CIRCE

Creative Fellow

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Can web3 technology help socially engaged art become organizationally sustainable, or what the heck is a community?

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Author Note

trust to my work. Thank you Josien Pieterse for taking me under your roof and welcome me to the backstages of one of the kindest institutions I ever know. Last but not the least, thank you Teresa Koloma Beck and all the CIRCE staff for your generosity and great care allowing this research to go into such depth.

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Main Insights

In our study, we have identified several key insights that shed light on the ontology of communities, paired with rich qualitative research and real-life examples. These insights revolve around the concepts of the solidarity trinity, three layers of value in communities, community wetlands, and the five axes of the community.

The solidarity trinity highlights the importance of space, labor and relationships within a community, arguing they are an integral whole that forms the experience of community life and the quality of solidarity.

Building from the solidarity trinity, we further develop three value layers that exist in a community. That is the Solidarity Trinity, the symbolic value of a community, and the observer value. From the symbolic value layer, we discover the unevenness of solidarity within a community, due to different proximities and intensities of interpersonal relationships that exist in the community. From the third layer, we express the need to understand the role of the observer beyond spectatorship, which later connects to the point of community wetlands, and propose the role of wetland weavers as observers.

The concept of community wetlands highlights the much-needed support networks in each community, arguing their essential function to keep the vitality of young or underfunded communities. The wetland concept also opens new horizon to understand the roles of policymakers, funders, institutional practitioners, etc. from a creative ecology perspective. That is, these roles can move closer to the role of wetland weavers.

Furthermore, we have outlined the five axes of the community: space, relationship, economy, labor and healing. These axes map out the status, or the ontology of a community, giving a holistic perspective to understand the well-being and sustainability of a community.

Research Problem / Creative Endeavour

The background: research within a research

Socially-engaged art has emerged as a significant shift in contemporary art practices, responding to the growing demand for art that addresses social justice, environmental sustainability, and community development. By collaborating with community members, activists, and other stakeholders, socially engaged art often reflects and responds to the needs and concerns of marginalized and vulnerable communities. This shift in focus from individual expression to community engagement reflects a broader cultural shift toward more participatory and socially- engaged forms of art and culture, as well as a growing awareness of the social and political potential of art. Socially-engaged art often challenges contemporary art institutions' organizational framework and stretches the art economy's limits. This can be seen during events like documenta fifteen, where conflicts between artists, institutions, and the public expose structural inadequacies of the art economy. On the other hand, artists that are nurtured by this system often lack the tangible experience to meaningfully engage with the public of interests beyond the "show business" framework. This limited structure makes it difficult for socially-engaged art to fulfill its promise to society, and make its impact sustainable and inclusive.

Therefore I initiated the project "The Alchemy of Commons" (previously work as a research practice under the name of Commons · Art)[1] to work through these problems. The project identifies six key roles in the typical model of European art ecology: policymakers, funders, institutions, artists, communities, and non-human assemblies. However, this model is categorically top-down, and based on the assumption of exposure equals impact. The Alchemy of Commons argues a more horizontal, care-based collective art economy should be created

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[1] commons.art

through collaborations among the identified six key roles, with the assistance of web 3.0 technology, such as Decentralized Autonomous Organizations (hereafter DAOs), smart contracts, and NFTs.

My CIRCE fellowship's focus was specifically attuned to a challenge that emerged within the context of the Alchemy of Commons (hereafter AlCo), a collaborative endeavor intertwined with one of the supporting organizations, Framer Framed, a contemporary art space in Amsterdam. What distinguishes this art space is its multifaceted, progressive approach, which not only champions numerous innovative artistic practices but also warmly embraces a variety of grassroots community projects under its roof. The title of the project "Can Web3 technology help socially-engaged art (organisationally) sustainable?" emerge from the conversation between Josien Pieterse, the co-director of Framer Framed, and myself. As an institution that has been incubating and supporting many collective-driven artivist initiatives, Framer Framed concerns the sustainability of these types of practices, wondering what the institution can help for the future of these initiatives especially to the direction of self-governance. In other words, what to do after a great idea or a great show is launched? How to ensure these initiatives can self-sustain when the institutional support approaches an end?

