Light+ Collective Imaginings - EP1

Jamila Prowse [00:00:32] Collective imaginings is a light plus podcast series from Lighthouse, curated and hosted by me, Jamila, the roots of the series were planted in January 2020, although the thinking behind them predates even that. In the time that I have planned them, research them began dialogues with the collaborators. Whose words form them. The world we exist within has changed significantly during the eight months before we came to record the first episode. My thinking and approach as a curator has unravelled entirely due to my own learnings and reflections, as well as harmful experiences I have been through in the sector. I am no longer sure if I wish to curate. I am no longer sure of the value of having conversations in public. As I share these conversations with you, I have unraveled and doubted the meaning of them and their worth, so many times as cultural workers; we are routinely bound and compromised in what we can share publicly. Although in this series, I was given free creative control, a rare thing. Many of us are still bound by contractual clauses. Even as I make a series about our embodied experiences of harm, I cannot explicitly name the beast I refer to. So where does the value in the series stem from? Throughout the series, I'll be speaking to cultural workers, including artists and curators who have been through and continue to think through their own processes of learning and unlearning resistance and radical imagining. Their work and ideas have helped me to better understand the reasons I was originally drawn and connected to art-making and cultural organising. The conversations that follow are not complete, exhaustive or final. They are snippets into possibilities and imaginings which have helped me to better understand myself and my positioning in the world. I hope they might help you reach insights and learnings of your own. This series was originally intended as an open resource for people interested in or entering into or working within the arts of personal accounts, of navigating the sector and strategies for resistance, self-preservation and survival. In many ways, a series I wish I would have had when starting out in the sector as someone who has continually felt lost, overwhelmed and squashed, and one that would also be invaluable to me today. I have come to realise through these conversations and my wider research that survival is not and will never be enough. We need to be able to do more than survive. Even still, I hope that these personal accounts come together in a collective radical imagining for the art world we hope to bring into fruition. Collective imaginings stems from and is a continuation of thinking which took place in and around Eva Rowsons 2019 curatorial residency at Lighthouse. Who's doing the washing up? Where's the sink? Which included a light plus podcast of the same name.

Jamila Prowse [00:03:36] In this episode, I'll be speaking to a curator and co-founder of La Sala, a feminist collective space for biodiversity, sustainability and care. Lucy Lopez and curator, producer and researcher Rachel Noel, who is presently the convenor of the Young People's Programme at Tate, where she led the research project. Where does culture happen? Between Tent in Rotterdam and Tate and London. We'll be discussing what it might mean to practise from a place of care in the arts and why it's key to prioritise space for downtime and rest as a curator.

Jamila Prowse [00:04:09] Thank you both for joining me. It's quite a strange way to be doing this because we're obviously doing everything remotely and actually none of us has met each other in person before, have we?

Lucy Lopez [00:04:22] No, no.

Jamila Prowse [00:04:26] So, yeah, I'm really pleased to be having this conversation with you. OK, so how are you both feeling? Lucy.

Lucy Lopez [00:04:35] I feel good. Yeah.

Jamila Prowse [00:04:39] And Rachel, how are you doing?

Rachel Noel [00:04:41] I think I'm good. I think I'm good. I'm happy that it's Friday and the sun is shining. Feeling calm.

Jamila Prowse [00:04:47] Yeah, it's nice. I have the sun coming into the room. I'm in. So, I'm like kind of basking at the same time.

Jamila Prowse [00:04:54] Um, so Lucy and Rachel, you both have experience of working within institutions, but you also prioritise less formalised ways of working and reference cultural meeting places outside of the institution in your work. So, Lucy and La Sala founding manifesto. This Is the Kitchen Table. And Rachel. And where does culture happen? The street, the corner shop, the dance floor our various homes all referenced. So, I want to know what is possible when we organise and come together in these informal spaces. Lucy, do you want to start us off?

