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**Immersive theatre in austerity Britain: Les Enfants Terribles' riot in the Saatchi Gallery  
and the liquidation of difference**

Dr Adam Alston

## **Immersive theatre in austerity Britain: Les Enfants Terribles' riot in the Saatchi Gallery and the liquidation of differencEngine**

This article looks at the relationship of immersive theatre to the material conditions that support its production in austerity Britain. It explores a dark underside to a rapidly expanded market for immersive theatre in London that can leave theatre makers open to profound vulnerabilities. This is particularly the case among companies who have only recently embarked on professional careers in a 'second-wave' of experimentation in immersive practices post-2010, which has been characterised by an emergent distrust of the public sector and an active embrace of private finance and commercial enterprise. It takes two examples as cases in point. The first looks at politically-engaged work by a company with a much older heritage, but which has only recently started to engage with immersive theatre: Les Enfants Terribles' *Inside Pussy Riot* (2017), which was presented in London's Saatchi Gallery and was indirectly funded by Russian tycoons. This performance found security in private philanthropy, but elicits cognitive dissonance once the work's progressive political commitments are read alongside highly compromised revenue streams emerging from a market governed by conflicting interests. The second, differencEngine's commercial work *The Hollow Hotel* (2018), found no such security, leading the company to enter voluntary liquidation after racking up debts that ran into the hundreds of thousands. Focusing on these performances' institutional, financial, and legal contexts, this article explores how a new generation of immersive theatre makers are especially prone to competing interests and incentives in the private sector, whatever their political or commercial orientation, inviting reflection on the responsibilities of key stakeholders in challenging a misleading rhetoric of economic resilience that has accompanied stringent cuts in the public sector.

Keywords: immersive theatre; funding; risk; resilience; austerity

On 8 June 2018, I dialled into a conference call as one of several creditors of an insolvent theatre company called differencEngine. Its purpose was to agree on the appointment of the company's liquidator, although I hoped it would also shed some light on the controversial closure of their immersive performance, *The Hollow Hotel* (2018). The show was based on accounts of H. H. Holmes – a serial killer who tortured and killed his victims in a 'murder hotel' complete with booby traps and a dungeon – and put the audience in the role of victims tasked with escape. However, beset by several major challenges in the lead-up to and throughout its preview performances, the company entered voluntary liquidation after accruing

a financial deficit in excess of £250,000.<sup>1</sup> This is a staggering sum for a small company, particularly one that formed only four years previously. The liquidation left several stakeholders out of pocket including practitioners owed thousands in unpaid wages, and investors who backed the project to the tune of £100,000.<sup>2</sup> I was a consumer creditor by default having bought tickets, which meant that I could participate in the call – albeit in the knowledge that remuneration was unlikely (moreover, I was among the least deserving as a salaried lecturer). Nonetheless, it provided an opportunity to learn more about how the company ended up in this situation, and what it can tell us about the resilience of a burgeoning market for immersive experiences in London.

After the conference call, I set about reviewing publicly accessible documentation about the liquidation via Companies House, and interviewing several practitioners who were directly involved with the production or who could offer insight into the company’s liquidation as members of a closely-knit group of London-based companies. These interviews also served as an opportunity to take stock of the immersive theatre scene in London, which has reached a point of market saturation over the course of the 2010s, as it has in several other cities around the world. The kinds of experience on offer are numerous and diverse, spanning highly commercial initiatives like *The Hollow Hotel*, and politically-engaged performances that on the face of it seem opposed to commercial interests. A good example of this latter is Les Enfants Terrible’s *Inside Pussy Riot* (2017), which was made in collaboration with Nadya Tolokonnikova, a founding member of the Russian art-punk collective Pussy Riot. The performance invited audiences to take on the role of rioter, and was intended to reflect something of Tolokonnikova’s own experiences of the Russian penal system after she was arrested and imprisoned for hooliganism. However, it was presented as part of an exhibition

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<sup>1</sup> Companies House, ‘DifferencEngine Ltd: Statement of Affairs’, 26 June 2018, <https://beta.companieshouse.gov.uk/company/09344589/filing-history>, (accessed 24 Aug. 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

funded by tycoons at London's Saatchi Gallery – an institution famed for housing the art collection of advertising mogul Charles Saatchi – which undermined the performance's attempts to condemn various kinds of oppression, such as the gross inequalities produced in capitalist markets. In other words, relationships with markets governed by competing interests are also impacting companies that one might otherwise think would be shunning them.

In response, this article addresses a range of economic and legal issues and risks that immersive theatre makers are having to navigate today when working in the private sector, and explores how they have been exacerbated by a shift in attitude toward the market among a networked group of London-based theatre companies who only started to make immersive work after the 2008 global financial crash. These companies include The Lab Collective, CoLab, Half Cut, Parabolic Theatre, SPECIFIQ, the Guild of Misrule and differencEngine, all of which formed in the 2010s, as well as older companies that only turned to experimentation with immersive practices in the same decade, like Les Enfants Terribles. I describe these companies as 'networked' because their members often collaborate, and regularly gather at networking events like The Gunpowder Plot, which is a meet-up led by SPECIFIQ predicated on sharing creative opportunities and best practice. Many of these companies are embracing private and commercial finance and real estate without recourse to the public sector much more readily than would have been the case a decade ago, inviting analysis of why this is, and why it matters. The material conditions underpinning *Inside Pussy Riot* and *The Hollow Hotel* are especially illuminating to the extent that they represent convivial opposition among this networked group, with those championing political engagement on the one side, and those more interested in commercial opportunities on the other. Moreover, considering them in tandem in a focused critical analysis affords an opportunity to get under the skin of issues closely linked to the UK government's introduction of austerity measures following the financial crash, which cut across a company's political and commercial orientation, albeit with different ramifications.

Pop-up theatre's involvement in controversial regeneration projects has benefitted from several insightful critiques,<sup>3</sup> and the politics and economics of immersive theatre production has generated its own field of research.<sup>4</sup> But how has a new generation of immersive theatre makers been responding to challenging economic circumstances in Britain? Are there any risks linked to private and commercial enterprise that are specific to immersive theatre? If so, to what extent has austerity exacerbated these risks? More fundamentally, noting that critique of immersive theatre's embedding in the private sector has itself been called into question,<sup>5</sup> why should we be worried about how a work is financed, or where it takes place? Are these really 'problems' if the work finds an audience and fair remuneration for its workers?

In responding to these questions, I will be burrowing into archival resources that document the minutiae of financial models, legal documentation, company registration, property development plans and community bulletins, as well as journalistic reports addressing the business practices of private investors and philanthropists. This approach builds on the principle that a performance's material contexts, irrespective of their visibility to audiences, cannot be divorced from how we conceptualise their appropriateness in supporting a work, especially if that work is purportedly opposed to the competing interests of key supporters. I will also be turning to the corpus of interviews noted above, which were conducted between August 2018 and January 2019. They evidence a shift in attitude toward the private sector among a new generation of immersive theatre companies in London, and inform my contention

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<sup>3</sup> Michael McKinnie, 'Rethinking Site-Specificity: Monopoly, Urban Space, and the Cultural Economics of Site-Specific Performance', in *Performing Site-Specific Theatre*, ed. Anna Birch and Joanne Tompkins (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 21-36; Jen Harvie, 'Democracy and Neoliberalism in Art's Social Turn and Roger Hiorns's Seizure', *Performance Research*, 16, no. 2 (2011), 113-23; Michael Shane Boyle, 'Container Aesthetics: The Infrastructural Politics of Shunt's *The Boy Who Climbed Out of his Face*', *Theatre Journal*, 68, no.1 (March 2016), 57-77.

