and going, "Is this it? Am I never going to be able to live in a nice house? And am I never going to be able to buy new clothes again?"

And so, people get tired and their capacity changes as you get older and people have new responsibilities. And they have new desires that sit with their lives as well. And I think that the period of growth coinciding with that, your age as well, means that some of that, those really joyful periods, you cannot recapture because you cannot compromise in the same way anymore.

And so, I think there is this wistful nostalgia for the purity of form. And it was joyful and it is joyful. And I connect with the way that Punchdrunk see those moments of beg, borrowing and stealing and tramping around the country and being in festivals and like building something from nothing and it being a massive ride.

But I do think there is a ceiling for how long people are able to maintain that. Because it's hard work. It is the hardest I've ever worked in my life. And it is exhausting. And you get to a point where it's like we either have to grow and formalise and make some money and be able to have a rest. Or we don't and we abandon it. And we ended up doing both.

Adam: You highlighted three formative moments in the development of this second-wave. The first was Theatre Souk in 2010. The second was when Theatre Delicatessen moved to Marylebone Gardens in 2012, and the third was Heist in 2014. I find that really interesting for several reasons. First of all, all three of those formative moments are affiliated with Theatre Delicatessen. The rose-tinting, if you like, that's at work here is with regard to what you were framing as a kind of heyday of this second-wave. Its early years were rooted in what was an explicit response to austerity. It reminds me of a chat I had with Jessica Brewster and Roland Smith, who used to be co-artistic directors of Theatre Delicatessen, in 2013. They initially intended for Theatre Souk to be a pragmatic response to austerity that pastiched marketplace economics. Before you went into each performance, you bartered the cost of entry with somebody on the door. What seems to have happened by the time you get to 2014 is that the pastiche element has gone and marketplace economics has taken over, feeding into the very lifeblood of how companies are approaching the production of new work. The trajectory of differenceEngine speaks volumes here: for instance, in their decision not to operate as a charity - which limited the kinds of deal they could broker with property developers, in effect nullifying the prospect of rent-free deals through Section 106 agreements, while opening up the possibility of making a profit - and to embrace and absolutely run with commercial and investment-led models.

The other thing I wanted to feed into here, coming back to what I think is a really useful point of focus for this discussion, is risk. There are two kinds of risk that are at stake in this discussion, as Josephine was hitting upon this earlier. On the one hand, you have risk in experimentation. I would put this under the umbrella of the aesthetic. On the other hand, you have what we might call structurally-embedded risk, which falls within the terrain of economics and the political. How these two modalities of risk intersect is crucial to understanding the politics of

aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics. Risk in experimentation is always couched within structurally-embedded risk.

Jo: Yes.

Adam: And whatever that structure is determines the parameters, I would argue, of that experimentation, and it shapes the experimentation itself in some form or another. Where things get really exciting is where structurally-embedded risk exists within risk-taking experimentation, where the structures - for instance, those that support the distribution of wealth and opportunity in a given social schema - are subject to that experimentation.

So, I guess if I have hope for immersive forms, plural, it would be in the upturning of relationships between risk in experimentation and structurally-embedded risk without ignoring the fact that all experimentation occurs within a given structure, without ignoring the material conditions that shape experimentation.

Natalie: Mmm. Well, I think what's really - Sorry, Joe, you were going to say something. But just to... What's really interesting is that I think in some ways, just to return to Deli for a moment. If we look at the difference between risks that they took.

Theatre Delicatessen bought the charity CurvingRoad just after Theatre Sooke. And then-

Joe: Were joined by it.

Natalie: Yes. So, the person who had that charity then sat on their board. But that then facilitated their commercial purpose in terms of getting rates' reductions on buildings. And so, once you have that formalised structure, you know, you have something that was, at the time, really quite new and quite risky of going, okay, so we've got CurvingRoad, we've got Theatre Delicatessen, the charity and the trading arm of that.

And actually, that organisational structure, whilst not new, in this context, it was quite new in terms of its commercial purposes then feeding a charitable aim and that being overseen by a board. And then the work within that sat that underneath it being quite risk-taking.

I think it has happened. I think that was a moment that was really interesting. And that moment of growth and change where the company has kind of split away and Theatre Delicatessen took associate artists to become employees therefore sort of making that very strange.