Lucy Lopez [00:05:29] Yeah, sure. Um, in general, I mean, you mentioned La Sala specifically, but in general, I've always kind of tried to prioritise those informal spaces of gathering and thinking together and seeing that as a kind of antidote to the more like formal institutional environment. So often that's meant when working within institutions using like architecture and design to build structures or sort of temporary infrastructures which might sit inside of institutions, but also of a different kind of modes of learning or being together and really foregrounding that informality and I guess togetherness over a more polished form of exhibition-making or display. But I think for me, it's also a way to think about how that space can function as a political space. And so, learning something from all of the wonderful artistic practises that kind of function in that in-between space and use that as a way to like, imagine new worlds, new ways of being. Yeah, but you asked specifically about La Sala, which is a little space in Nottingham that myself and Alba Colomo have initiated. It's not an exhibition space at all and it's in normal times would have been a space for workshops, for talks and dinners and for us to work together and with others. And I guess, yeah, Alba and I really came together through thinking about what was not working, what was malfunctioning in institutional spaces. And when we started talking about La Sala, the idea of the kitchen table as a space for informality, cooking, eating, preserving, talking, that was really at the heart of what we were imagining. And I guess that space just kind of offers something more familiar, a different way to welcome people in and something else really nice. I was just talking to Alba about this earlier that she was telling me about a phrase from she spent some time recently in the Canary Islands and some friends of hers who have a biodynamic farm there they use this phrase. It's like toread de Tierra, which is about like getting your hands in the soil in the earth or taking from the earth and talking about how as a way of welcoming someone, they invite you to basically get your hands dirty. And I think that was really interesting for us, like the idea that when we invite someone into La Sala, and you have that kind of kitchen space, you're inviting someone to be part of that. So, to cook or ferment with us whilst we talk. And that felt really important somehow. Yeah.

Jamila Prowse [00:07:58] Yeah. It's interesting because I suppose as artwork, as we find ourselves in these more traditional spaces quite often, and I'm constantly thinking about whether that kind of comfortability ever comes of like going into an invidulated, white-walled space. I'm so self-conscious moving around those spaces, so aware of myself. And

something completely different happens when you bring food or something that is more, as you say, familiar into that, setting a kind of comfortability and this kind of organic ness to the conversations kind of being more free flowing. Do you kind of feel yourself drawn, Lucy, much more towards those more informal spaces, then kind of more traditional, institutionalised gallery spaces?

Lucy Lopez [00:08:47] Yeah, absolutely. And I suppose. Well, I think I think we've all experienced that, haven't we? Like what you speak of that kind of how it feels when you enter that kind of space where you maybe you don't feel welcome. And I think it is about welcoming and there's something about doing something together, entering a space and being. Part of something or doing something with your hands that it just breaks through that. Yeah, that that feeling of formality somehow and for me personally, I've always appreciated those kinds of interactions and spaces. So, I think that's I guess that's part of how we wanted to open that space out to people.

Jamila Prowse [00:09:29] And Rachel. How about you? Because I suppose you have this experience of treading these two very kinds of, I mean, they can be complementary in some ways, but also quite antithetical spaces of kind of the institution, but also these far less formal spaces. What do you feel as possible when we kind of meet and organise in those the more informal spaces?

Rachel Noel [00:09:55] I think it's I think a lot of my work sits at the I suppose the intersection between the kind of the institutional and the much more kind of communal, the familiar. And I think it's really interesting Lucy that you mentioned welcome so much because I think that's something that, yeah, really centre in my work. And I think a lot of my work is centred around conditions actually and thinking about environments that kind of allow us and allow people to be the true selves. You know, we all know how to be in a home, for example. And I was really influenced by Abondance Matanda's essay, the first gallery I knew of black homes, which I just think is such a wonderful makes it such a wonderful kind of series of connections between culture and the gathering of culture, the creation of culture, the consumption of culture, the display of culture, and how that kind of starts in the home. And I just yeah, I think I'm really interested in the way that environments allow us to be indifferent spaces and what that can enable. So, through the project that you've mentioned, Where Does Culture Happen? I suppose we have been really interested in exploring, I suppose, the relationship between the gallery or the arts organisation to the communities. And when we started that project, we had a conversation about, I suppose, kind of tracing an artwork from the artist studio, from creation into those into kind of the arts organisations, galleries, museums, etcetera. And actually, how many of those through the process of processes of exclusion wouldn't make it. I think something that I'm interested in is, I suppose, in a way that art speaks to us in ways that language can't. I think there's something really similar around space as well. And what we kind of allow ourselves to do or what is possible within spaces. I think the conversation, for example, we have in our personal spaces, in our community spaces, in our local spaces, in spaces that feel familiar to us, are completely different to those in which we don't feel welcome. And that's what I'm really interested in, is, I suppose, the kind of conditions around those spaces and what their spaces can allow to be possible.

