A love letter from Paris

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I was asked to write something for a panel discussion on Art Agency Action produced by NAVA at First Draft. It was dutifully delivered and beautifully enunciated by Bird, partner in crime with the Money Laundering Ladiez. Here is the original text. Also you can listen to the full panel and discussion on Nava’s soundcloud [here](https://soundcloud.com/nava-visualarts).

***DEAR LOVERS,***

I write this to you as a hot sweaty love letter from Paris, the city of romance and adults who are allowed to stay out late at night. As you gather in Sydney I am meeting with a large group of dreamers and makers who are part of a growing movement of discontent with the economy. This is a global movement variously called the solidarity economy, peer to peer, or transition, post-growth economies, or simply ‘the commons’. It is not called the share economy because some dickheads from Silicon valley ruined that word already. Although as I scribe from this venue bedecked in an astro turfed and bamboo veneer decor, I am not 100 per cent convinced the viral bandwagon of collaborative consumption and positive capitalism hasn’t already entered the building. It feels a bit like Vivid and TEDX combined their event and asked Hillsong if they could do the catering and the lighting/Sound in a big circus tent at Tumbalong Park in Darling Harbour. ANYHOO the message is pretty clear: we need some new models.

From bitcoin to data commons to ride share to co-working, many conventional business providers are looking to cooperatives and social enterprises to help support or to benefit their communities. They speak of a things like triple bottom line, and collaboration, and social engagement. To those of us who are barely make their living from the arts, these are not novel ideas. But their rapid uptake by the corporate sector is interesting to reflect on.

Why are other sectors and business having this conversation about changing the business model, and the arts isn’t? Especially when it never worked for us in the first place. So in my recent suite of works exploring art and economy, I have been pondering the following questions:

1. What specific elements of the conventional business model don’t work for the arts?

2. What do artists in the small to medium sector already do well when organising their own production and distribution?

3. How can we shape our economy with the particular language we use to describe what we do as specific and important?

4. Who is speaking for artists and art workers and is their decision making informed by their practice?

*MONEY LAUNDERING*

These questions have helped shape MONEY LAUNDERING which is the obvious name you give to a quest to build the worlds first artist run laundromat. The idea is pretty simple but as yet untested. But in theory it is being designed to fit the business model to the practice—not the other way around. The artist run laundromat is a response to the feast and famine which is characteristic of the gig-economy. It will result in a functional commercial enterprise, governed by a shared equity model, that will prioritise the artist’s working life as a practising artist by offering unconditional flexible paid work (as a laundromat attendant) to cover living costs during periods where the artist is in between gigs or selectively inactive. The physical space of the laundromat will also function as a hub for artist activity and presentations, as well as being an ongoing site for experimentation in artist led practice and fair-share economic models.

This idea is a practical idea underpinned by some serious reflection about no longer wanting to simply do the best we can within the sad and limited prospects of an economy designed by a handful of people with terrible imaginations and suspect motives. Artists need to come up with new models to survive, but these models need to come from a thorough overhaul and redesign of the entire economy.

*AN ARTIST LED ECONOMY*

I want to propose a set of principles for a practice-led economy; this an idea that ties decision making to the bodies that will enact them and/or be impacted by them. It a design that eliminates the role of the manager/middleman, as the man who stands outside of the embodied practice, whose decisions are executed by others, and whose body will not be affected by any adverse fallout but instead benefit from the negative impact it has on others. We need to consider an alternative to this where the body and the practice are tethered to decision making.

*HOW AN ARTIST LED ECONOMY BEHAVES*

Here are some elements that I have started to write about as forming a set of values and ideas to articulate how an artist led economy would behave.

**Interdependence**

It recognises that its spheres of labour and social are messy and conflated, and bound up in reproducing each other.

**Relational**

The bee produces honey but this is many ways a by product to its real function which is to pollinate. The artists economy works better when it is considered as a conduit and fertiliser of relations.

**Movement: Processual, Flux, Flow**

We don’t capture but momentarily apprehend, and we flourish when we keep the the gift in circulation

**Indeterminacy (becoming-unbecoming)**

Along with keeping things in flux, we also understand things as constantly forming, like who we are, and we create the conditions to allow this to happen.

**Open Source**

Ideas and knowledge grow best through sharing.

**Mutual Aid**

No hands held out for charity. We consider the contributions we make according to the values that we decide on.

**Spectrum—Non-binary**

Our identities shift across a spectrum, and we enjoy the benefits of a proliferation of constantly differentiating binaries. Never a full stop static binary which is the logic of cancer.

**Nothing about us without us**

We represent ourselves and all decisions are made by those who will be affected by them

**Practice-led**

The shape of our production and distribution is shaped by the practice and the needs of those who practice it.

**Custodian/stewardship**

First nations people were right. You can not own the land, you can only belong to the land.

Design models where care and roles and responsibility are embedded into legal structures governing the care of shared resources such as land, air and water.

**Anti-monopoly**

It is possible for people to own too much to control too many things, to be too busy. No more franchises. If you have an idea, don’t replicate it. Give your idea to someone else and see what they do to it.

**Generative not Reductive – Abundance not Scarcity – Distribution not Accumulation**

Spread it round, spread it open and release it into circulation. Keep it moving!