<sup>4</sup> Adam Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan), 2016; Keren Zaointz, 'Narcissistic Spectatorship in Immersive and One-on-One Performance', *Theatre Journal*, 66 (2014), 405-25; Meghan O'Hara, 'Experience Economies: Immersion, Disposability, and Punchdrunk Theatre', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 27, no. 4 (2017), 481-96.

<sup>5</sup> Josephine Machon, 'Punchdrunk', in *British Theatre Companies: 1995-2014*, ed. Liz Tomlin (London: Bloomsbury, 2015): 268-69.

that issues around venue leasing and licensing specific to pop-up theatre performances have been exacerbated by this shift in an increasingly competitive and saturated market.

In the next section I historicise the development of an evolved attitude toward the private sector in light of market saturation and the impact of austerity measures on arts funding in Britain, and set out how a new generation of theatre makers are *prioritising* the private sector in a corner of the industry that recently thrived on public funding and institutional support. I then turn to *Inside Pussy Riot* (2017) and the cognitive dissonance required if one accepts the performance's invitation to revolt given that the space housing the work and the money funding it forms the brunt of its critique. In tackling this dissonance, I argue that the decisions underpinning a work's production cannot be ignored, and have political consequences – not least when an audience is invited to become part of the artwork. In the final section I look at the reasons behind differencEngine's liquidation, exploring how the company's embrace of commercial incentives and reliance on ticket sales and risky contractual arrangements meant that they had little aside from informal peer networks to fall back on when they brushed up against the competing interests of a private property developer and a saturated market. In conclusion, I invite reflection on the extent to which an unbridled embrace of the private sector is at all 'resilient' given the fact that the very livelihoods of companies and those who work for them are on the line. My core contention is that austerity is affecting more than the material conditions that underpin cultural production; it is also changing how the public and private sectors are viewed and understood by a new generation of immersive theatre makers who have become suspicious of public funding and publically-funded institutions. Hence, if we are to really get to grips with the extent of austerity's impact on cultural production and the industry's current precarity, then we need to address the influence of policy reform on how different means of cultural production are being valued by cultural producers themselves.

## **Immersive theatre in austerity Britain**

Immersive theatre is no longer the trailblazer it was when companies including Punchdrunk, Shunt, dreamthinkspeak and Coney were making waves in the 2000s and early 2010s. While previously used in reference to virtual reality performances in the early 1990s, the work of these companies influenced British theatre critics in deploying the term ‘immersive theatre’ from around the time of Punchdrunk’s *The Masque of the Red Death* (2007-08) to identify a range of theatre and performance forms that place audiences within material environments that surround them completely, and that frequently encourage different forms and levels of audience engagement, exploration, and participation. All four were also singled out as key influences among the theatre makers I interviewed, and have had a hand in producing a set of standards and expectations in London’s immersive theatre scene. However, that scene has now reached a point of market saturation. Little today falls beyond the purview of the immersive badge, from end-on theatre performances, to themed cocktail bars and shopping experiences. Now there is more of a market base and hence more pressure on those supplying ‘artrepreneurial’ solutions to unproductive and otherwise very costly premises undergoing redevelopment.<sup>6</sup> Also, given its popularity, it is no surprise that larger West-End production companies are trying to cash in, such as EBP and LimeLight Productions. They are behind plans for a dedicated commercially-run immersive theatre venue in South London called The Buzz that was due to open in November 2018, although at the time of writing all productions have been cancelled and the opening postponed indefinitely. It looks unlikely to open at all.

The market for immersive experiences in London is becoming increasingly precarious as it struggles to grapple with market saturation. However, there are also much wider issues

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<sup>6</sup> Evelyn Brink, *The Artrepreneur: Financial Success for Artistic Souls* (London: Papy Publishing, 2011); see also Jen Harvie, *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 62.



affecting the sector as a whole that have had a substantive impact on theatre companies over the past ten years, particularly following the 2008 financial crash and the introduction of austerity measures by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government in 2010. Austerity measures are defined as strategic reductions in government spending, and are intended to mitigate against the risk of a debt crisis by reducing budget deficits. In the UK after the financial crash, this included reductions in the size of the welfare state and reduced spending on government jobs and services. The Coalition also announced its withdrawal of over 30 per cent of government funding for the arts in 2010, promoting philanthropy and corporate sponsorship in its place that required artists and arts organisations ‘to bend to the priorities of business in order to survive’, as Jen Harvie puts it.<sup>7</sup> As this section illustrates, these sweeping reforms brought about a change in the culture of arts funding, one that sought to foster cross-subsidisation across the public and private sectors, while cultivating entrepreneurialism and self-reliance among artists and institutions – not least among a new generation of immersive theatre makers, many of whom are now approaching the public sector with suspicion.

Crucial for the purposes of this article is Arts Council England’s (ACE) championing of mixed economic funding as the basis for a more resilient creative industry. For Alan Davey, who was ACE’s Chief Executive from 2008 to 2014, ‘The fiscal elements of the successful mixed economy of the arts will have to work harder’ in light of the government’s austerity measures, striving to ‘deliver more from the private sector, by improving fundraising skills and the overall culture of giving to the arts’.<sup>8</sup> His sentiments underpin ACE’s flagship policy document, *Achieving great art for everyone: a strategic framework for the arts*, which was originally published in 2010 and updated in 2013 in a new document titled *Great Art and Culture for Everyone: 10-year Strategic Framework*. Importantly, the third of five long-term

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<sup>7</sup> Harvie, *Fair Play*, 15.

<sup>8</sup> Alan Davey, ‘Achieving Great Art for Everyone’, in ACE, *Achieving great art for everyone: a strategic framework for the arts*, (London: Arts Council England, 2010): 7.

goals set out in both documents retains two instructive keywords: that the arts are both ‘sustainable’ and ‘resilient’. A keyword that was dropped in the 2013 version is that the arts are also ‘innovative’.<sup>9</sup> The 2013 version commits to encouraging private giving, supporting organisations in forging new partnerships, efficiency and cost-reduction, and building new markets and sources of income (particularly non-grant income),<sup>10</sup> but there is nothing like the same emphasis on fostering artistic innovation against this goal, even if ‘innovation’ was deployed somewhat vaguely in the 2010 version. That the arts are ‘resilient’ is what takes precedence, positioning relationships with the private sector as a key factor in the prospect and viability of arts funding – an attitude that their ‘Catalyst’ funding scheme was specifically intended to foster.<sup>11</sup>

One of the most striking differences between immersive theatre companies that formed before and after the financial crash is in their deployment, or lack thereof, of mixed economic funding models – in other words, the very thing that was meant to guarantee the resilience of the creative industries. Immersive theatre’s embrace of the private sector was certainly not born of austerity. For instance, Punchdrunk are well-known for their philanthropic schemes and corporate partnerships with famous brands like Sony, Louis Vuitton and Stella Artois Black.<sup>12</sup> What is different, though, is that an embrace of the private sector is no longer balanced against public funding and institutional support, which is threatening the prospect of a resilient creative economy over-exposed to the whims of commerce and competing interests in the market.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> ACE, *Achieving great art*: 12; ACE, *Great Art and Culture for Everyone: 10-year Strategic Framework*, (London: Arts Council England, 2013): 39.