Jamila Prowse [00:12:27] Yeah, I mean, it's interesting because I guess a lot of what you both are drawing out is the sense of belonging and who belongs in cultural spaces, but also what kind of cultural output we view as valuable within society. And, of course, I mean, the essay that you mentioned, Rachel, which is a really beautiful essay that I returned to quite regularly and is actually published as part of the publication that you

made with Where Does Culture Happen? But the sense that actually there is artmaking and kind of cultural value and so many of our familiar spaces that are kind of outside of these institutional settings that occur in our homes and on our streets, like in our clubs, at our kitchen tables. There's a huge array of places that we kind of connect culturally and connect and creative ways. And while we're on that project, Rachel, I just I wanted to talk about the idea of the locality that kind of comes through, because when you were doing research around, Where Does Culture Happen? You were working between Tent in Rotterdam and Tate in London. And I wonder, how did you build kind of connections and community between those two localities?

Rachel Noel [00:13:45] Yeah, it's a really good question. And I suppose the I think the wonderful thing about that project was it was, you know, in theory, on paper, it was created by two institutions. But actually, the process of creating that project came about in a very informal way. And it started, I suppose, with kind of real relationships between programmers in both cities. And I suppose it was unusual for us in terms of its kind of it was natural you know, it started every conversation and came about naturally rather than, you know, being a funding bid or kind of more formal beginning to a project. So, it came about through the conversations in spaces like we've been speaking about. So, in kitchen and kitchen spaces, around kitchen tables, in bars and pubs, etc... And I think something that kind of followed through the life of that project was really about kind of exploring the life of the conversation rather than, you know, starting out wanting to kind of create a project and create a community. And actually, the conversations we were having in the very beginning were about this idea of the gallery as a civic space and its relationship to the city. And that project was between two institutions. So, one very large in London, one much smaller in Rotterdam. And actually, they both faced the very, very similar processes of inclusion and exclusion in terms of the work that would be shown, the staff in the workforce, the audiences in those spaces. So, we were looking to explore a similar question in terms of how those spaces related directly to those communities who are producing culture. And Rotterdam is the most diverse city per capita in Europe. So, we've got very interesting and rich diverse populations. But you know, obviously, the work that is shown, not necessarily representing that. So, I think what was interesting was it started with a kind of very informal series of conversations. And actually, I think what happened through that project was, was that we didn't actually set out to start a community, but that kind of happened as through the process. And again, I think it comes back to the conditions of the project, so very much being led by young people, young thinkers, young makers, young cultural producers in each space, and then really having a blank canvas, if you like, with the project. I think I mean; my practice is working with young people and quite often that can be when working with institutions that could be quite a kind of strong set of restrictions that actually young people are having to work within. And this being an international exchange allowed a lot more freedom, a lot more, I suppose, distance from an institution as well for young people to experiment and lead and connect with each other around something between both cities. And the project evolved over three or four years. So we did a number of exchanges and run workshops involved artists and makers and thinkers, community leaders, activists in each city. And with the final leg, we invited some people in each city to invite us to a place where they felt the culture happened. And so, it was very much about exploring, you know, the very spaces. So, we were in London, we were in Peckham. We were looking at the new development in Battersea, interestingly. And the way that art and public art has been used to tell a narrative to the city and to the residents. And I think, yeah, there was I suppose there was a kind of set of conditions around that project that allowed a community to emerge. And I think, yeah, I think we learnt a lot from that project as well, working in a large institution in London. And the, you know, I suppose the kind of protocols around projects and the way in which learning

projects are produced and actually working with a much smaller institution, a much smaller organisation in Rotterdam. And the freedom that that enabled, I think, really allowed us to. I suppose to bring a sense of informality to the project and to really focus on the connections between people and the conversations between people being the work and being the project and the experimenting with kind of spaces and how. Yeah, I suppose the culture that we are exploring that maybe isn't making its way into our cultural institutions is happening in nightclubs and around kitchen tables and in local restaurants. And that being part of the work.

Jamila Prowse [00:19:12] I mean, it's interesting how you draw that out as well, the idea of the connections between the people being the work itself, because that really comes across in the kind of publication that you produce. There are these really beautiful conversations between the people involved and the project that is kind of happening across these two localities. You know, sometimes one person from Rotterdam, one person from London, and they are drawing out really organically all these connections between the ways that they work, the ways that they kind of exists and respond to culture and society around them. And is that something that kind of stayed with you? Because I suppose simultaneously you were building all those connections with those people and seeing all of these new kinds of journeys and routes come through these two communities?