The concern is very much in line with the core question of the AlCo project: while the arts are centered around show-based business and are baffled by the increasingly high frequency of attentional economy, socially-engaged arts have become one of the most uncomfortable practices in the arts and cultures. This is because social engagement and transformation requires enduring togetherness and situated efforts, which a world of show-based logic usually cannot adequately provide. Therefore, the AlCo project seeks to imagine and implement a new kind of art economy that offers adequate support for socially-engaged arts and collective artivisim, to

leverage systematic changes in the arts and the cultural fields for increasing social relevance. Under the umbrella of AlCo, the questions of maintenance labor, collective authorship/ ownership and sustainable organizations became the key departure points to seek an alternative economic model for the arts. Namely, a maintenance economy that allows the arts to become life (instead of a show). Departing from there, all relationships among the six key actors in the current art economy may be completely reimagined and reorganized.

The problem: sustainability of socially-engaged art and community practice

In my earlier research in the Alchemy of Art, I had already begun to glimpse the pivotal role of maintenance in holding a group together. The site of maintenance was where community members came to understand each other as part of a collective entity, forging trust and an immediate sense of togetherness. However, in the case of art residency and other forms of offer that institutions usually give to artists, maintenance labor has been one of go-to types of offering. Next to financial support often manifests as artist fees and production budget, and material support includes the provision of essential work materials, workspace, and accommodation, institutions often arrange their staffs to take over the maintenance labor that usually consist of organizational support that encompasses the day-to-day communal life. The intention is to remove the everyday hassles from the community and give space for them to focus on the "real work".

Despite the good intent, this particular type of offer has two problems: firstly, it removes the most fundamental experience of a community, applying the conventional division between artistic production and the everyday work in the lonesome genius artist life to an artivist collective. And this might be the key problem why most of institutionally incubated communities fall short after the incubated phase. Because there was no such a thing as "being a community"

without the mundane everyday maintenance, as our research suggested. Secondly, maintenance labor, financial support and material support are not the only possible ways to support artists and collectives, instead, they are just the most obvious and the easiest ones to give[2]. The question from Framer Framed, not only poses a specific aspect of AlCo's concerns (institutions-artists-communities), but also hinting the uneasy relationships exist between art institutions and artivist collectives in the current art economy, despite the best intentions from all sides. Art institutions, and frankly every actor in the art economy, knows very little about what exactly a community is for the arts and society at large. Without this fundamental understanding, art institutions, funders and policymakers will always have difficulties to offer adequate support.

From these previously built thinking, my immediate speculation to Josien's question is to redesign the labour distribution and organisational methods within the relationship between art institutions and artivist communities. This initial insight served as a pivotal starting point for my research within the CIRCE project, prompting me to delve deeper into the intriguing connection between labor and solidarity: What role does labor play in shaping and strengthening bonds of solidarity within a community? And essentially, how do we understand "community" as a living thing within the society and what kind of support it indeed needs beyond the most obvious.

The prompt: web3 as a thinking tool

Meanwhile, web3 technologies act as a catalyst for community facilitation by promoting decentralized communication and interaction. The cluster of technologies offer a peer-to-peer network model which eliminates the need for intermediaries, thereby assuming greater transparency, trust, and collaboration within communities. For instance, blockchain and smart contract technologies offer potentials to facilitate collective ownership, community agreement

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[2] Quote comes from Laura Alexandra from Prins Claus Fonds

and offer alternative value-making. Additionally, NFTs and DAOs offer different ways to organize membership and participation in online communities, giving users more control over their digital identities and contributions. However, these technologies are still in very early stage of exposing the full design potential, given that many design efforts in this realm are unfortunately invested in duplicating Web2 design and quantifying human behaviors.

Such underdeveloped technological potentials make web3 technologies a handy thinking and design tool when it comes to sketching alternative value models, power and labor redistribution and alternative organization. By embracing these technologies and focusing on their unique affordances, we can sketch out new possibilities for more equitable and participatory systems.