<sup>10</sup> ACE, *Great Art and Culture*, 51-52.

<sup>11</sup> See Harvie, *Fair Play*, 159-68.

<sup>12</sup> Adam Alston, ‘Funding, Product Placement and Drunkenness in Punchdrunk’s *The Black Diamond*’, *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 32, no. 2 (2012): 193-208

<sup>13</sup> A notable exception is the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council funding 32 projects exploring the future of immersive experiences, which saw both Lab Collective and RIFT collaborate as Project Partners with award-holders Joanna Bucknall and Martin Welton, respectively. See ‘AHRC and EPSRC to fund 32 projects that will lead the way for future immersive experiences’, AHRC, 16 January 2018, <https://ahrc.ukri.org/newsevents/news/ahrc-to-fund-32-projects-that-will-lead-the-way-for-future-immersive-experiences/>, (accessed 18 December 2018).

Punchdrunk, Shunt, dreamthinkspeak and Coney have all been regularly funded by the public sector, particularly through ACE as Regularly Funded Organisations (RFOs), National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs), or through substantial Grants for the Arts awards. Moreover, they managed to achieve substantial rises in arts funding at points when many other companies were having their funding cut. Punchdrunk received a real-term funding rise of 141 per cent from ACE as a NPO in April 2012 when 206 other companies had their regular funding axed.<sup>14</sup> Coney and dreamthinkspeak also both went from £0 to £122,120 and £157,500 respectively in the same year.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Shunt benefitted from a rise of 123 per cent in 2008 when 194 other companies lost much or all of their funding.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, even when presenting work in non-theatre spaces, all four companies have had their work supported by some of the UK's most important publically-funded theatres, including the National Theatre, Battersea Arts Centre, and The Barbican.

Where a previous generation of immersive theatre makers were able to balance their commercial and corporate activities in mixed economic funding models, most of the younger theatre makers and producers that I interviewed are not just failing to gain support from ACE, local councils, and theatres in receipt of public funding; they are deliberately rejecting the public sector in search of autonomous professional relationships in the private sector, inverting the more conventional view that regards public funding and publically-funded institutions as vital means of protecting artistic freedoms. At the same time, pressure on space and resource, particularly for more ambitious projects, means that artists keen to explore immersive practices

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<sup>14</sup> Rob Sharp, 'From big names to fringe venues, cuts hit hundreds of arts bodies', *The Independent*, 31 March 2011, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/news/from-big-names-to-fringe-venues-cuts-hit-hundreds-of-arts-bodies-2257885.html>, (accessed 14 December 2018).

<sup>15</sup> 'Arts council funding, 2011-12 to 2014-15'. Available at:

[https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/105SzHaA5s9N2-u\\_uPCGxbpeVINR29\\_WX\\_RM9GLNHZS4/edit?hl=en&hl=en#gid=0](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/105SzHaA5s9N2-u_uPCGxbpeVINR29_WX_RM9GLNHZS4/edit?hl=en&hl=en#gid=0) (accessed 11 January 2019).

<sup>16</sup> Louise Jury and Alex Stephens, 'Funding body delivers £5m extra to 89 London theatre company and venues', *Evening Standard*, 10 January 2008, <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/funding-body-delivers-5m-extra-to-89-london-theatre-company-and-venues-6670571.html> (accessed 17 September 2018)

are less likely to be programmed within established, publically-funded venues unless there is a proven track record of success, which can force the hand of artists to make use of temporary ‘pop-up’ theatre spaces without institutional support and the experience, expertise and security that such support brings with it. These spaces can offer exciting opportunities to grow the scale and ambition of a work in a significantly truncated time period compared with a more arduous journey through the ranks of festival and institutional theatre programming. However, while being able to self-sustain in the private sector is a realisable goal for some, an evolved relationship with private finance and real estate is leaving many immersive theatre makers over-exposed to risk, which can have devastating consequences for even the most enterprising artists and those who work for them.

London-based theatre companies starting to experiment with immersive forms of performance in the wake of austerity, like The Lab Collective, CoLab, Half Cut, Parabolic Theatre, SPECIFIQ, the Guild of Misrule, differencEngine and Les Enfants Terribles, are regularly failing to secure support from public funders and institutions, or are avoiding them altogether. They constitute a ‘second wave’ of immersive theatre production to the extent that they share an evolved attitude toward the public sector that has a tendency to treat it with suspicion, or in some cases disdain. At the same time, they are not just open to the prospect or goal of self-sustaining in the private sector; they are actively pursuing and valorising it as a point of departure. This shift in attitude is a legacy of austerity, and it cuts across what my interviewees referred to as both ‘fringe’ or ‘art-led’ immersive theatre, and ‘commercial’ or ‘popular’ immersive experiences targeted at a broad spectrum of theatre and performance audiences (and hence not to be confused with experience designers like Bearded Kitten, Reuben Feels, and Civilised Mess, who only work for existing commercial and corporate brands and their respective customer bases). For instance, Becky Brown, creative producer with SPECIFIQ, refers to the ‘reputation’ of ACE for not giving money to early- and mid-

career immersive companies. For Brown, ACE ‘are less willing to take a risk on the fringe-level or medium-tier scale show, and there’s just no reason to approach them’. She also expresses concern about ACE’s demands for evidencing engagement and outreach, which she regards as unrealistic for companies of limited size and with limited time and resource.<sup>17</sup> This is a view shared by Owen Kingston, artistic director of Parabolic Theatre: ‘I have never bothered to put in an Arts Council application for Parabolic Theatre. I don’t have the time to waste. I don’t have limitless hours trying to jump through hoops and trying to justify different things. [...] From the word go with Parabolic Theatre, we were like, this has got to stand on its own two feet [...]. We’re not going to be reliant on public funding’.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, when commercial revenue is tight, Kingston supports his practice by driving for the taxi firm Uber – a choice that is reflective of his prizing of autonomy in a precarious gig economy.