Rachel Noel [00:20:02] It really did. And it was something that kind of again, that we didn't necessarily set out. You know, we set out to run an exchange programme between young people in London and Rotterdam to explore this question, Where Does Culture Happen? And we cited young people as young researchers who were kind of capturing and holding these conversations and speaking to so many different people in each city to kind of interrogate this question. But I suppose there's kind of one of those unexpected outcomes of the project was that you know, there's the young people, many of the young people are still in contact with each other, are still collaborating with each other connections have been made between some of the artists and young people that are continuing to this day. I'm definitely still very involved and connected to a lot of the people from that project, too. And just I think really for me, a really beautiful kind of output of the project was in the final year we hosted a group in Rotterdam and usually we kind of jump straight into programming or there would be a far more kind of logistical finding people in their rooms, their accommodation, et cetera. Whereas we decided to start this time with, I suppose, a kind of more formalised, informal welcome. So that involved kind of hosting a space within the gallery. And we had roti from one of my neighbours who runs a roti business. We had food, we had drinks. We invited a researcher who is exploring similar themes to us, but within India and working with young people and smartphones and technology and doing lots of really interesting work in terms of where culture happens in India to give us a presentation. And so that kind of spearheaded and started the conversation. But that space, I think, really spoke to me in terms of where this project and how this project had kind of started as a series of kind of informal conversations. And it had had formal moments. We've had panel discussions. We'd we produce films. There's been events at both galleries. But actually, that this to me felt like the work and the connections that were made there, I think that feels like the work. And we have this conversation when we were putting together the publication in terms of who do we want this conversation to be for, you know, who do we want to put together this publication for?

[00:22:46] And initially, there was a conversation about it being for directors and decision-makers in the cultural sector. And after a while, it just became really clear to us that actually this project is actually about connecting these communities in both cities. And we

want to be able to through this publication to connect those conversations in a much more formal way. So, some of the people who are in contact with each other in that publication may not have necessarily met, but they've both they had both previously contributed to a conversation. So, it felt like us. The publication was a way of bringing those conversations and those communities together.

Jamila Prowse [00:23:31] Yeah, I think that really comes through in a beautiful way. And it's interesting that when you're talking about this, there is this kind of sense of the whole project stemming from this really organic place. And it becomes clear that that's so much more can be sometimes possible when you don't start from this really formalised base of kind of responding to funding bids and having to kind of gear or project around the specific outputs, the specific people that it's going to intend to reach because so much is unforeseen. And I suppose that actually, this is a process Lucy that you're going through as well with Alba and La Sala, in terms of thinking through, how you actually kind of begin those stories and begin the connections and roots of a space, and when you talk about it and your you've produced this really wonderful kind of founding manifesto of some of the ways that you want your work to kind of stem from and the different things that you want to speak to and hold yourself to. And you talk about this idea of prioritising the slow fermentation of an institution. I'm wondering if you can draw out a bit more where that idea comes from and what brought you to it.

Lucy Lopez [00:24:59] It's at such a different place. I mean, talking about Tent or Tate and then talking about something that's so brand new. But I think there's a few things to pull out there. And I suppose, yeah, I think for both Alba and I in part is a reaction to institutions we've worked within the past. And I suppose thinking about being this idea of slowness has been really important to us. And of course, like at the moment, there's a whole other layer to that. You know, a lot of people have been forced to be slow in a way that isn't necessarily that helpful or, you know, it's sort of something we've all had to work through this year in different ways. The idea of slowness, also the idea of care and what that means now. But I think for us, it's about resisting that kind of rush for overproduction. So really thinking about it as a very slow beginning to something that we hope would kind of continue to be a really porous organisation. Institution sounds really grand, but, you know, it's very it will always be small. I think it will grow from being Alba and I to including others, but it will always be quite small and porous. But yeah, I guess the slowness is thinking about a kind of antidote to that real sense of burnout and also extraction. Yeah, I suppose, I was just thinking about in terms of what slowness means now. Also, what care means now and there's a really beautiful text that was written by Johanna Hedva in the sort of the beginning of the lockdown period, I think. Called Get Well Soon about the fact that like at the moment we can't deny care like there's a demand for care for the first time. There's a demand to kind of put these things front and centre. And at the same time, there's a total lack of ability of our societies to meet that demand for care. And I suppose that sort of thinking about what it would mean if we did demand that if we continued to demand that care, which I think, yeah. Is sort of something that unfolds in a slower way and in terms of fermentation, we've used this as a way of thinking about beginnings and how to begin. Well, so thinking about the time, the care, the conditions needed to build an institution or an organisation. And I guess there's a certain uncertainty to fermentation. So, you can take care with the different elements, which are the different inputs. But ultimately the outcome is unknown. And it felt really important to hold onto that unknown aspect. So, to bring together the different inputs, but allow the outcome to kind of surprise us, I guess. And I think in part that is a reaction to that kind of rush to produce.

