



Fellow Report 2024 - Creative Impact in Practice

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Survival Kits for Intentional Communities

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Table of Content

Summary	1
Acknowledgement	1
Problem and evidence	2
Journey	3
1. Timeline and workshop design	3
2. Facilitation flow & ethics	8
3. Survival bias	9
Impact	9
Learnings and contributions for CIRCE	12
References	14

Summary

Artist communities face significant challenges in sustaining collective efforts for social transformation within an art ecosystem that lacks structural support. This project employs a facilitated Survival Kits Workshop as our key method to help these communities navigate internal and external challenges and sustain collective work. In the following sections, this report illustrates the design of our modular workshop system, with Community Timeline Review, Personal Mapping and Community Ontology Mapping as its key components. We held workshops with differently situated collectives in six cities, guiding them in self-reflection while collecting valuable data to improve the workshop flow. Showing the reasons why our project departed from a self-help book and stays with a facilitated workshop at the current stage, we also want to foreground the importance and difficulty of facilitation throughout a workshop. Finally, with our partnership development with multiple art institutions in Europe, we sketch out the structural challenges of institutions with community inclination. These challenges and questions are not able to fully tackled in the short period of five months, but did inspire future collaborations after the fellowship period. In the future, we envision our work will engage institutional changes, helping institutions and funders to create strategies and policies that support creative communal practices for social missions.

Acknowledgement

The development of Survival Kits for Artist Community is built on top of the on-going research Alchemy of Commons. Both projects are done by myself and Yiren ZHAO. We would like to thank the ongoing support of our partner institutions, Framer Framed (Amsterdam), KANAL-Centre Pompidou (Brussels), AFIELD (Paris/Global) and documenta Institut (Kassel), for ensuring the quality, urgency, and the future of the project to remain sharp and relevant; all the collectives/communities we workshoped with, OXER, Ensemble 老妖精, House of Lazy People 懒汉之家, the Framer Framed team, the AFIELD team, CIRCE fellowship cohort 2024, and Ensemble Not Found, who have given us the trust to expose their vulnerabilities and challenges; the critical friends who have lend their insights and warmth throughout the entire research journey. As well, we would like to acknowledge the assistance of Meander Z.Ye and the design support by Sixin Zeng in finalising the report. Last but not least, thank you CIRCE for your generous support in this research and

development for the second time. Thank you everyone who contribute to making this challenging project possible.