The relationship of second-wave immersive theatre makers to the public sector is not just characterised by disenchantment; for some, it is regarded as fundamentally flawed and even unethical. Kingston describes the Arts Council as ‘a closed shop for arts administrators [paying] arts administrators to do the bullshit that the arts council demand of them’, rather than funding the practice itself.<sup>19</sup> One of my anonymous interviewees went further by suggesting that public sector funding is ‘dis-incentivising running self-sufficient budgets [...]. I would like the Arts Council to function more as a creative investment fund. [...] In the cases where it does well, there should be a mechanism by which you can pay that money back’.<sup>20</sup> This reflects the view of Bertie Watkins, director of CoLab, who is similarly critical of ‘dependency’ on public funding, and is in favour of ACE functioning more as an investment vehicle, ‘setting up a fund where you can make a profit, but the Arts Council take it back and keep it until you want to do

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<sup>17</sup> Becky Brown, interview with the author, 18 Sept. 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Owen Kingston, interview with the author, 11 January 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Anonymous, interview with the author. 21 August 2018.

another show, and you apply for your money back [...]. Obviously it's public funds, so it can't be given as dividends, but it's there to fund theatre and it's a bit restrictive in that way'.<sup>21</sup>

As Lab Collective co-director Natalie Scott puts it, tackling the politics of immersive theatre production is 'unfashionable' among younger immersive theatre companies today. She suggests that this may be because of an entrepreneurial attitude that has been forced upon a generation of university graduates accustomed to large debts, and with nothing to lose. Also, she describes how the Arts Council is being perceived as an opaque institution prone to the personal taste of those adjudicating applications. This is not to say that suspicion of the Arts Council is homogeneous among second-wave companies. For instance, even in lieu of successful funding applications, Scott still regards the public sector and its support of politically-challenging work as an important cornerstone of a healthy creative industry and suggests that a frustrated sense of entitlement to Arts Council funding can get in the way of appreciating its obligations for the work it funds to reach new and minority demographics.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, it is increasingly common among second-wave practitioners fluctuating between disenchantment with the public sector, and condemnation of it.

It is remarkable just how many second-wave companies emerged out of another company, Theatre Delicatessen. Theatre Deli, as it is affectionately known, began life as a company in 2007 by producing its own site-sympathetic theatre performances in pop-up locations. However, its core function began to change in 2010 when it first presented 'Theatre Souk': essentially a marketplace for emerging theatre companies on shoestring budgets to present short pieces of work to an audience who barter the cost of the performance on the door. Theatre Deli's marketplace model was a response to the impact of austerity, and the challenges it posed to companies at the outset of their careers. They found an entrepreneurial

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<sup>21</sup> Bertie Watkins, interview with the author, 8 January 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Natalie Scott, interview with the author, 15 Sept. 2018.

way of working that worked for them in spite of a dearth in public support, and Theatre Souk provided a means of sharing this model with a new generation of theatre makers caught in yet more dire financial circumstances.

For Roland Smith, co-director of Theatre Deli,

the idea of public subsidy is simply not in this generation's lived experience. [...] Even if people are applying to the Arts Council, it's very much that message that [...] you need to diversify income strands [...]. As a community of makers who believe in left-wing ideas, and yet at the same time embracing entrepreneurialism, embracing the commercialisation, there's always the danger of bowing to the right, which is to say 'if you take away the subsidies, we will find another way to do it.'<sup>23</sup>

The problem, though, as I set out above, is that it is precisely this message of diversifying income strands that has been dropped and superseded by financial models that prioritise the private sector. Second-wave practitioners and producers are not just having to be 'artrepreneurial' in how they present themselves to ACE and local government councils. Rather, a lack of sufficient public support has made a virtue of 'going your own way' in spite of substantial risks that is leaving this group of immersive theatre makers especially exposed to precarity. However, what remains to be seen is the devil in the detail, and how austerity's legacy is affecting immersive theatre makers in particular, which the next two sections unpick through close critical analyses of *Inside Pussy Riot* and *The Hollow Hotel*.

### **Political engagement in the private sector: Les Enfants Terribles' *Inside Pussy Riot***

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<sup>23</sup> Roland Smith, interview with the author, 13 Sept. 2018.

*Inside Pussy Riot* ran in November and December 2017 in London's Saatchi Gallery with tickets running just shy of £24 each, and follows on from the company's first immersive theatre show and international hit, *Alice's Adventures Underground* (2015). It was co-produced with the London-based company Bird&Carrot, which specialises in producing collaborative projects with Russian artists, and was co-written with Nadya Tolokonnikova, a member of the Russian art-punk collective Pussy Riot. The performance responds to the trial of Tolokonnikova and two other members of Pussy Riot – Maria Alyokhina and Katerina Samutsevich – following their arrest for hooliganism after performing *Mother of God, Chase Putin Out* (also known as the 'punk prayer' or 'Holy Shit') in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour on 21 February 2012. Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina were subsequently imprisoned, with Samutsevich released on probation. While fundamentally a response to this well-documented controversy, *Inside Pussy Riot* is, more broadly, about the Russian penal system, corruption, the imbrication of church and state, and the ongoing necessity of protest in the face of untenable oppression. However, this section considers what is lost when there is a clear contradiction between the making of political art and making art politically, to borrow a well-worn dictum rehearsed from Bertolt Brecht to Thomas Hirschhorn. To what extent should we be worried about how a work is financed and where it takes place provided the urgency of the content is promoted and comprehended? What can *Inside Pussy Riot* tell us about the impact of promoting a culture of philanthropy and sponsorship on politically-engaged performance? What does this culture mean for participating audiences who may be oblivious to their complicity in maintaining the very structures that a performed commitment to activism might otherwise be assumed to condemn?

*Inside Pussy Riot* positioned audiences – in my case a group of four, although it can accommodate double that – as protestors who are arrested, tried, and imprisoned for hooliganism. The first scene takes place in what the company calls a 'pre-experience space' in



which audience members complete a questionnaire intended to get them thinking about their own ideological commitments. The questionnaires are deposited in a large filing cabinet, receiving in return a pre-prepared placard linked to their expressed commitments. Mine read ‘Gender equality for all’; others bore slogans like ‘Unite against racism’, and ‘Share the world’s worth’. After putting on a colourful balaclava synonymous with Pussy Riot, the audience enters a more recognisably ‘immersive’ space satirising the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour with bright stained glass windows depicting world leaders like Vladimir Putin and Theresa May. Performers embedded within the crowd initiate a protest, asking the audience to hold their placards aloft whilst shouting their slogans. The authorities arrive, and demand that the giggling, chanting crowd shut up and kneel with their hands clasped behind their heads. After arrest and processing at a police station, the audience stands before a judge and jury represented by a giant nodding dog and a demonic judge who acts at the beck and call of a ‘Kremlin presence’ the other end of a phone line. They are sentenced and escorted to prison, where they carry out a series of pointless, menial tasks – like counting coins or needles. In each case, attempts are made to transport audiences into the thick of stylised incarceration. The performance ends by interring the audience-prisoners in pitch-black solitary confinement, where they listen to a recording of Tolokonnikova recounting her experiences and ambitions for meaningful protest. When the recording ends, they are encouraged to ‘stand up for what they believe in’ by re-joining their fellow audience members in a communal space with placards once again in hand. One by one they take their place in the centre of the room, raise their placard, and shout their slogan, or whatever else they feel moved to declare.