[00:28:00] So we wanted to really take the time to think about and what would be useful now, what kind of organisation would make sense. And so much of the time organisations with really radical seeming statements or programmes are actually in practice not working with those same ideals. That's something I think we're already familiar with. So, I suppose it's a way of taking that initial process of becoming, really slowly and being really responsive. Yeah, I guess another part of that we've been speaking about the idea of caretakers and caregivers and what that means and how those phrases sometimes mean the same thing. And we're working on bringing together a group of people to work with us as sort of caretakers to think through what La Sala could become. So that's a really important part of that process.

Jamila Prowse [00:28:52] Yeah, it's interesting because you're talking about so many ways that you were kind of holding yourself to those roots and to the manifesto that you have kind of begun with knowing that the ideas around it might change and evolve over time. But, you know, as you say, we're very used to the sense of. Institutions may be presenting in one way to the public but being very different behind closed doors and the ways that they operate internally, and I think that there's so much that comes through in the sense of the ways that you're bringing other people in as caretakers in the way that you've just described, but also the degree of transparency that has taken place. You've said that you're going to do things like make all of your budgets publicly available and just have this really clear view of how your internal structures are all kind of growing and operating. Is that also a response to the kind of experiences you've had in maybe bigger settings?

Lucy Lopez [00:30:00] Yeah, I think. I suppose let's say it's certainly a response to practises that we see around us, and some of that is our personal experiences, but it's also the experiences of our peers and our friends, you know, and I think I mentioned already. But that discrepancy between what's presented and then what's really happening is the thing that feels the most hypocritical and so that through being transparent about those things, even though, you know, we're so tiny, so there's not much to be transparent about yet, but it feels like a way of kind of from the off, just really foregrounding that those things should be in communication, you know, like the things that we are researching and programming around our conversations around, like planetary care and mental health and reproductive labour. And so, to really instil that in our working practises, that's something that needs to be made visible. And I think from the beginning.

Jamila Prowse [00:31:05] Yeah, and I suppose there is this kind of protective element which comes through which Rachel is also present in your practice and the ways that you kind of hold space for the people that you work with. Lucy, when you were talking, then you spoke about this idea of slowness and also about this idea of being an antidote to the kind of overworking practices that exist in our sector and also this kind of, Art world, burnout that takes place. And in previous conversations that the three of us have had, that's something that's come up for us as well of even, you know, in the short time that we've been in dialogue, ensuring that we can take the time to actually protect our energy and take real-time off and take time, that's maybe outside of the city in nature and kind of reconnect to ourselves. And it's interesting coming from this context of the last few months of being in government lockdown because of COVID and the sense that actually the art world really hasn't slowed down at all. It's really continued to have this really quite intensive output online. So, you know, even in this moment of reflection, there isn't this slowing down kind of sector wide. So, I'm wondering that personally, for both of you as Art workers, what boundaries do you kind of set for yourselves in order to sustain a practise and actually protect against Art world burnout rates? Rachel, should we start with you?

Rachel Noel [00:32:38] Yeah, sure. And I think it's a really, really good question. And I feel like it's something that we need to start thinking about a lot earlier when people are coming into the sector because I feel like it's something that we only come across when it happens to us. And it's far too late at that point. But yeah, I think, yeah, there's a lot of processes that I have kind of over the past few years have really found. And some of them are just really practical. So, one thing that I always try to do is really at the beginning of the year, sit down in January and sit down and plan to make sure that there is time off every three months that feels like it's just a personal boundary that I've drawn. And it really helps. I always notice when it's getting much closer to that three months and it's just ensuring that you've got regular time to step away and taking the time for yourself as well to just plan it in plot it out so that you don't have to run up against finding yourself burnt out and needing to put time off when you can't afford to take the time off for another month or so. So that's something that I always aim to do at the beginning of the year and something that I found just it's just one of those things that you can think about once and never again. And then, you know, you've got that time back then, I think finding space for yourself and your ideas as well is really important. And you're reading your research. And I think that feels like working in a large institution is just the thing that always runs away.

[00:34:17] It's the thing that you clock in for Friday morning and it never, you know, never gets there. And before, you know, it's the weekend and it's Monday again. So ensuring that there is time and I'm a really big fan of just holding a slot in my diary to just protect, protect my time and protect my space so that I think just putting in and holding space for yourself. And I found that over lockdown recently. Actually, that's been something I've been able to do a lot more at lunchtime, whereas usually we're in quite a busy space and it's quite sociable, which is brilliant, but it often means it's quite hard to kind of remove yourself from that space, to give yourself the time to go away and read or see some art or listen to a podcast, so that's something that overlooked. I've kind of re-engineered to be within my lunchtime. And again, I use outlook for all of this. So just super practical. But I just put it in, and I'll just pop in whatever it is, the articles or as things come up, I can kind of put them into my lunchtime so that I know that, yeah, I'm giving myself time to read the things I want to.