Switching focus: from web3 application to the ontology of community

One might notice then, my primary focus during the CIRCE fellowship was on the ontology of "community", not web3 technologies and art institutions. This research choice has to come from my background and the large research context. Throughout my career as a designer and researcher, a significant portion of my focus has been dedicated to understanding the affordance of digital technologies to human psychology, social dynamics and collective subconsciousness. Particularly, over the course of 2015-2021, I have undertaken a meticulous examination of how digital technologies under communicative capitalism either bolster or undermine the fundamental aspects of togetherness and common sense.[3] Alongside this experience, I have mastered skills of designing technological affordances that induce psychological patterns. As a result of this trajectory, I choose to focus on comprehending the

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[3] https://so-far.xyz/issues/issue04-platforms

intricacies of community life itself, rather than taking Web3 design as the key concern or the entrance of it at all.

This deliberate approach also stems from my personal verdict that our contemporary technological propositions are grounded in uniform assumptions about individuals, communities, and the broader spectrum of human existence, often out of tunnel vision of profit, or simply of lazy imagination. It is imperative, therefore, to design any effective, authentic facilitating technology, we must first gain true insights about the essence of community, about the give-and-take between the individuals, the communities and society at large. Instead of what IT corporations had us believe in the last decades that technologies produce insights, I strongly believe meaningful tech comes from insights of life.

Consequently, I began my research with a seemingly simple question: what is going on inside a community? I would like to map out the possible dynamics and workflow within a community first, so that it is possible to sketch a framework for web3 technology that apply meaningfully to communities. However, the simple question got out of hand, I realize most research about communities stays on an observational level, and has little theorization to tell the ontology of the community. Yet, for web3 technologies or any platform-alike technologies, it is crucial to understand the "objects" that they meant to support, in order to avoid systematic violence out of ignorance. Such as a social network platform that has little insight about human relationship, a communication device that cares little about non-violent communication. Therefore I decided to dive deep into the ontology of community, and (un)fortunately I/we indeed come up with a proper theorization at the end of the 6-month fellowship.

That's why my research report places minimal emphasis on technological aspects, notwithstanding their underlying relevance. Instead, my exploration of technology's role is

reserved for the latter stages of this research, after a thorough foundation has been established in comprehending the intrinsic dynamics of community and its essential characteristics. Yet, it is worth mentioning that the technological prompt and applied research intention are essential to the theorization process, as they emphasize the need to properly deconstruct the intangible "object" (i.e. a community) for constructive use. The web3 prompt also encourages us to look at the "value" layers of a community, as the dominant uses of the web3 technologies are value-making and incentive-driven. And one can see the main takeaway of the ontology research does begin with a value analysis of a community. Additionally, for system design, it is fundamental to understand the critical definition of the supporting "object", and yet that is loose enough to give spaces to potential users for self-organizing purposes. And these concerns have directed the ontology research in the later stage. Therefore, this entire research would not have existed if I did not begin with the initial applied research question.

As for the art institution, I have come to believe the deficient support of the art world to socially-engaged art, especially those of community nature, has to do with the absence of insights about and around collective practices and communities. As this research report shows later, new perspectives and imaginations of the role of institutions, funders and researchers naturally open after an in-depth understanding of the nature of a community. Within a short period of 6 months, I choose to focus on the most fundamental concern that lay out the foundation for a sustainable inquiry in the future.

Research/Creative Process

The site of inquiry: Dinghaiqiao Mutual-aid Society and other collectives/communities

The 6-month research result in an in-depth study of Dinghaiqiao Mutual-aid Society (hereafter DMaS), a renowned socially-engaged artivist community in Shanghai that survive through lack of funding, political turmoils, zero-COVID policy and interpersonal community conflicts, and reach to a happy closure by 2021 with the expected demolishment of the residential area.

I choose to focus on this community for several reasons. Firstly, the strong resilience that the community exhibits, the visionary and pioneering work they have done, and the deeply ingrained, interpersonal, relationship-focused approach they craft over the years have made them an exemplary community to study.