Problem and evidence

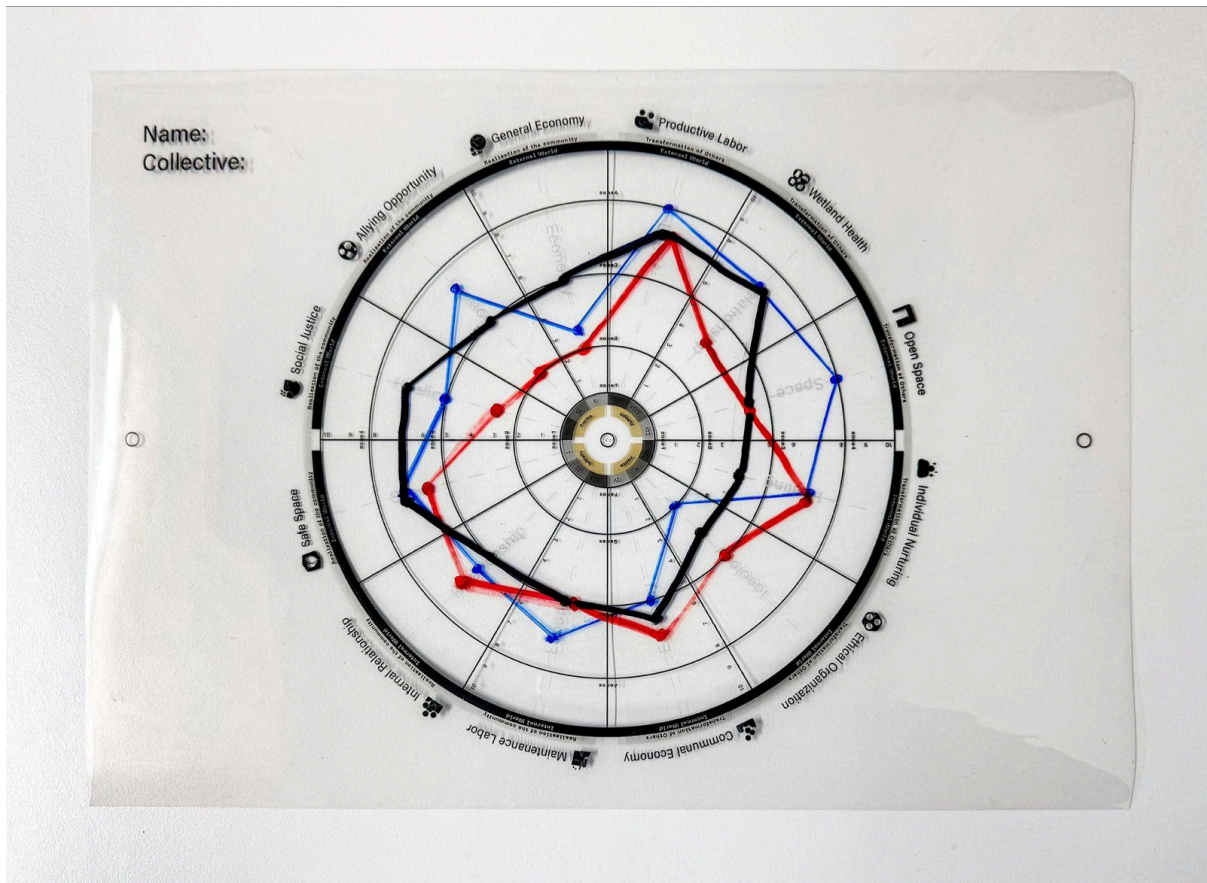
This project came from my observation that activist communities—the intentional communities where art practitioners work in an activist manner or activists employ art as a method of activism—are vibrant and vital for enjoining contemporary arts and social transformation, while they are vulnerable to internal and external challenges. My previous CIRCE research showcases that the project-driven mindset and the obsessions of “shows” in the art economy make it structurally difficult to adequately support socially-engaged artists and activist communities for long-term commitment to social transformation (Yin, 2023). Artist communities often struggle with reaching a negotiable consensus on what a community is and how to build sustainable collective work. However, these communities can hardly afford teamwork counselling or workshops for companies and NGOs, though goal-oriented and aimed to maximise productivity, such commercialised training is also not tailored for activist collectives. Through our research on the ontology of community, we also want to note that the practitioners in an intentional community often expect too much from themselves and their fellows and are thus easily frustrated or exhausted when they are un(der)aware of the efforts and difficulty in this collective course.

Recognising maintaining an activist community is complicated and even more challenging when systemic support is largely missing, this project has tried to provide affordable Survival Toolkits that help grassroots communities self-evaluate the communal effort, identify possible oversight and improve future planning. Initially, we proposed an easy-to-use self-help book that includes a guideline to run a self-assessment workshop and surveys for self-reflection. But as the project developed, we realised that we do not have enough data and knowledge to create a universal guideline that can responsibly help the community to navigate their problems and potentiality in a situated way. A professional “outsider”, i.e. a facilitator, is necessary to untangle their complex situation and emotions. Therefore, my current CIRCE project prioritises workshop design and facilitation, with my research mainly working on the guidelines for a facilitated workshop where the community can be guided to finish collective mapping and analysis of their communal and individual status.

Journey

1. Timeline and workshop design

Starting from June, we spent the first month of the project on preparatory research and gradually formed a clearer plan aligned with the adjusted research goal. For the overall design of the workshop, we referred to different individual, relationship and organisation consultation tools but realised each tool employs a specific ideological framework, philosophy, and specific goals that may not align with our concerns. For example, tools for team development such as Belbin Reports unpack the visible and invisible layers of teamwork productivity with little focus on personal growth while personal development or relationship consulting tools rarely include collective ambitions. Our work, however, believes that the individual, the relational and the collective are equally important and pays attention to the interrelated dynamics among the three. Meanwhile, our work has been built upon rigid previous research and a strong proposition about sustainable communal practice, which led to a role-playing game format named *Alchemy of Commons*. The game is structured by three layers: a) the individual's situation, which includes metrics like Available Time, Personal Well-beings, Financial Opportunities, Sense of Belonging, Sense of Achievement and Sense of Growth, b) the collective's situation, which is represented by the ontology of community that we developed in the previous CIRCE research (Yin, 2023), and c) the larger societal conditions. The transformation of *Alchemy of Commons*'s structure to the workshop's framework turns out successful because of their shared values. The major difference between the game and the workshop is that the game is pre-scripted by the history of an existing collective we researched and archived, while the workshop is designed to invite collectives to map their personal and collective experience, share their feelings and perceptions of the collective, and analyze their community status.