[00:35:32] And I think I think I'm constantly kind of reprioritising, you know, and I think this feels ever more prevalent in a world that is just is changing. And it feels like one minute everything is moving so slowly and is paused and the next minute everything is kind of running away with us. And I think constantly kind of taking the time to check in on what your week looks like, how you're feeling as well is something I'm always asking people that I work with and looking to kind of office space for conversation or check-ins, especially kind of in the wake of the pandemic. And lockdown and it's all kind of moving into working remotely and knowing, of course, that we're all in such different situations at home and have very different home working lives. And in the wake of Black Lives Matter, you know, just checking in the way that I try to kind of hold space for other people and check in with them just to see if they're OK and if a space for a conversation would be good. Kind of doing that for yourself as well, because it's not something we ask ourselves very often. I don't think, you know, are you OK? And what do you need? Is there you know; do I just need to just clear some of these meetings out of my diary? Because I'm just I'm starting to get really burned out or just need to focus on this one thing or it just, you know, I'm going to have to book a day off next week. So, yeah, constantly kind of checking in with yourself as well. And I think also kind of just exercising that flexibility. I think that's something that in the last couple of weeks for me particularly as well as we kind of.

[00:37:23] You know to move into space with the pandemic where we, in the beginning, it was all so sudden and so, you know, so I think it felt we were kind of tied to those government announcements every day. And there was a kind of rhythm and everything was so, so big and changing so fast. And then we're now in a kind of new space where I suppose we've kind of gotten used to a certain part of lookdown. But there's still a lot of unanswered questions. There's still a lot that we don't know. So I think just allowing yourself the flexibility to just to be able to just stop or to just recognise that we're still living in a time of such unprecedented change and that, you know, sometimes that can that, you know, all of those questions and all of that thinking that goes on in our minds builds up as well. So just to kind of sit with that and ensure that, yeah, we're thinking about yourself.

Jamila Prowse [00:38:26] Yeah, I mean, part of the reason that I wanted to do the series is just to have an opportunity to speak to people that I really am inspired by their work, but also just to actually ask these questions and have those bits of advice myself, because I guess it's something, we're all constantly trying to figure out is how to navigate that space, especially when we don't have any kind of blueprint or training around how to care for ourselves and one another. Lucy, what kind of strategies have you developed to kind of protect against Art world burnout?

Lucy Lopez [00:39:01] It's such an important. And I would echo Rachel. I think a lot of the time this is something that we come to after that has happened and when it's too late. And I certainly, you know, my kind of first institutional curator job, I had a really serious burnout and various other things connected to that. And so, I suppose since then I've really had to prioritise other parts of life or rather deprioritise work for me on a really practical level like I'm just trying to swim outside as much as possible, which in Birmingham you have to be a bit creative for. But yeah. In Rivers or in Lidos in the sea when I can get there. But that's a really like kind of personal thing. I suppose, also, you know, I've spent the last four years doing a PhD, so as well as working freelance alongside that. And amongst that, there's, you know, it can kind of take over everything. But at the same time, you're in control of your own time frame in a way that I hadn't been before. And that can be really helpful. And so, in a way, just not I think knowing that maybe like that institutional framework was not what I needed and being OK with stepping outside of that and trying to do things a bit differently. With La Sala, for example, we've sort of tried to prioritise those, as I said earlier, like different ways of kind of being together, whether that's like saying and cooking something and or working on growing things together. And I suppose finding those sorts of spaces also within work that is more. Almost circumventing the thing that's that is burning you out. You know, we don't actually have to work in ways that induce burnout. And I think that part of the issue is, is the institutions that are causing that environment. And I guess for me, friendships and alliances, those kinds of friendships that are sustaining have really allowed me to keep going. And I feel like along the way we sort of gather our own almost alternative Art world, like the people that you actually want to be in conversation with. And it really helps me to think of that and the peers who are doing this kind of work.