Secondly, the composition of this community is quite straightforward: all its members are Han-Chinese, well-educated, hail from middle-class backgrounds, are of a similar age, and do not have any visible disabilities. Most importantly, they all joined the community during a comparable life stage, typically as recent graduates or soon-to-be graduates who grappled with feelings of isolation and anxiety within their immediate surroundings. The relatively simple membership makeup keep the study at a relatively low level of complexity that allows plausible outcomes within 6-months time.

Another reason I chose to dive into DMaS instead of other communities in our scope of attention has to do with the maturity of the established relationships. Although I made myself acquainted to all the communities mentioned, but it requires extensive trust the get to the bottom of what happened in the community, in order to fulfill the research goal. Before the CIRCE fellowship, I have worked closely with DMaS on a different project where we establish nearly

unconditional trust to each other's work ethics and intellectual connections. With this connection, I have the privilege to listen to some of the most intimate, sometimes not commonly well-perceived thoughts.

While some of our conclusions are heavily in debt to these community members' trust and honesty, we struggle in many moments around anonymity issues, especially to safeguard the healthy relationships among the community. Our resolution was to carefully turn our findings to these community members and make it into community knowledge. However, I must note that this process has not been fully completed at the time of writing, due to the amount of knowledge we produce and the scheduling difficulties for community gatherings. Therefore this report will refrained from exposing eventual details but focus on structural concerns and conclusions.

Having said that, during our research, we dedicated considerable time to comparing various collectives in China, Taiwan, Europe, and the United States. As our conversations with interviewees and consultants expanded, we incorporated their (private and formal) observations into our understanding. Therefore, it's important to acknowledge the limitations of our research. In the brief span of six months, we couldn't delve deeply into how each type of shared position and diversity contributes to group dynamics and the process of building solidarity. Additionally, each collective operates within its unique circumstances. Therefore, it's crucial to recognize that the insights presented in this report come with significant constraints and cannot be assumed universally applicable.

The methodologies

As mentioned, the majority of our effort is centered around the ethnographic research on Dinghaiqiao Mutual-aid Society, which include gamification-as-research, in-depth conversation

and discussion with main participants, archival study, interviews, community study, and literature review.

Gamification-as-research

As mentioned, the CIRCE research is part of the bigger research AlCo, which attempts to use gamification and simulation as a way to model the existing dynamics of the art economy and redesign it. Like web3 technology, gamification is a thinking and research tool that aims towards a structural framework that gives spaces to materializing of the immaterial layers in social exchange. Although this methodology is used mostly outside of the scope of my CIRCE project, it casts important influence to the analysis and conclusion. For instance, in the process of designing the gamification of community-making history of Dinghaiqiao Mutual-aid Society, we designed Disposable Income as one of the personal resource for each community member, while other costs and incomes flowing in and out of the community, such as rental cost for the DMaS building, the mutual-aid fund, the micro-income from small merchandise, production fee from curatorial invitation, etc. The vast differences between these different types of income and expenses makes it difficult to use the same token of the same conversion ratio to represent them all. However, this problem inspires us to rethink the nature of these transcations, and eventually realize that they belong to different kinds of economies. Namely, a kind of relational-driven, care-based economy such as the rent-sharing (the community always negotiate the sharing proportion for each member based on their current situation) and mutual-aid fund, and a general economy that is less relational-contexted, such as production budget and the venue rent itself. In real life, the monolithic expression of money often conflates the different hidden layers of exchanges, but gamification can offer the space to visualize these layers. Having said that, we also notice the limitation of such visualization/materialization. That is, the financial exchanges

within a community often contains both types of economy. For example, the rent for the residential building is connecting to the general economy, for the exchange between the landlord and the community; but within the community, how much each individual should pay at the moment is highly relational and contextualized. The gamification design we currently have is only able to visualize the layers into different items, but not showing the co-existing reality in each transaction.