So, one person from each associate artist group became employees of Theatre Delicatessen. And then those associate artists, those companies themselves couldn't function. So -

Joe: Yes. So, we did lose Stamp Collective.

Natalie: Stamp Collective got lost.

Joe: And we did lose-

Natalie: We lost Half Cut.

Joe: We lost Half Cut. And then you could look at that trajectory and say, when, where does Difference Engine then come within that arc? We had a really big safety net of a building.

Natalie: Yes.

Joe: Of space. Of infrastructure. You spoke about infrastructure and building a spaceless space and getting that ready for performance being an area of concern for Difference Engine when making that piece. And actually, within Delicatessen, we had these structures. We had these things in place that meant that we could create the set and start working. I think that's something that's quite interesting there of movement from coming out of that supported building-led or space-led support. And then coming up and trying to do it on their own, independent and then the troubles that came along with that.

Natalie: And I think that there's something about like, who is risk good for? Because that risk was extremely good for Theatre Delicatessen. But it was not good for the artists that were running their buildings and like programming work there.

And so again, this kind of thing of growth and commercial purpose really sort of is quite formative, I think, in that change. That change between taking risks to make work that you really want, which is like exciting and wild and fresh and moving forward into more structured, more organisationally structured kind of ways of making. And I think what underpins it all is growth. All the time, growth.

Joe: And I have to place myself within that phase because I also was making decisions with Theatre Delicatessen as an employee. I was also making those decisions to push that same agenda. So, I myself was also part of that same shift and problem.

Jo: It's interesting, isn't it? We're drawing attention to how we value risk as audience members as much as artists and academics working within the

arts. Conversations around risk - risk in form, risk for funders, risk for artists - necessitates reflection on how far audiences value and understand the significance of risk within experimentation. Valuing experimentation as the means of creating new art forms that then become the new mainstream, and so turn into 'the old school'.

There is a responsibility there on the part of audiences. Audiences must be prepared to allow practitioners and companies to continue to take risks, rather than demanding that they continue to do what they have proven themselves to excel at. There's something in that idea of being devoured by an audience too hungry for the same format. If we value the innovations that come out of risk then we have to value the failures that it took to get there. That risk always also relates to failure and learning through failure. The iterative process of evolving a form, from one wave to the next. Doing things, trying again, trying it differently, failing better, doing it brilliantly. Continuing to evolve. Funding remits have to acknowledge that and support it wherever it comes. Artists have to relish that and appreciate it. The audiences have to permit it, have to embrace and allow for testing and failure. And that is equal, if not more important, to the way in which audiences respond to the first wave, to those 'pioneers', they must be allowed to fail in order to find new ways of doing. Equally for those, like Lab Collective, who were at the helm of the second-wave and are now part of the old school in some respects. Audiences have to allow you to make mistakes, get things wrong, to try things out and enable the work to continue to evolve as a consequence. Rather than dismissing new experiments and pilots in practice as 'not working'.

Souk folded for economic reasons, and I wonder if that's also related to this philosophy of risk-taking in form in some respects.

Adam: Which is why I would argue that public funding is just so utterly essential. Because as soon as a work is commercially driven, it becomes entirely reliant on commercial revenue, depending on the level of investment received in preparing a show. There are expectations that come with the commercial cost of a ticket that isn't subsidised, which makes it a lot more difficult to embrace risk in aesthetic experimentation. There is less space for productive or instructive failure in those contexts.

The most urgent question I have for all of you is where this leaves us with regard to the kind of changes that you might wish to see in the sector to help in responding to some of the issues that we've been talking about. To put it more succinctly, what are the primary changes, tactics, strategies, support networks, initiatives, and so on, that need to be

implemented in order to best help young and emerging theatre makers with an interest in immersive, interactive and intimate theatre?

Natalie: So, I think this is very meta. Then I get meta. I think there needs to be a huge shift in the way that the public perceive art and culture. And part of that is, you know, they see work that fails and they resist that level of risk because they see it as their personal money wasted. Their personal tax money that they've contributed to society wasted.

