

KATE RICH *Thinking with infrastructure*

In their essay *Radical Transactionalism*¹, legal theorists Bronwen Morgan and Declan Kuch call for a more creative approach to the nature of infrastructure. Their argument centres on commercial law as a neglected site for activism, where the legal building blocks of property and capital could be rethought and reconfigured. I would like to further extend this challenge - *getting creative with the infrastructure* - to the context of art. Artists are endlessly practised at playing with form, at the level of content. If we don't apply the same kind of structural attention to the layers of organisation and administration - the containers in which the art work takes place - we are missing a trick.

This is the underlying logic behind the Feral MBA: a proposal for radically different kind of business school where artists and other researchers would gather to experiment with new shapes for business and enterprise for a fundamentally reimagined economy. The programme of the fMBA will focus on collecting and analysing 'outlier' business practices from the arts (and elsewhere), as well as designing new business experiments. The curriculum will range from critical making workshops for avant garde business shapes, to artists in residence in the admin office.

The fMBA project takes an experimental approach to the infrastructure and implements of business, such as entrepreneurship, management, merchandising, accounting and the business plan, with particular attention to radical practices in these fields. It will focus both on pragmatic needs for artists' material survival in the present economy; and a wilder imagination of how this could be different. It will ask (amongst other questions): *How can we as artists a) finance and b) de-financialise our activities?* Perhaps controversially this may not mean a focus on fair wages for art work: a rational proposal but one that potentially displaces a whole ecology of other, less stabilised or quantifiable livelihood demands², which might not be founded on the assumption that value equals money.

The idea for a business school for artists emerged out of 15 years running the Feral Trade³ project (2003-ongoing), an artist-operated grocery business, trading goods across hybrid value systems of art, commodity markets and social networks. The notion of the 'feral' encompasses a scavenger's approach to infrastructure (opportunistic, mutualistic, boundary-disregarding). With Feral Trade, this renders as a grocery dealership that taps the spare carrying capacity of existing social, cultural and intellectual resources to run a robust but ad hoc freight network for coffee and other goods, the kind of occupation that might be theorised as the *demonstration of another culture in relating to infrastructure*⁴.

The recent NESTA report *Experimental Culture*⁵ states that we 'know' creativity is essential to our social and economic future. This confidence underwrites the report's conclusions that to remain sustainable, arts organisations must get experimenting: with technology, new business models, revenue methods and industry partners. What goes unquestioned here (and unexperimented with), is what kind of 'economy' this efflorescence of creativeness might wish to inhabit. While global, national, sector and workforce competition are counted as given, a host of thick strands of other economic means, ends, collectives and livelihoods go unacknowledged.

My closing thoughts are lifted from another infrastructure thinker, legal activist Janelle Orsi who suggests we might usefully rewrite our definition of 'enterprise' as '*any productive activity that could bring us sustenance*'⁶. In line with this proposal, the fMBA moves well beyond the marketplace to consider that the

1 Morgan, B. and Kush, D. (2015) "Radical transactionalism: legal consciousness, diverse economies and the sharing economy". *Journal of Law and Society* 556-587; see also <https://www.stirtoaction.com/article/legal-imagination>

2 Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2008) "Diverse economies: performative practices for other worlds". *Progress in Human Geography*, 32(5), pp.613-632.

3 <http://www.feraltrade.org>

4 Conversation with Femke Snelting from Constant, Brussels, March 2018.

5 https://www.nesta.org.uk/sites/default/files/experimental_culture_report_2018.pdf

6 Orsi, J. (2010) *Cooperation Law for a Sharing Economy*

arts could take an active/activist role designing radically different formats, meanings and outcomes for and in business itself. Such activity - *business as medium of artistic enquiry* - points to a long-standing cordon sanitaire between administration and the 'real', sanctioned/valorised work of making art; and may demand a shift of attention as to what is considered glamorous in creative practice. Supplying administration and infrastructure with their own circuits of exhibitions, commissions, symposia, residencies, prizes and (even) critical discourse could be a start.