Rachel Noel [00:41:31] Just to echo your point, Lisa, on the friendships and the alternative art world as well. I just I think that's such an important one. I suppose you build your own community of people that you want to have these conversations with and people that energise you and whether that's kind of within work or outside, it just feels like such an important one. And I've definitely over the past, you know, during the pandemic had many moments of kind of I suppose you know, where your hope feels compromised or you feel you feel that burnout coming or you just feel, yeah, I suppose there are things that can happen sometimes that feel like they are kind of. Having a great impact on your work and it can feel really heavy. And then having a conversation with a group of like-minded people

can suddenly just boost you full of energy and your back, and that's quite amazing actually. I definitely find a lot of energy and drive and nourishment from like-minded people.

Jamila Prowse [00:42:45] Yeah. It's interesting, isn't it, because I found like having gone from working in a more kind of traditional institutional setting to working as a freelancer and kind of setting my own time. It takes practice to unlearn all of those kinds of restrictions and that actually you can carve out time and space for yourself. And I'm making notes as you go to say like, oh, yeah, that's a good idea. I should do that. I should carve out time and that way. And I guess it's really nice then to have this conversation with you both because I suppose so much is about understanding different. Strategies with each other and kind of envisioning those ways to protect ourselves, but also to protect this collective space that we hold within the Arts that maybe is less formal, but also is more caring and has these ways to really connect to what we need as human beings. So, when you're talking about those kinds of alliances and the ways that we collectivise as well, it brings up really interesting points around kind of the ways that we kind of practise and extend care in our communities and collectively throughout the Art world. So how do you both practise care for your peers and colleagues within your work? Lucy, do you want to start us off?

Lucy Lopez [00:44:17] Sure. Yeah. I mean, I think this feels like really extra pertinent right now. And a lot of the time, of course, those working relationships are really intuitive. I guess I try to always foreground care to consider if I'm inviting an artist, a designer to work with me or an institution that I'm working with, I would always prioritise my well-being. So, this might be making sure I'm aware of any access needs and that those are heard. Jamila, you were talking to me recently about the idea of an access rider, which is really brilliant. And it also might be making sure that they're comfortable within the institution that I'm kind of holding and making space for them there and thinking about how I can best facilitate that relationship. Yeah, there are certain things that should go without saying, like making sure the rate of pay is fair, for example. But the other side of that, which I think is equally important and equally neglected, is that the working structures within organisations, institutions and between management and staff teams, I think we see a total lack of care. And at the moment that's really visible in the kind of pay discrepancies and also redundancies which are really visible right now, as well as the disconnect between the statements that certain organisations made about Black Lives Matter, for example, and then the realities of working in those institutions. A lot of the time, I think, in working relationships should be really simple, like paying people while respecting, valuing their time, paying attention to things like maternity leave, sick pay, mental health. But yeah, it's just so often neglected, and that practise is so, so widespread. There's a lot of work to be done.

Jamila Prowse [00:46:01] Yeah. And I guess that that's something that through all of us talking as well, it's something that we've all been through and we've been on the receiving end of needing to set those boundaries ourselves. And what is lost when they are not present. Rachel, I mean, you work with so many people and have to have to think about so many people. When you were working, what are the different techniques you have for the kind of practising and extending that care to your peers and colleagues?

Rachel Noel [00:46:30] Yeah, I think I'm very similar to Lucy. I think prioritising well-being is always something that I aim to centre. And I think within that as well, practising equity and just understanding that care looks very different for people with different, whether it's access needs, whether it's inviting artists to work with us in an institution and I suppose

sharing the history, the environment, the kind of the current status of the institution and the environment that they are coming into something that I always aim to do. And the team I work with always aim to offer or create safer spaces. And that really starts with a kind of check-in at the very beginning. So, yeah, I think you're totally right in terms of the kind of volume. It's a large programme. There's a lot of young people. It's something that we just build into our processes. And I think processes is something that I talk about all the time and it sounds so dry, but it's something that I think when you're working in institutions and we are thinking about, care is really important. And that can involve when we're recruiting young people to programme that we ensure. Yeah. Where they're at with mental health, whether in terms of their basic needs, who we need to be able to contact. I think as Lucy mentioned, paying people fairly, having kind of regular conversations with people about, I suppose, managing their expectations as well. The programme I run, young people are paid, but there were also elements of that programme that offer learning experiences. So it's, I suppose, I think the overriding kind of thing for me is about being. It's about being a human, even though it's a large programme and a large institution and I think this is the kind of constant trap that institutions fall down, which is that through working together and in large teams and for a large programme, the sense the human approach could be lost is something I always aim to centre is, yeah, I suppose a human relationship and a human sense of care. So really understanding who you're inviting into this space and what they might need from you. And sometimes that can look very different from the way that the institution that you are working with might consider care. And I think its kind of constantly carving out that space and constantly holding space for those people and understanding those people, having a human relationship with those people in order to be able to provide the best possible care for them to be able to do their job or their space or participate in the programme and it with us themselves.