However, how can we more broadly encourage people to perhaps think a little bit differently about arts and culture and about how it's part of our society? You know, I did a tour in November and had a very interesting conversation with Dewsbury who never had a piece of outdoor public work in their town before.

"No, like, this is my money. This is my taxes. This is waste. This is like in the middle of austerity. How can we justify this?" And it was really interesting because I had said to them all, "Do you listen to music? Do you turn on the radio or watch television? In fact, do you look at advertising or play a game or play video games? Because all of that has been made by an artist. And that artist at some point, I guarantee, has made something that either hasn't worked or that you wouldn't like personally."

So, I don't have children but I am really happy that if you do, I pay for their education through my taxes. I don't believe in war. But I know my taxes fund war. You know? And I think there is kind of permanent cost benefit analysis of what my tax is paying for that sort of undermines the idea that, you know, things... It's a very narrow viewpoint of what art is.

And again, I think the strategy that they've just published is trying to address that. My concern is that that strategy places an imbalance of power between public and artists in terms of, you know, what can, should and will be made. So, I think what I would like to see is perhaps a kind of more equitable discussion and dialogue between our audiences and the makers about art and what it is and why we make it.

And I think the Arts Council is not a public service like the education sector. You know, at the moment, it's being used to fill the gaps in the education sector and in training and higher education that the government have starved. And they go, "Okay, now we want to work with schools and museums and libraries. That's what your remit is."

And it's very concerning that the kind of risk in quality of art and thought and creativity that sits behind it will be stymied by public opinion. And I

think that what I would very much like to see is sort of a split between those funds. Funds that encourage innovation and making and failure and funds that reach audiences but perhaps in a less directed way towards artists and more in an exchange project.

Joe: I think for me, this is a very quick point. One is about resource and space. And so, there's an idea here that landlords have cottoned onto the possibility of a commercially successful immersive experience and well, won't necessarily relinquish a space for something that companies can afford therefore placing themselves in difficult places.

So, I don't know if there is something about the protections of those spaces and those buildings and how that kind of works within council. Especially when you've got a fully privately funded piece and then working with councils and working with outreach within that to make that building useable.

I think there's also a lot of red tape that needs to be looked at in terms of moving into buildings and how artists use those buildings.

Natalie: And also-

Joe: Even with councils. I also think this concept of competition within all educational areas is actually hugely damaging for the artist. That's competition in social media. That's competition in tests and it's exams. There's competition of good schools, bad schools and it actually is creating quite a toxic atmosphere amongst artists who seem to be fighting each other. And then the public funding is also creating that feeling that you're fighting for funding against each other.

And actually, some ideas of being able to be unified, I would like to see some sort of unification of strategy within the sector where we can all decide, especially coming out of where we are now which we've not talked about at all, the situation that the industry is in right now and how we come out of that is finding a way in which we can be unified with a strategy to help both those companies things that are funded on a regular basis and those who are not. And hopefully, that will help us move to a more balanced funding stream idea.

Natalie: I mean, I think it's really interesting you talking about buildings. I was working for EEA and obviously I have very close ties with Southwark Council because they're based there. You know, they're a 40 year old company. They are an NPO. And their building in Greenwich is at the moment under, you know, they don't know if their lease is going to be renewed.

We're in Southwark Council having a chat about things that the council can do for them. They were like, "Oh, we've got a building you can have. You can just have it." And I was like, "What do you mean, you can just have it? This is obviously-" and it's that kind of thing of going, very established, publicly funded organisations have a reach and a network and an ability to just-

Joe: Some.

Natalie: Some have an ability to obtain things that a lot of, you know, younger second and third wave companies will probably never have access to. And I think that there is something beyond the safety net of money that goes into the sort of strata above it which also then is able to access resources in a way that is just not necessarily accessible to younger artists.

Jo: I would absolutely echo and agree with everything that Joe and Nat have just said there. We need to be educated about why taxes are paid and what they pay for. We need to understand and appreciate that they make a healthy society at every single level. The more we pay taxes, the more we all benefit as Nat pointed out. We need to understand the value of what that is funding across the board, what that gives us and why we all benefit.

There is also a need to acknowledge the link here in valuing art within education. We judge the health of a nation not just by its NHS but also by what else is supported and deemed worthy in terms of it being a civilisation.