Mapping the Ontology of Community

Between July and September, we have conducted workshops with/for different activist communities in Amsterdam, London, Paris, Copenhagen, Shanghai, and Kassel. In each workshop, we tested out different facilitation methodology and ways of mapping, according to the community's needs and situation. As the outcome, we developed a set of workshop modules, preliminary procedures and facilitation flow that seem to cover the main body of the community experience and concerns. As well, the procedures, facilitation flows and workshop modules managed to create a consistent focus that aligns with the main value of our research, namely, the fundamental challenge of an activist community is to balance the personal needs within a community and the desire for social change as a collective.

It was also during the workshop design and testing phase that we found that the initial goal (self-help book) might not be ideal at this stage. First, because our tool is designed to be a situated framework that allows maximum application to communities across cultural contexts, practising domains, and ways of organising, the workshop becomes a venue where community members share, map and discover their situatedness beyond their immediate problems. Consequently, we learn each pattern can signify vastly different situations

depending on the positionality and situation of the individual and the community. For instance, when it comes to different experiences of safe space, the initiator (or anyone in some sort of “powerful” position in the community) can be the person feeling unsafe because they are responsible and pressured to take care of everyone’s safety and feelings. This can mean that the community is safe for most members, while such safety can be precarious at the cost of the initiator’s well-being. In this case, we will suggest that the initiator share their concerns and experiences with the community and explore options to share the responsibility. If the unsafe member is in a marginalised position, however, the community may have a more loaded task to figure out whether they have created an environment that is potentially abusive. In other words, each pattern analysis requires theoretical knowledge from our research and situated knowledge by carefully listening to and understanding the reality each community faces. As such, workshop facilitators play an essential role in providing a macro-view of their situation and helping community members realise their hidden problems and needs.

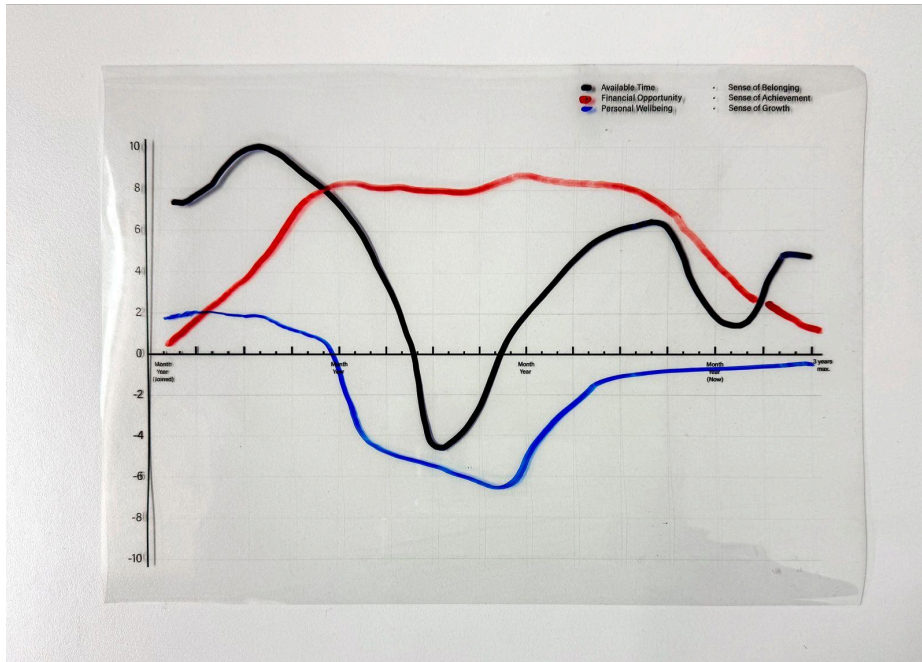
Meanwhile, workshopping has become a kind of fieldwork where we get to understand how each collective’s comprehensive reality gets mapped onto patterns of the community ontology, and vice versa. Although we believe a self-help book is necessary in the future, considering affordability, accessibility and scalability for distributing the knowledge and helping collectives across different fields, cultures and political conditions, the guidelines and analysis must meet a responsible and ethical design standard. We feel the necessity to research and workshop with collectives from as diverse contexts and situations as possible, in order to create a self-help book that can balance the need to be an effective, “universal” guideline material and avoid making irresponsible judgements that disregard the unique situation of each community around the world. In other words, while we believe the initial envisioned outcome is necessary and important for our goal, we need more time and workshops to arrive there. Having said that, we believe the workshop has become a useful tool of its own. It has formulated a comprehensive workflow that helps facilitators create a supportive and constructive space for communities to reflect on their situations. It develops a modular system that can discern different stages and needs of a collective and a clear goal which prioritises self-care and collective solidarity instead of productivity and immediate conflict resolutions.