Jamila Prowse [00:49:33] Yeah, absolutely, and I mean, it is it's interesting the ways that you talk about building that in your programme, because I think that in my experience, I've often worked in these kinds of self-proclaimed fast-paced environments that that kind of constantly lose this time for reflection and attentiveness to the needs of the people, whether that is the kind of internal team working there or the audience is coming in or the artists that you were working with, so much can be lost. So, I think that brings us really nicely onto our final question, which is something that, Lucy, you actually asked me several weeks ago, is this idea of what would a caring institution look like to both of you? Rachel, do you want to start us off?

Rachel Noel [00:50:21] Sure, I think just going back to that human approach, I think that is something that I really think quite a lot about. And I think often when we see an institution and institutions behaviour and you think about the ways in which we hold relationships or we kind of care for each other between individuals, I think it's about scaling that up. So, I think one of the strongest things for me is Mia Mingus, who's a transformative justice writer, has created incredible resource around apologising and the four stages of apologising. So, the first is self-reflection and then apologising and then repairing and creating that change in the behaviour. And I think for me, humility is really important aspect for institutions to be able to hold their hands up and say, we got this wrong, we've caused harm and we're sorry and we're going to do something about it. And I think also, I think having a sense of a I think the sense of kind of flexibility and the ability to be able to, I suppose, shift and move in order to accommodate difference, I think something, you know, I suppose being aware of kind of intersectionality, the different needs of different audiences, different staff members, different artists, different people who might be engaging with the institution is so important. And I think one that's able to build genuine trust, you know, and the kind of. Build genuine relationships and speak with a genuine

voice and listen to people. These are public institutions. Well, if we're thinking of public institutions, for example, these are places we pay our taxes for, you know, and culture is a human right. This is something that we all have access to, and we all have the ability to learn from each other. And yeah, for me, I think the listening being open and humble is so important to institutions remaining relevant and being able to move with new generations and new forms of thinking, ways of thinking, ways of being in the world.

Jamila Prowse [00:52:58] Yeah, absolutely, I think I mean, Mia Mingus as well her resources, are a really good way for art workers as well, to think through when accountability has actually been practised in a productive way with people in the institutions they work within. Lucy, how about you?

Lucy Lopez [00:53:18] Yeah, I mean, it's an interesting one. And like you said Jamila, you know, it's a question I asked you, and that's partly because it is pretty much the question of my PhD is thinking about what a caring practise in an Art institution would look like. And I guess in one way, I feel like it doesn't exist and certainly not in any of the institutions that we've got. I think for me, it would look like an equitable institution, a truly intersectional team, a pay structure that everyone has a role in determining, prioritising well-being overproduction and a real commitment to contribute positively to the future of the planet as well. Like all of this, you know, is maybe a bit of a dream. And sometimes the answer I get, too, is like, that's not maybe that's not possible within the constraints of like of our society, our government having to navigate the funding structures that we have, like living in extreme neoliberalism. All of these things actually make it difficult for institutions to work in ways that are truly caring. I think I would agree with a lot of what Rachel just said, but I suppose that it feels like public institutions, while they should be accessible to all or not, not in the same way, at least like people have so many different barriers to accessing those spaces. I suppose for me, the main kind of aspects of what that caring institution would be that it would be responsive, that it exists to fulfil a needs and that it has a working structure that's really reflective of its programme.

Jamila Prowse [00:55:03] Thank you both for having this conversation with me. I'm really pleased to kind of start here and start with you both.

Rachel Noel [00:55:11] Thanks, Jamila.

Lucy Lopez [00:55:12] My pleasure.

Rachel Noel [00:55:14] It's been so good.

Jamila Prowse [00:55:16] In the next episode of Collective Imaginings, I'll be speaking to curator and film programmer Jemma Desai about her research. This Work Isn't For Us, which reflects on her experiences of working on the film and public sector for the past ten years and what it means to be a BIPOC cultural worker navigating why institutional settings.

[00:55:38] Thank you for listening. If we are to leverage real meaningful change within the cultural sector, we need to begin from a place of collectivising in order to dismantle and oppose the hostile and often inhospitable institutional landscape which has long been the norm. If you've enjoyed this podcast, please subscribe and rate us on iTunes or wherever you get your podcasts. It helps other people to find us. You can find out more on Lighthouse's website, Lighthouse dot org dot UK thanks to Platform B and our producers Elijah Peart, Nats Spada and Ed Apivor.