As *Les Enfants Terribles*’ artistic director and co-writer of the work, Oliver Lansley, writes in the piece’s programme: ‘I was suddenly acutely aware that, as an English white dude, writing a show about a Russian, all female, feminist, punk protest group, to be performed in an art gallery in the most affluent area of London – carries with it certain ironies’. However, in

setting out why the piece is worth performing now, he goes on to describe it as ‘a story that encourages people to question the systems of power on which our lives are run’.<sup>24</sup> The first of these ‘systems of power’ that I want to consider is not the judicial or penal systems in Russia, but the institutional context of the Saatchi Gallery itself. The gallery initially opened in St. John’s Wood in North London in 1985 to display the private art collection of the multi-millionaire Charles Saatchi, although it is now situated in London’s well-heeled Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Saatchi is best-known for selling off his collection of US contemporary art so as to invest in a new generation of Young British Artists (YBA) like Sarah Lucas and Damien Hirst in the early 1990s, with the first of many exhibitions of their work funded by Saatchi opening in 1992. However, Saatchi first made his name not as an art collector, but as an advertising mogul who, alongside his brother Maurice, founded Saatchi & Saatchi in 1970. Together, they adopted ‘an aggressive acquisition strategy, buying out more than 35 marketing companies between 1972 and 1987 – and it paid off. By 1986, Saatchi & Saatchi [...] surpassed marketing giants Interpublic and Omnicom to become the biggest communications company in the world’.<sup>25</sup> One of the initiatives that boosted Saatchi & Saatchi’s success was their ‘Labour isn’t working’ campaign for Margaret Thatcher’s right-wing Conservative Party in the lead-up to the 1979 UK General Election, which played a vital role in the party’s successful election. Saatchi’s political background, then, alongside his interventions in the advertising industry, already sets up a counter-intuitive context for a performance advocating an embrace of protest and progressive values.

As Laura French observes, Saatchi regularly attended student shows in search of the next big name, and ‘made millions on the YBA works, auctioning [Tracey Emin’s] My Bed

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<sup>24</sup> Oliver Lansley, ‘What Do You Believe In?’, *Inside Pussy Riot* programme (London: Saatchi Gallery, 2017), n.p.

<sup>25</sup> Laura French, ‘The story of Charles Saatchi’, *EuropeanCEO*, 11 Mar. 2015, <https://www.europeanceo.com/lifestyle/the-story-of-charles-saatchi/>, (accessed 3 March 2018).

for £2.5m (after having bought it for £150,000), selling Hirst's preserved shark for £5.3m (he paid £50,000), shifting Mark Quinn's *Self* for £1.5m (up from a reported £13,000) and raking in £6m for a piece by Peter Doig. All this suggests he knew how to play the market – that his interest in art went beyond a mere collector's fanaticism'.<sup>26</sup> Saatchi's notorious relationship to the art market is hard to shake from consciousness when asked to hold placards aloft in Saatchi's gallery that read 'Share the world's worth'. Also, a placard reading 'Gender equality for all' is similarly problematic given Saatchi's involvement in a scandal in June 2013 when he was photographed grabbing the throat of his then wife, the TV chef Nigella Lawson, outside a Mayfair restaurant. They are now divorced. Whatever his reasons, to claim to defend 'Gender equality for all' or to advocate for 'Sharing the world's worth' whilst standing in the Saatchi gallery is to participate in a strange iteration of Pascal's wager, which Slavoj Žižek dryly summarises: 'submit yourself simply to ideological ritual, stupefy yourself by repeating the meaningless gestures, act *as if* you already believe, and the belief will come by itself'.<sup>27</sup>

Such a wager seems worlds apart from the sincerity expressed in one of Tolokonnikova's responses to Žižek's numerous letters that were written to her while she was in prison: 'With regard to the techniques that the global economy's intellectual and ad-industry core has developed for escaping static identities of subjugation, my feeling is that we need to find a way of joining this game without checking our beliefs at the door'.<sup>28</sup> A core issue that *Inside Pussy Riot* struggled to contend with is how to deal with this 'door' in performance. The 'world' that was created for audiences to enter, the role that they were asked to take on, drew several thematic connections with the 'world' of Pussy Riot's interventions and imprisonment.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London & New York: Verso, 1989), 38, original emphasis.

<sup>28</sup> Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, 'Nadya to Slavoj, April 16, 2013', in *Art Riot: Post-Soviet Actionism*, ed. Andrey Kovalev (London: ABC Design Studio), 89.

However, the ‘game’ that audiences are asked to join is enabled by the very ad-industry against which Tolokonnikova’s inspiring example is set.

The institutional context supporting this performance, then, is of crucial significance to the work’s political ambitions – but it is just as important to take into account another ‘system of power’, to borrow again from Lansley, that might be ‘questioned’; that is, the financial. *Inside Pussy Riot* was sponsored by the Tsukanov Family Foundation, which is a UK Charity offering scholarships to children from former Soviet countries to attend some of Britain’s most elite private schools. It also supports and promotes Russian and Eastern-European post-war art, and owns one of the world’s largest collections of post-war Russian art.<sup>29</sup> Igor Tsukanov is its co-founder – a Russian banker whose wealth purportedly exceeds £100 million.<sup>30</sup> Tsukanov’s relationship with Saatchi began when the Saatchi Gallery opened an exhibition called ‘Breaking the Ice: Moscow Art 1960-80s’ in November 2012, which brought an ‘anti-regime’ theme in Russian art to the foreground, and set the tone for three other Saatchi-Tsukanov collaborations, the most recent of which was ‘Art Riot: Post-Soviet Actionism’.<sup>31</sup> This was an exhibition celebrating protest in Russia over the past twenty-five years in a year that also marked the centenary of the October Revolution, and was presented concurrently with *Inside Pussy Riot*.

Sponsorship of the Art Riot exhibition also came from a number of anonymous donors, as well as Russian oligarch Mikhail Kroupeev, and Leonard Blavatnik’s Family Foundation. Blavatnik was born in Ukraine but now lives in the UK. He is a multi-billionaire and one of the wealthiest individuals in Britain thanks to his founding and direction of Access Industries, a conglomerate with holdings in venture capital, chemicals, and natural resources, including

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<sup>29</sup> Tsukanov Family Foundation, ‘Tsukanov Family Foundation’, *Breaking the Ice*, <http://www.moscowart.net/ttf.html>, (accessed 3 Mar. 2018).

<sup>30</sup> Andrew Jack, ‘Igor Tsukanov: the Russian banker who wants a museum, not a yacht’, *Financial Times*, 30 Nov. 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/b6254ee0-b327-11e6-a37c-f4a01f1b0fa1>, (accessed 3 Mar. 2018).