And I know that that might sound quite grandiose but that is absolutely what civilisations are built on. That linked up approach to the value of all of these things and the understanding of the arts as being vital to that.

In terms of specific tactics, there is something in there around the connection between higher education and arts practice. So many of the artists I know have come out of a higher education system, whether it be in this or another country, and have benefited from that and benefited from a continuing relationship with HE. I think there's something really interesting to be eked out there in terms of what higher education offers to a society more broadly, and specifically how it produces the emerging artists of the future, the next innovations in form. This filters down to how the arts must be appreciated and supported in education at every level. Yet we're living through a time where that is being dismantled and destroyed.

This returns us to the value of risk. Many artists I know talk about the joy of experimentation in the safe confines of an educational institution, deepening knowledge as well as honing a skills base. As Nat and Joe have described, it's an important space for nurturing the next wave of artists. As a tactic, there is something in the relationship of HE to a wider network that supports new work.

An important element within that, something that has to shift specifically in relation to immersive and interactive work, is explicitly addressing diversity and inclusivity in this practice. We now have to investigate how the form itself, in its risk-taking, allows for inclusive practice. Public funding with its charitable outreach remit proactively addresses that much more significantly and with a commitment greater than any private philanthropic funding or commercial finance might do.

Focusing now on access, inclusivity and diversity in this work is about attending to, in order to understand better, different qualities of experience. Understanding the significance of different modes and methods of being invited in. Understanding how audiences might be encouraged to engage actively with this work in relevant, open and meaningful ways. Access All Areas with dreamthinkspeak, for example, are looking at this in terms of how and with what benefits the immersive form learns form and is available to neurodiverse people. Coney, Tamasha, Kit Theatre or Punchdrunk Enrichment are just a few examples of those closely attending to the benefits of this practice in work with schools and communities.

I'm also acutely aware that immersive and interactive practices, are very white currently. Or certainly that which is heralded as leading or given attention in terms of the well-known practitioners. In terms of tactics, networks, support systems and futures, we need to think about how this work might genuinely evolve approaches to inclusion and diversity that are really exciting for society as well as the art form.

I know that offers only a broad and very abstract response and that it opens up a whole other urgent discussion to be had but that's something that feels really vital to me.

Adam: The last of those in particular around inclusion and diversity I think is made all the more significant as the result of the current crisis surrounding the pandemic. I agree absolutely with what you are saying about the responsibilities of universities to work in close collaboration with the creative and cultural industries functioning as a kind of ethical obligation, but what I'm worried about, moving forwards with a multi-billion-pound debt crisis, is that universities will no longer be in a

position to help, at least not in the ways we might wish them to. So that resource is feeling really vulnerable at the moment. What worries me moving forward is that we'll see a shoring up of security in ways that support established organisations to the detriment of those looking to enter the sector. A new set of risks and precarities will be introduced as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, but if we've learnt anything from the coronavirus pandemic is that it's exposing an inequitable distribution of economic inertia and productivism within society. There are some people for whom productivity has found itself incredibly intensified as a result of the pandemic with a stretching of the working day and an increase in the number of tasks and the responsibilities that are assigned to them, whereas others are finding themselves in a position where they're perhaps realising - and Polly Toynbee wrote brilliantly about this in *The Guardian* - for the first time, perhaps, that the social safety net is badly damaged as a result of 10 years of austerity. Brilliant as it is that the Chancellor of the Exchequer has announced a programme of support packages for furloughed workers and struggling businesses, the social fabric is already torn and that tear is going to be made worse.

So, to sum that up with regard to how it relates to the current discussion, what worries me is that young and emerging theatre makers are going to have yet more avenues to them closed off with the elimination of project grants, for instance, from Arts Council England, with existing ACE funds being steered toward supporting fairly established organisations and artists within an extraordinarily fragile arts ecosystem. What worries me is that the very people who are most likely to be excluded from robust support as a result of the coronavirus pandemic will be non-white, early career makers, shoring up rather than resolving inequalities within the system. Maybe this is an obvious point to make but it just strikes me as a crucial one.

Joe: I think-

Natalie: I agree with you-

Joe: Oh, sorry.