As part of our partnership development, we travelled to six cities and held workshops with at least one collective in each city. These communities are in different statuses, such as in a stage of conflict, stagnation or forward-looking. These statuses need to be responded with different sensitivities, emotional challenges and focal points during the workshop. As a result, we developed a modular workshop system to ensure consistent quality and flexibility regarding the community situation. The workshop length thus adapts to the needs of the collective, ranging between 3-6 hours.

Acted by	Module Name	Brief description	Duration
participant	* Community Timeline and Energy Mapping	Mapping community key events (internally and/or publicly), a	15-30 min (depending on the community his
participant	Personal Mapping	Individual identify their "reality curve" and "energy curve"	20 min
participant	Sharing session	Individual sharing, participant response and collectivediscus	20-40 min (depending on group size)
host	Explanation the Ontology of Community		20 min
participant	Mapping the Community Ontology	Participant mapping their personal understanding of the com	20 min
participant	Sharing session	participant share how they understand the mapping and thou	20-40 min
participant	*Expectation Mapping	participant locate their expectation for the future of the comi	5 min
host	Community Analysis	identity the current tension, problem and potentials	20 - 60 min

Modules screenshot

There are three fundamental components in each workshop: Community Timeline Review, Personal Mapping and Community Ontology Mapping. Each mapping component is accompanied by a round of sharing, in which the participants can share their thoughts and feeling about the community and their personal life next to it. The Review component is usually a pre-workshop preparation work done by the facilitator, which (re)collects public events and information about the community in a timeline manner. This component allows participants to reset their perspective on the community and emotional baseline at the beginning of the workshop. It is a necessary step to prepare a constructive and comprehensive discussion for the community, as people tend to forget what they have done for themselves and each other and become overwhelmed by their present feelings and thoughts especially if they are in a stage of conflict.



Personal Mapping on Available Time, Financial Opportunity, Personal Well-being, Sense of Growth, Sense of Achievement, Sense of Belonging.

The Personal Mapping is for participants to identify their and know other members' "reality curve" (available time, financial opportunity, and personal well-being) and "energy curve" (sense of belonging, sense of achievement, and sense of growth). They will be asked to visualise the change in these aspects over time on a line chart. A round of sharing session comes after, in which the participants will walk through their journey and share their feelings and experiences, guided by their chart. This step allows participants to expand their presence outside of the scope of collective work to each other, maximising their empathy for each other's personal journey. It embodies our most important finding in understanding community, that is, each individual's life intertwines and informs the life of the community. One cannot use the collective goal to overwrite personal needs; instead, the sustainability of collective actions lies in the understanding of each individual involved.

By giving an overview of the collective work and an overview of each participant's personal journey, the workshop at this point has expanded the participants' notions about their collective and helped them locate their current position or problem with a holistic and contextualized view. Till then, the participants are prepared to enter the last component of the workshop: Mapping the Community Ontology and analysis.

Mapping the Community Ontology invites participants to map out their respective perceptions and understanding of the status of the community. The Community Ontology is a

framework developed from the previous CIRCE research “Can web3.0 help socially-engaged art sustainable, or what the heck is a community.” It is a comprehensive chart that visualises the normative journey of a community and its capacity to mobilise change. The chart consists of six axes: Space, Relationship, Labour, Economy, Ideology and Healing. Each axis is diagonally extended by the internal and external aspects of the same theme. Participants are invited to “score” their community by 0-10 based on how they feel or wish the community to be. The collective does not need to agree on a standard to score each aspect. Instead, we ask each participant to map the 12 aspects in their own way, allowing their subjective interpretations and definitions of each aspect, as long as they are consistent standards in mind. In this way, the different understandings, expectations and experiences within a community begin to be exposed through the mapping. By then, the workshop facilitator will have enough context and information to begin the analysis.

2. Facilitation flow & ethics

The facilitation flow generally follows the components of the workshop. Before the workshop, the facilitator is required to be familiarised with the community—what does the collective do (in what field, by what methods, with what goal, etc.), how has the collective been (Progressing forward or being stuck? Too busy to be attentive to internal conflicts or in a gap for collective reflection?), and their expected takeaways from the workshops.