<sup>31</sup> See also ‘Post-Pop: East Meets West’ (2014-2015) and ‘Revelations’ (2016).

oil and petrochemicals. He personally received seven billion US dollars after selling his shares in the oil company TNK-BP, and amid stormy controversy donated one million US dollars to Donald Trump's inauguration committee<sup>32</sup> – one of the leaders vilified in the performance's mocked up version of Christ the Saviour Cathedral. Access Industries' also has an entertainment division, recently purchasing London's Theatre Royal Haymarket for £45 million, which is a staggering sum for a single theatre regardless of location.<sup>33</sup>

Kroupeev also made his fortune in oil and gas, and is currently non-executive chairman and the largest shareholder of Sterling Energy PLC, and non-executive director and 27% shareholder, though an investment vehicle, of Gulfsands Petroleum. Both companies focus part of their operations in the Middle East, including Syria. According to the *Financial Times*, Gulfsands even found itself embroiled in a controversy after it

agreed to give a share of profits from its production activities in Syria to a company controlled by Rami Makhlouf, the first cousin of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad [another of the world leaders depicted in the performance's stained glass windows]. The company has also paid more than \$1m in fees to Ramak, the Makhlouf family's holding company, for services connected with its operations in the country [...] Mr Makhlouf has been put under sanctions by both the US and the European Union for his links to the Syrian regime, which has been accused of killing 2,400 protestors since uprisings began in March.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Graham Ruddick, 'Should Oxford and the V&A take millions from Ukrainian-born billionaire Len Blavatnik?', *The Guardian*, 3 Sept. 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/sep/03/len-blavatnik-oligarch-controversy-philanthropy-resignation-oxford-professor>, (accessed 3 Mar. 2018).

<sup>33</sup> Georgia Snow, 'Leonard Blavatnik completes £45m purchase of Theatre Royal Haymarket', *The Stage*, 19 June 2018, <https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/2018/leonard-blavatnik-completes-45m-purchase-theatre-royal-haymarket/>, (accessed 3 January 2019).

<sup>34</sup> Lina Saigol and Sylvia Pfeifer, 'Gulfsands Petroleum in oil payments to Assad cousin', *The Financial Times*, 23 Aug. 2011, <https://www.ft.com/content/4d14c150-cdbe-11e0-bb4f-00144feabdc0>, (accessed 3 Mar. 2018).

Gulflands' operations in Syria are currently closed following the need for compliance with US and EU sanctions. Nonetheless, the cognitive dissonance that accompanies the invitation to protest within the Saatchi Gallery takes on a discomfiting edge once we dig into the financial foundations of Art Riot. The invitation to protest is not just an invitation to express one's own political commitment; it is linked to activities that such protest is meant to oppose. Regardless of their visibility, these sources of support fundamentally undermine the political ambitions of the work to the extent that they form the antithesis of those ambitions, and are opposed to their realisation.

The problem here is not just linked to what the institutional and financial contexts do to the work, but what the work and its participants do for the institution and its financiers. While well-intended, *Inside Pussy Riot* implicates participating audiences in the ideologies it opposes – capitalism and white patriarchy – calling to mind an important question raised by Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello: 'How is committed engagement in the processes of accumulation a source of enthusiasm, even for those who will not necessarily be the main beneficiaries of the profits that are made'?<sup>35</sup> The irony of *Inside Pussy Riot*, as with so much cultural production, is that it relies on the enemy it targets. But Boltanski and Chiapello ask us to flip what we choose to focus on in this relationship; capitalism *needs* opponents like Pussy Riot in order to sustain itself by finding 'the moral supporters it lacks'.<sup>36</sup> The financiers of *Inside Pussy Riot* are in a position to procure a moral foundation by means of private philanthropy for otherwise untenable degrees of inequality, and the desiring bodies of audiences play a crucial role in this. Desire for protest, albeit highly sanitised, is corralled into a setting that supports its objects of critique. The result is a reconstitution of Pussy Riot's activism, making it readable in another vein, as if it were always already operating within the

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<sup>35</sup> Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2005), 16.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

ideological terrain of its opponents.<sup>37</sup> Activism finds itself caught in the very thick of its targets, and here it is we, the audience, who are protagonists in this process of legitimation.

### **Immersive theatre and commercial risk: DifferencEngine's *The Hollow Hotel***

Stories of commercial theatre performances folding on Broadway or the West End with disastrous financial implications are well-known. High-profile examples include Julie Taymor's musical *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* (2010) and Mike Read's *Oscar* (2004). Also, that immersive theatre can enjoy commercial success is beyond doubt as extended runs of Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* in New York (2011-) and Shanghai (2017-) and The Guild of Misrule's *The Great Gatsby* (2016-) – now the longest-running immersive theatre show in London – go some way toward illustrating.<sup>38</sup> Secret Cinema's commercial performances are wildly popular, and indeed differencEngine's first show *Heist* (2014) was also a commercial hit, extending its run from three weeks to nine months. All of these performances have offered a range of employment opportunities in the arts while cultivating substantive fan bases that make sustained contributions to local economies. However, the pace of immersive theatre's commercialisation in London is moving at an alarming rate of knots. What are the risks that commercially-orientated immersive theatre makers are having to deal with in a burgeoning market for immersive experiences? How do these dovetail with commercial theatre production more broadly? What risks have emerged that are specific to immersive theatre, and what can we learn from differencEngine's liquidation?

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<sup>37</sup> See also Žižek, *Sublime*, 58.

<sup>38</sup> *The Great Gatsby* was originally produced by The Guild of Misrule and created by Holly Beasley-Garrigan, Amie Burns Walker, Hannah Davies, Phil Grainger, Michael Lambourne, Thomas Maller, and Oliver Tilney. It is directed and adapted by Alexander Wright.

In responding to these questions, this section focuses on the circumstances surrounding differencEngine's ill-fated commercial performance *The Hollow Hotel*. It explores how the company's speculative approach to theatre production put them at the mercy of both a saturated market and the competing interests of a property developer. While it is not unusual for a performance to make a commercial loss, factors linked to the leasing, licensing and transformation of a pop-up venue significantly impacted the company's ability to produce a work of sufficient quality. It is this mixture of generic commercial risks and form-specific risks associated with working off-site that I will argue left differencEngine in especially precarious circumstances, the ramifications of which need to be pulled into much sharper focus.

Three days into *The Hollow Hotel's* preview run the company were notified by their Superior Landlord that they were not permitted to access the roof of the building they were using – the former home of the Peek Frean Biscuit Factory in the London borough of Southwark – despite the Direct Landlord, who is meant to operate on the Superior Landlord's behalf, allegedly having agreed this with them in writing beforehand (here I have to take the interviewees at their word, although it was noted in three independent interviews). By this point the show had already been constructed around access to the roof, so this change required *significant* rebuilding of the space, and hence significant changes to the use and technical support of the space itself, with all that entails in terms of labour time and material costs. The work was unfinished when first presented to a paying audience after only five days of rehearsal, which caused issues with cash flow when commercial revenue targets were missed. Matched with poor reviews for a performance charged at full price (£42), and unsuccessful appeals for enhanced funding and attempts to revamp the work's marketing, a perfect storm resulted that in the company's eyes made continuation of the run – and the company – untenable.

Given the number of people owed money as a result of differencEngine's liquidation, one might reasonably ask why the company are not pursuing legal action against the Direct or



Superior Landlord if written permission granting access to the roof really was offered. One answer is that legal fees would have consumed a lot of the money returned through legal action, despite the fact that some of these costs could have been recouped if they won the case. Another answer is that the issues run deeper than the right to use the roof, despite the magnitude of the set-backs this caused.