In-depth conversation and discussion

The major research work is done through my conversation and discussion with my collaborator Yiren ZHAO. Who is not only the major participant of DMaS from the beginning till the end, but also has a unique philosophy in relationship-making and community-building. Through our previous collaborations, we have noticed that her fully immersed making and living experience and my theoretical and design background have informed and inspired each other's practice perfectly. In the AlCo project, we exhausted our exceptional collaboration through in-depth conversations and discussions. For more than 200 hours of conversation (this include the conversations take place before CIRCE), we dig deep into the history of DMaS, the multifaceted experience, the observations of each member, the reflections of the organizational changes within the community, the shifting shapes of the community and how it relates to personal and societal changes. And finally, we reflect, discuss, theorize and revise our hypothesis after each gamification development call, interviews, archival studies and community studies.

Interviews

During the interviews with each member, we primarily look at three sections: personal history and background, emotional and relational trajectory within and with the community, and their reflections on critical events that change the community dynamics. These interviews

constantly provide inspirations and materials for new theorization ideas and revision of our hypothesis. Besides having each member's stories, we also cross compare people's thoughts and feelings towards the same events, taking into account their personal journey, the phases of the community then and the societal context. This way we can map out the internal and external elements and factors that shaped the community.

As the research continued, we made several hypotheses, such as the implication of spaces, the community wetlands (see page 24), that were immediately incorporated in the next interviews to test. Additionally, we also tried to map out the societal context that correlates to the shifting relationships and formation of the community, such as zero-COVID policy and the changing tides of feminist ethos in China.

Archival study

The archival study not only looks at what happens in the public event archive, publications, internal documents, voluntarily shared members personal chats and group chats (including event-based group chat and core member group chat). The archival study is mostly a preparation work for interviews and fact-checking during gamification and in-depth conversation.

Community study

Another part of the research is community study, which is gathering community members together for collective discussion, partly group consensus and checking for our research, partly for inquiring detail information, and partly for sharing our research hypotheses to the group for reflection.

Observations

Alongside the study about (and with) DMaS, I have made observations of two collectives under Framer Framed's roof, Open Atelier and LIMBO, and da0, the Taiwan-based decentralized online community that derived from g0v (open governance community initiated by Audrey Tang).

Research exchanges

Besides direct community observations, I have been in frequent exchanges with institutional staffs, curators, directors of art institutions who live and work between the gray areas of communities and organizations, to capture the dynamics of an uneasy, hard-to-defined practice in an uncomfortable economy (for these kinds of pursuit). And finally, I exchange intermediary findings with Other Internet, a research collective that researches Web3 users and communities, as well as researchers who research in activist, artist and online communities, to check if our research resonate and corroborate with each other.

Analysis and Main Insights

A small note about our analysis here: we make very little distinction between a community and a collective given our research focus on artivist groups that produce socially-engaged art and community practices that can be loosely defined in such a way. I use both term interchangeably depending on the context. i.e. when the group needs to highlight a collective front for representational value or obtaining certain agency to act in the art field, they'd call themselves a collective; when the group needs to emphasize their communal nature and interpersonal relationships, community is a much more preferred term.

Another related issue is that we came to notice the increasingly subtle boundaries between communities that have gone too big to self-organize and institutions that have a strong community network/history and artivist background/inclination. In this context, I differentiate institutions with paid staff and public responsibilities, while communities generally don't have expected income and obligations to the wider public. In the later part of the report, we will share the particular struggles that come along with this gray area. However, at the time of writing, we are still at the beginning to comprehend a direction to resolve these difficulties.

Solidarity Trinity

After my initial conversation with Josien, I embarked on collecting various stories about the struggles faced by self-governing communities and the institutions that support them. Interestingly, it is quite common for collectives that start with a commission from an art institution to experience difficulties or even fall apart during or after receiving institutional support.

As I pointed out in the research problem section, maintenance labor is crucial for creating a communal life. During the incubation period, collectives often become reliant on the maintenance labor provided by the supporting organization, and they may develop a sense of solidarity in the belief that institutions are not adequately ensuring their stability. However, when the institutional support ends and the collective must reintegrate the necessary maintenance labor within their own structure, tensions, resentment, and disruptions can arise within the collective's internal relationships.