The overall task of the facilitation is to (re)establish an impartial and empathetic position for collective discussion. Particularly, the facilitator must create a space for honest sharing by encouraging and affirming it throughout the workshop. As our research indicates, collective action is (in)formed by each individual’s understanding, belief and expectation of the community, thus the real “face” of the community can only be revealed by each individual’s honest feelings about it. Therefore, whether participants feel safe and encouraged to share their honest opinions about the current status of the community is decisive to successful facilitation. The workshop facilitator must remove any possible shame around sharing honest feelings and understandings.

Relatedly, the facilitator must be able to play an impartial and emphatic role throughout the workshop session. The focal point of the sharing session should be how each individual felt during an incident and how each party could have been accountable for their contribution to the event. When tensions arise in a community, people may tend to resolve the

problems by identifying the person of wrongdoings, which results in an evolving blame game. However, based on our research, we came to realise each conflict reflects all community members' status and baggage as well as external factors that impact how the conflict is unfolding. As the goal of the workshop focuses more on individual well-being and collective solidarity with a prospect of collective change, the facilitator must not play the role of the judge; instead, their focus should always be on the present connection among the participants and the sustainability of the community.

Additionally, we look into details of the facilitation flow and allow for future training programs to prepare new facilitators. This task specifically includes writing scripts for the routine (e.g. trigger warning, specific wording for tone setting, etc.) to ensure the workshop is a safe space.

3. Survival bias

Although we attempt to diversify the communities we workshop with — by identifying different cultural backgrounds, seniority of collective experience, and type of communal “glue” (space, practice, or mission) — we recognise that the data we collected from the workshops may have a survival bias. Namely, in the face of conflicts, the commitment of each community to spend time organising themselves for a 3-6 hour workshop already shows a strong base of solidarity and trust; the members who are willing to participate, regardless of the emotional challenges they might face, do usually have good enough connection with the community.

With this awareness, we recognise that the patterns we collect may not be able to provide the full picture of a community crisis. How to resolve this limitation of data will be a continuous challenge for us.

Impact

The Survival Kits Workshop aims to give an overview and guidelines to community members to understand where they are at and what they can do to sustain the community, while looking after their own mental health and sustainability. We ensured that we recorded how the community has been formed through different stages to make sense of their visible problems and the latent forces that shape their struggles. In doing this, we have endeavoured to create a safe space for activist communities to scan their inner needs, struggles and external

barriers when the current attention-seeking art economy does not always offer an opportunity to do so.

When selecting collectives to research and workshop with, we pay attention to 1) what “glues” the collective together, 2) the collective status during the time of the workshop and 3) the socio-cultural-economic context in which they operate. Looking at these conditions through each workshop helps to understand the larger context of why each pattern emerges through the mapping. For example, a location-bound collective practice can bring people through location proximity or spatial usage, whilst a practice-driven collective is less reliant on geographic/spatial conditions than a shared practice, resources and professional network. Likewise, a mission-driven collective—for example, a group of scientists, designers and artists working on the ecological crisis—shares the same pursuit and can assemble different practices and resources, but relies on a more intense ideological alignment than others. What the collective predominantly relies on can be its strength while becoming its vulnerable part, which needs particular attention and careful balance with other drives of the collective. Recognising what brought the collective together can help us understand the foundation of their solidarity, contextualise the reasons for their frustration (if there is any), and inform us about future challenges.

The ultimate goal of the workshop facilitation is to generate empathy among the participants and for the group themselves. Our research on the ontology of community not only reveals many hidden efforts in a community, but also shows the immense challenge a community has to face: the 12 aspects require constant attention and effort, while each aspect may put a constraint on each other if not carefully balanced. With the limited energy and time that everyone has, an intentional community is structurally difficult to sustain and grow. We want to stress this point to the participants in the workshop and to different actors in the arts, as we observe many practitioners in the field tend to be overly demanding to themselves and their fellow practitioners. This phenomenon partly comes from a lack of understanding of the challenges of communal practices, thus practitioners tend to assume they can accomplish perfect practice if everyone, including themselves, try harder. While analysing the collective’s community mapping, which might look like a “diagnosis” of the community’s health status, the workshop must be able to confirm the hard work they have collectively accomplished. The facilitator, with their knowledge and observation from previous research, workshops and their personal survival experiences, also acts as an intervenor who breaks the information gap in the field. It is useful to share cross-community observation and lessons when the collective

feels alone in their struggles. This is why we plan to publish a self-help book and involve more collective/organisations/institutions in the future: we acknowledge the significance of sharing and circulating supportive tools and information (with the protection of privacy), which has the potential to foster structural changes in the field.