Immediate capital expenditure for many immersive theatre performances can be considerable, particularly if the performance in question relies on expansive, richly detailed settings. DifferencEngine needed to raise between £120,000 and £130,000 to cover these costs, and to take the company just beyond the initial preview period in terms of running costs. Thereafter they were reliant on commercial revenue, which is the source of the most substantive risk they faced. As distinct from a first-wave company like Punchdrunk, whose largescale work can accommodate in excess of 500 audience members per night (sometimes more), nightly capacity for *The Hollow Hotel* was more in the region of 120, with a break-even rate at 60 per cent capacity. This is plausible as a projection for a company with a track-record of commercial success. However, as intimated above, the field of immersive experiences on offer in London has become saturated. Horizons of audience expectations have developed since the excitement that surrounded the work of first-wave companies, with a much wider range of alternatives to choose from if these expectations are not met. One must surely question where this leaves companies looking to take artistic risks – and blending immersive theatre with escape room games was an attempt to innovate – who may find that they need to position themselves more as a speculative investment opportunity grounded in an unforgiving model of accountability and expectation. Indeed, as my interview data illustrates, this is how a number of second-wave companies are now thinking about the work they produce, going so far as to call for reformulation of public funding bodies as profit-making investment vehicles.

The initial fundraising for *The Hollow Hotel* was not the result of diversified revenue streams from grants, trusts, foundations or crowd funding; it came solely from private investment from a range of investors. Importantly, the *extremity* of the company's reliance on private investment and forecasted commercial revenue is not one that most early-career companies could realistically adopt should they wish to produce work on this scale given the fact that £55,000 of the initial fundraising came directly from one of the two directors' personal savings.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, if a company that can muster such capital off its own back finds itself applying for voluntary liquidation, then what about artists who do not enjoy the same degree of privilege? Nonetheless, the company epitomises a trend in a sector keen to enable underfunded projects, as Smith sets out above, and signals the extent of the risk that theatre makers operating outside of a more secure funding model can take on by choice or otherwise when looking to emulate the largescale work of first-wave practitioners. And this is true not just of funding, but organisational structure as well. DifferencEngine bucked the trend common among first-wave practitioners of operating as a nonprofit charity. Operating as a charity would make the company accountable to a board of trustees, and would prohibit this kind of personal investment. But in foregoing charitable status, embracing instead a model founded on speculative and unfettered commercial enterprise, differencEngine enabled the prospect of both independence and profit at the cost of exposure to dangerous levels of risk. Perhaps this is all very well if you have the liquidity to take on this risk out of choice. However, this is not the case for most other practitioners working on the production in a precarious gig economy. Even the UK creative practitioners' union Equity proved itself ineffective in this instance, and indeed it is remarkable how little of consequence has been done to resolve this situation among those I interviewed, some of whom are still owed thousands in unpaid wages.

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<sup>39</sup> Companies House, 'DifferencEngine Ltd'.

Various styles of pop-up and site-responsive theatre often rely on rolling short-term leases and have routinely built on bonds of trust with landlords and developers, who stand to benefit from having charities and cultural activity occurring on their premises: for instance, through significant reductions in business rates for the property owner. Even when for-profit companies rent space from a private landlord, as is the case with differencEngine, there is still capacity for mutual benefit – such as cheaper rent in exchange for fulfilment of a property developer’s obligations to a local council, which might indicatively stipulate inclusion of cultural enrichment programmes through a Section 106 agreement (which is a legal mechanism intended to mitigate the impact of development on local communities). However, such relationships potentially threaten a more sustainable arts infrastructure by propping up cultural production in lieu of sufficient public support, as Jen Harvie explores elsewhere.<sup>40</sup> What’s more, as freelance immersive theatre producer Dan Ball notes, now that the market base for immersive experiences has expanded so much, ‘no landlord wants to give away an empty building for free anymore. [...] We’ve removed one of the elements that made this whole thing balance [...]. Landlords have cottoned on to the idea that there is this wonderful income stream’, and are no longer willing to offer peppercorn rents in exchange for cuts in business rates, as was the case ten years ago.<sup>41</sup> In other words, this particular issue is only likely to worsen as the current fad for pop-up initiatives develops.

A lack of legal know-how or purchasing power in the context of market saturation makes artists and theatre companies especially vulnerable as a party on the back foot from the start. After all, even with the personal and private investment secured by differencEngine, how can they compete in a legal battle with Grosvenor Britain and Ireland, which is part of one of the world’s largest property businesses, the Grosvenor Group? The biscuit factory that housed

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<sup>40</sup> Harvie, ‘Democracy’.

<sup>41</sup> Dan Ball, interview with the author, 11 January 2019.

*The Hollow Hotel* was part of a 12-acre site that Grosvenor acquired in 2013. Community engagement plays an important role in Grosvenor's £500 million build-to-rent development plan for the area,<sup>42</sup> and the arts offer one means of fulfilling such a role alongside social enterprise. The involvement of the arts in urban regeneration schemes is much-documented.<sup>43</sup> However, the threat of local communities losing their homes to gentrification and reports of several hundred artists losing their studios to make way for the re-development serves to underscore the urgency of the issue and its impact on the lives of those living and working in the area.<sup>44</sup>

While Grosvenor declined to comment when I asked for their views on this, there are a number of reasons why they might reasonably argue that denying access to the roof, assuming the veracity of my interviewees' comments, was justified. If roof access was not formalised in the lease, they would not be legally bound to facilitate access, depending on the nature of the correspondence with the Direct Landlord. Also, there may well be Health and Safety issues warranting careful management and monitoring, which could be costly if not handled properly. They would also have been looking to ensure good public relations with the local community, who may have concerns about noise and security with increased footfall in the area (although local residents have already expressed concern that the build-to-rent development itself will lead to years of noisy construction work and potentially dangerous streets).<sup>45</sup> Moreover, as the foregoing analysis suggests, issues with roof access were the tip of a larger iceberg, one made

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<sup>42</sup> Grosvenor, 'Grosvenor publishes its £500 million Bermondsey masterplan', <http://www.grosvenor.com/news-views-research/news/2017/grosvenor-publishes-its-%C2%A3500-million-bermondsey-ma/>, (accessed 22 August 2018).

<sup>43</sup> See especially Harvie, *Fair Play*, 108-40.

<sup>44</sup> James Pickford, 'Biscuit factory development forces artists further out of London', *Financial Times*, 10 January 2014, <https://www.ft.com/content/dce4bdec-7a16-11e3-8211-00144feabdc0>, (accessed 22 August 2018); Southwark Notes, 'Art & empty Southwark industrial buildings 1980s – NOW', *Southwark Notes – whose regeneration?*, February 2014, <https://southwarknotes.wordpress.com/art-and-regeneration/art-empty-southwark-industrial-buildings/>, (accessed 22 August 2018).