Typically, collectives remain unaware of or take for granted the labor provided by institutional staff during the incubation process. Consequently, they fail to recognize labor as a vital component of collectivity. In other words, when this labor is not naturally integrated within

the internal organization, it creates a different dynamic that can be seen as incomplete in terms of organizational sustainability. The undervaluing of maintenance labor is a reflection of a broader societal issue where care work is generally undervalued. This is evidenced by the widespread acceptance of institutional practices where maintenance responsibilities are taken over, while hinting at a broader sense of alienation within the realm of artistic production labor.

Based on these insights, we propose that labor and relationships are inseparable. Furthermore, given that labor is intrinsic to the space in which it takes place (for example, the material nature of labor differs between physical and online spaces) and relationships are influenced by spatial conditions (such as the different conditions and quality of relational experiences between long-distance and in-person relationships), we introduce the concept of the "Solidarity Trinity". This concept asserts that space (implicitly involving time), labor (implicitly involving the body), and relationships are a unified whole, as one cannot be changed without affecting the other two.

Through this lens, we can gain a deeper understanding of certain uncomfortable moments within the art world. For instance, institutions that seek to commission collaborative work from a group of individuals who don't necessarily have prior relationships, as a demonstration of collectivity often fail, to consider the importance of relationships within the solidarity trinity. Likewise, an exhibition that displaces local community practices into a white cube or a foreign country actively removes the spatial dimension from the trinity. Lastly, residency programs that provide cleaning services for communities in order to enable them to solely focus on their collectivity inadvertently miss the essence of the collective experience.

Another aspect to consider within the framework of the solidarity trinity is the role of money. Specifically, the use of time-based payment systems that fragment the trinity into

discrete units of time can hinder the free flow and interconnection between labor, space, and relationships. While a detailed understanding of how monetary resources precisely impact collectivity and solidarity is still needed, there is already substantial evidence supporting this hypothesis.

One particularly noteworthy observation is that collectives often function well until they receive funding or when members seek compensation for their maintenance work. The introduction of money into the equation raises complex questions and challenges that we were unable to fully explore during the fellowship. These questions possess intricate layers that warrant further investigation to better comprehend the dynamics of money within the context of collectivity and solidarity.

Three layers of value in a community

Building upon the previous information, we further develop the notion of value, or more precisely what "values" a community produces. Our conclusion is that a community has at least three (for lack of a better word) layers of values:

Layer 1: Solidarity Trinity

The first significant value is the core value known as the solidarity trinity. The solidarity within the community is made of each member's contribution: The contribution through working together, maintaining the space together, hanging out with each other, and putting resources together to make things happen, all these moments foster a sense of belonging. Next to the sense of belonging, a nurturing community is often able to make individuals feel a sense of personal growth through communal life and informal peer coaching. Meanwhile, many individuals who join a community with a mission also hope to achieve something good for society, to fulfill the purposefulness of their life. In other words, community members invest their own time, efforts,

and money in the community, in the hope of obtaining a Sense of Personal Growth, a Sense of Achievement and a Sense of Belonging (hereafter three Senses).[4] Here we have the basic condition of the Solidarity Trinity: the individual nurturing.

Our research also shows further details for the Solidarity Trinity: If a community solely focuses on labor without considering the importance of continuous relationships or the connection to the physical space, it can lead to isolation and alienation. Likewise, if the relationships within a community are strained or absent, the overall functioning of the community suffers, and the space loses its meaningfulness. The absence of physical space, as evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, hinders people's ability to connect and impacts the tangible aspects of labor that require three-dimensional spaces. However, it is worth mentioning that online spaces, such as digital platforms and chat groups, have emerged and cultivated event-based communities, providing an alternative entry point for community connections. These digital spaces, while different in nature from physical spaces, contribute a distinct quality to labor and relationships, thereby shaping a different form of solidarity. Thus, understanding and nurturing the interplay between labor, relationship, and space, both in physical and digital realms, are crucial for fostering a strong sense of solidarity within a community.