Natalie: Sorry.

Joe: I was just going to say I was chatting to an artist friend of mine and they said a really interesting line which is, "It's not about who survives, it's who we lose in terms of artists." And I think that is a huge point that you made, yes.

Adam: Or who we haven't heard from yet.

Joe: Exactly.

Adam: It's not just about who we lose, important as that is. It's about the decreased likelihood of hearing from people who are yet to have a voice within the sector.

Joe: And she was saying that the communities in which she worked within, they are never going to make artwork again after this. She said that was the reality of her community is that they can't see going past this how they can carry on. Anyway, sorry, I was just...

Natalie: I think as well there is something about, okay, me personally, there is something about coming full circle to where we started. And the comparison of our positions then. So, like we emerged into a very similar economy as artists. And at the time, what was really exciting was that we had nothing to lose. Right? We didn't have a mortgage. We had no kids. When we were still there, we still didn't have a mortgage, we didn't still have any kids.

Now, our company is a charity and, you know, we are accountable people. And we have to do strategic thinking and organisational development and all of that really boring shit. It is boring stuff. But, you know, it feels like in some ways, we've come full circle. And the joy of having nothing to lose and having nothing to begin with is that you can, in some way, just do it. You just do it. I mean, that's what we did. We would just say, "We just do it." We've got nothing. We have nothing to lose. We've got no money. We're so poor. And it was just like well then, why not? And it's our expectation of what our life should be at that time was nil. We didn't care.

Joe: Yes.

Natalie: And I think that's the difference in maybe life expectation as well now is very different to what it was coming out into the middle of the recession.

Joe: Yes.

Natalie: We had no expectation of ever having a full-time job. Or of having a house. Or of having anything. And so, in some ways, we sort of abandoned ourselves into that. And I think there is something that could be positive attitudinally in terms of emerging artists and maker is going, well-

Joe: So, in that, we've connected to that, will we lose the building? Will we lose sets? Will we lose those things to become more public space orientated in terms of participation? Maybe not necessarily in terms of

immersive but that idea of interaction and participation, will this work turn into being more in parks, in streets, in other spaces? Because buildings are becoming less and because we have nothing. So then, how do we express the work? Does it become back down to that small? And then how does that change the big? I'm not sure. But I want to answer ...

Natalie: I do think that the diversity question is so hugely pressing that, you know, I cannot see a way for those communities to desire it. To desire the struggle and more struggle and more difficulty. I think for a lot of people even though they love the art and they love their work so much, the cost of it, the personal cost is so high and it's quite breathtaking sometimes.

And so, I think when we look into reaching into our communities and trying to diversify it, that cost on top of the cost that those diverse communities are already experiencing is too high for them. And I wonder how that can be changed. I don't know how that can be changed. I think non higher education training opportunities and more vocational attitude towards training and accessing industry perhaps is a really important way forward. There are-

Adam: Or a different take on how public wealth is distributed.

Natalie: Absolutely. But, you know, I do have a few friends who've never trained in higher education institutions. Instead, they kind of left and just started and developed their training along the way. But I think if the industry can formalise that, it might be a better way in for other groups of people who feel that they cannot and don't necessarily want to be in higher education and pay that and come out with that debt. I think alternative training opportunities is a really important way forward for increasing our diversity.

Jo: Yes. And I should stress that that's what I was meaning; that there is some kind of connection to what lifelong learning might be in general and how the arts are absolutely vital to that. For me, that goes back to educating around the valuing of taxes and, to support what Adam's just said, ensuring education across the board is funded, the arts are funded, the national health is funded. That's a bigger ideal, isn't it, that we can only hope and vote for.

And, yes, absolutely it's about access to experiences, events, organisations, institutions, materials that enable you to be inspired and to practice. In terms of thinking around tactics and strategies as Adam asked, it requires exactly that joined-up way of thinking where all of those experiences interconnect and are valued.

Adam: I really like that as a possible end point actually because it seems to sound a note of hope, albeit distantly.

Jo: Yes.

Adam: Because I often find myself being drawn towards the cynical and the pessimistic so it's great to finish on something quite hopeful. So maybe we should leave it there. What do you reckon?

Joe: Yes, absolutely. Hope.