<sup>45</sup> Chiara Giordano, 'Resident's fears over £500m plans for former Peek Frean Biscuit Factory', *Southwark News*, 26 October 2017, <https://www.southwarknews.co.uk/news/residents-fears-500m-plans-former-peek-frean-biscuit-factory/>, (accessed 23 August 2018).

worse by issues with the content and delayed submission of an application for a change of building use. While it is possible to point to examples where change of use applications have been submitted retrospectively by other pop-ups, the significance of getting this aspect of the licensing right should not be underestimated. While I am reluctant to frame a culture of trust so bleakly, a lack of legally-binding assurances and shortfalls in due process can leave artists without a leg to stand on, even if informal agreements have been reached.

While there is a need for reform of high-risk contractual agreements and commercially-reliant financial models – a need, in short, for intervention and policy reform that combats the fostering of precarity in the private sector – in the short-term there is a pressing need for adequate safeguards and knowledge exchange resources that can support artists and companies as they navigate volatile legal and commercial relationships. The Gunpowder Plot referred to in the Introduction offers a clear opportunity for providing such a platform, and its founders, SPECIFIQ, are considering how it might evolve by developing an open-access resource that correlates and archives documentation and guidance addressing key areas of concern, from legally-binding contracts with property developers, to safety regulations and the affordances and risks of different financial models. However, according to the initiative’s co-founder, Becky Brown, development of the Gunpowder Plot is contingent on funding, and she is sceptical about the likelihood of the Arts Council backing it – a concern that must also be tied to ACE’s opaqueness in the eyes of second-wave companies. Whatever the case, this would at best be a stop-gap in combatting what Brown and Watkins describe as a culture of secrecy among second-wave companies,<sup>46</sup> and must surely be followed by lobbying and activism that is more focused on effecting material change given the failure of public institutions to resolve the current precarity of the cultural industries. Furthermore, material change will only become efficacious once these institutions are regarded by theatre makers left behind by austerity as

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<sup>46</sup> Brown, interview; Watkins, interview.

vital means of protecting artistic freedoms and ingenuity in a diverse field of cultural production. Policy reform is not enough; the transformative impact of austerity has affected the very attitudes of theatre makers who have become content with preserving the conditions of their own precarity.

Reliance on commercial revenue and rejecting charitable status in the pursuit of profit are by no means limited to immersive theatre, but the rapidity of commercialisation in London is exacerbating its risks. This is made all the more worrying in light of form-specific risks linked to large up-front capital expenditure, and to working in off-site property developments. Professional and contractual relationships with big business leaves emerging theatre companies on the back foot when competing interests rub against one another, and the consequences can be disastrous. I am not suggesting that ACE and local government councils *should* have funded *The Hollow Hotel* in light of these risks. It is not likely that this particular work would have been funded even if the company had applied for public funding given its explicit gearing towards a commercial market. However, as a company still finding its feet, still working out its identity and with a keen interest in experimenting with immersive form, gearing content and style around the demands of the commercial sector rather than the demands of the public sector is a pragmatic and political decision informed by highly politicised material circumstances. Even if it does not fund the work itself, public funding bodies certainly need to recognise and respond to a cultural shift in attitude toward the public and private sectors that they have helped to propagate in their responses to austerity measures and promotion of a creative economy that is anything but 'resilient'. Also, the nature and magnitude of the risks at stake are either being misread by companies, or undervalued, and it is not just the companies that are set to suffer as a result; those working for these companies are affected worst of all. In circumstances such as these, where regulation falls short of the mark, and irrespective of a work's political or commercial orientation, the ethical obligations of *all* stakeholders in a precarious gig economy

need to be pulled into much sharper focus, ensuring that a robust system of checks and balances is instituted regardless of a company's size or experience, and that takes seriously the most basic commitments to workers' rights.

## **Conclusion**

This article has identified a shift in attitude toward the public and private sectors among a networked group of immersive theatre makers based in London, focusing on the work of companies who either formed or started to make immersive work in austerity Britain. I've argued that ACE's attempts to promote a more resilient creative industry has resulted in quite the opposite as a new generation of immersive theatre makers embrace highly risky or compromised funding streams and contractual arrangements in a saturated market for immersive experiences. As my analysis of *Inside Pussy Riot* suggests, appropriate revenue streams and venues are not just 'contextual' factors; they can seriously undermine a work's aims and ambitions, not least when an audience is invited to participate. Also, the circumstances surrounding differenceEngine's liquidation suggest a need for enforcing checks and balances that take proper account of workers who have very little say in the financial decisions that govern their interests and precarity. At the same time, if companies choose to embrace commercial markets, they should at the very least be prepared to operate according to regulations predicated on due diligence.

Despite dubious claims announcing its end, the impact of austerity is far from over.<sup>47</sup>

A transformed public sector is still putting pressure on theatre makers across the creative industries to position themselves as entrepreneurial collaborators with the private sector, and

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<sup>47</sup> See Benjamin Kentish, 'Theresa May declares "austerity is over" after eight years of cuts and tax increases', *The Independent*, 3 Oct. 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/theresa-may-austerity-end-over-speech-conservative-conference-tory-labour-a8566526.html>, (accessed 20 Dec. 2018).

immersive theatre makers are no exception. As Jane Trowell writes, this has resulted in a profound value-shift: ‘The only equivalent in the past century would be the founding of the Arts Council itself in 1946, which brought its own outcries from those who feared state interference. It also reframes what an artist is supposed to be, the skills required of artists, the kinds of artists and arts organisations that will thrive, and those that will wither. And those that will refuse, rebel, regroup and reimagine’.<sup>48</sup> DifferenceEngine is a clear example of a company that withered, and Les Enfants Terribles evidences the extent of a value shift that regards anarcho-punk and gross inequality in capitalist markets as compatible. Whether or not one wishes to make political art, *all* art is made politically, and its making has ethical consequences for artists, those who work for them, and especially in immersive settings for audiences who participate in a work’s realisation.

The introduction of austerity measures in Britain had a profound impact on the material conditions supporting the creative industries. However, as this article has demonstrated, it is not just policy reform that has participated in the current precarity of cultural production; austerity has also produced a change in how the public and private sectors are viewed and understood among a new generation of immersive theatre makers, a second wave that is today valorising entrepreneurial endeavour and commercial imperatives in a saturated market without recourse to the public sector. These theatre makers are actively pursuing an ethos of self-sufficiency that underplays enhanced reliance on private income streams. They are seeking out and expressing preferences for partnerships with the private sector, and are actively striving to build new markets and unearth new sources of non-grant income. Hence, they are aligning with these aspects of the Arts Council’s post-2010 policy agenda. However, only a few years after the Arts Council championed immersive theatre as its posterchild, the public sector is now

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<sup>48</sup> Jane Trowell, *Take the Money and Run? Some positions on ethics, business sponsorship and making art*, (London: Live Art Development Agency, 2013): 6.



being avoided altogether among theatre makers left behind by austerity, and the result falls far short of ‘resilience’. Limited support from the public sector has made a virtue of ‘going your own way’ at the cost of enhanced precarity, which presents a pressing challenge to those with a vested interest in a beleaguered public sector: namely, the restoration of faith in its institutions.