We keep receiving invitations from organisations that aspire to become a horizontal community. In the past few months, we have continuously strengthened the institutional partnerships, including the global activist network AFIELD (Paris), the art space Framer Framed (Amsterdam), and Documents Institut (Kassel), as well as a new partnership with KANAL-Centre Pompidou (Brussels).

We spent time diving deeper into each partner's needs, understanding how these toolkits can be positioned within their picture. For example, the toolkits can work well with AFIELD's future plan to support the communities within its network. Framer Framed is interested in the toolkit's potential to guide their future work for local communities in their neighbourhood. KANAL offers a platform for the workshop to continuously develop with grassroots communities in Brussels, as part of their long-term program. documenta Institut is more inclined to work with the research potential that the workshop embodies. Until the time of the report, these partnerships remain independent projects to be developed, but the desire to work together for more extensive projects has been present in our conversations. Therefore, the next challenging step is to see how or if these institutional interests can work with each other in one or several proposals.

However, we are aware of and pay attention to the structural difference between these two. For instance, our model is developed for self-organised communities, which structurally have more space to discuss and negotiate "Communal Economy" (e.g. salary and payment) and "Ethical Organisation" (the alignment between ideology and the way they organise) than funded organisations which have a predefined pay scale and hierarchy. Still, the model was proven to be an insightful framework for those organisations that aspire to organise as closely as possible and to understand the challenges of structural transition and transformation. For instance, our framework and our theory of Solidarity Trinity (Yin and Zhao, 2024) demonstrate a general challenge for institutions with community inclination: what incubates a community, usually the financial and organisational support provided by the institution, can quickly become the blockage after the support ceases to continue.

Learnings and contributions for CIRCE

With workshopping became a resulting practice of our research, we realise organising workshops like this is a challenging task. Practically, depending on the group size, the community history and status, a complete workshop can take up 3-6 hours. It is often hard to coordinate schedules in the community and find a substantial chunk of time to workshop. These challenges also point to the possible addressing needs of a self-help book, which should enable asynchronised collective work mode in the future. Meanwhile, communities that want or need such workshop often are in some sort of noticeable struggle, which is usually rendered into interpersonal conflicts. Therefore, it is not easy to involve community members in a workshop where people have to be honest about their experiences and feelings, and it requires a lot of energy and skills from the facilitator to mobilise the participants when navigating their embodied problems.

Additionally, this project involves intense work with multiple communities, which means it is stretching my capacity to be emotionally and physically present. Since I have taken my commitment to several communities, I can hardly participate in or contribute to the CIRCE community incubation. Working with communities with care requires me to be responsive to various emergent responsibilities and situated emotional needs, which pragmatically leads to the inability to follow a productive appointment-driven schedule, or, an institutional temporality. This again showcases the tension between community logic and institutional logic and invites further exploration in creating supportive policies that respect process-driven collective endeavours.

We have received overwhelmingly positive responses from our partners and the connected communities during the implementation period. Our Survival Kits Workshop, based on a solid research and analysis of self-organised communities by ourselves, offer insights for self-organised communities to understand their struggles and opportunities in a holistic and growth-oriented view. The framework of the workshop, in line with our associated projects, offers a unique and much-needed perspective on collective works beyond the logic of organisation and funding. It highlights the need for collective self-care in the process of activism and solidarity as the basis of transformation, reifying care and solidarity in the communal context while encouraging organic, situated and explorative readings of them. The sustainability of a collective requires more than hard work and funding but also consistent sources of imagination, passion, intention and value. These unique takes enable collectives to navigate their work in the ever-shifting environment without losing themselves.

The positive feedback of our work also shows the ideological inadequacy in the existing cultural and creative sector, which sees art(ivist) communities as service providers or performers of social justice to a broader public, whilst their social contribution partly comes from being sites of practices and healing. We attribute the ideological inadequacy to the lack of imagination of social impact beyond productivity, while expecting solidarity as a pre-defined condition and self-care as a personal choice. During our workshops, however, it is evident that collective self-care and solidarity are always an ongoing struggle, and the knowledge of working through these struggles should be the core outcome of communal practices. In short, our approach highlights activist communities as sites of healing, resilience, and ongoing transformation and the urgency to provide tailored guidance and structural support for navigating their relational complexities and materialising their potentiality.

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