Layer 2: The symbolic value of a community

The second is the symbolic value of the community to each individual. Individuals within a community also perceive the community on a higher conceptual level. This conceptual understanding of the community is distinct from the sum of its individual members. It is a holistic concept that goes beyond tangible relationships, labor, and physical space. This notion

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[4] This conclusion leads to the overall game structure of the Alchemy of Commons, each individual invest their Personal Resources (Available Time, Personal Wellbeing and Disposable Income) to improve the overall status of the collective for gaining Sense of Personal Growth, Sense of Archivement and Sense of Belonging.

becomes evident when community members refer to the community as a whole, even when referring to specific subsets or events within that community. For example, in the case of DMaS, members may mention DMaS as a cohesive concept, signaling a collective understanding that goes beyond individual members. This highlights the importance of the conceptual image of the community in facilitating communication among its members. It provides an additional layer of connection and meaning beyond the tangible aspects of the community. Furthermore, each member may have a unique understanding of the community and its conceptual image. This individual interpretation gives rise to different expectations and perceptions regarding how the three senses of personal growth, achievement, and belonging are experienced within their relationship with the community. These varying perspectives contribute to the rich dynamics and diversity within the community, as members navigate their own personal journey within the collective. It emphasizes the need for ongoing dialogue, understanding, and empathy among community members, as they support each other in realizing their individual and shared experiences within the community.

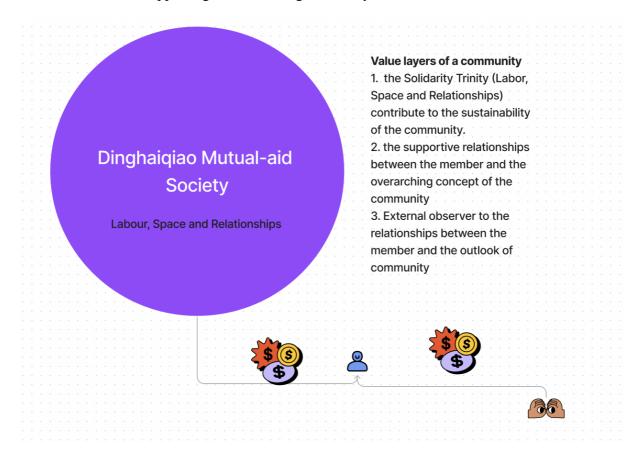### *The Plurality of Solidarity*

When we dive deep into Layer 2, which involves individual projections onto the conceptual ends of the community and how the community conceptually matters to them. This layer focuses on how the community nurtures an individual's three senses: the sense of belonging, the sense of personal growth, and the sense of achievement. Each individual perceives these aspects differently and co-creates their own understanding of how the community influences their being in the world. In real-life instances, we can observe a plurality of solidarity within the community. This is because individuals may have different psychological safe spaces within themselves and varying levels of acceptance towards different community members. Some individuals may feel

a stronger connection and consider a smaller group within the community as their true community, while others may extend their sense of community beyond its official boundaries to include the wetlands (see page 25) or even broader social networks. This diversity within the community confirms the existence of different psychological realities and highlights the various ways individuals perceive the presence of the community. Even within the same collective, there are multiple interpretations of the community's significance and the multi-dimensional combinations of relationships within it. It is important to acknowledge and respect these differences, as they shape how individuals view the social organization and their role within it.

Consequently, the heterogeneity of interpersonal relationships within a community can create challenges in maintaining a safe space and meeting the community's expectations, in the case of interpersonal conflicts. When a critical conflict arises, it becomes a political challenge for the community to address. The way individuals perceive and feel about the conflict may vary depending on their personal relationships with those involved. For instance, in cases of interpersonal conflicts, individuals within the community may have different reactions toward the individuals in conflict. This variation in response arises from the everyday relationships individuals have with those involved in the conflict. This discrepancy between the collective responsibility to address the conflict and individuals' personal feelings can create a significant gap. In situations where victimhood is evident and there is a need for justice, individuals may struggle to reconcile their interpersonal dynamics with the collective responsibility to support the victim.

These discrepancies and tensions within the community can lead to a sense of vacuum or suppression, impacting the overall community relationships. They contribute to a minefield of unresolved and unaddressed sentiments that may manifest in future conflicts. It is crucial for the

community to navigate these complexities and find ways to foster open dialogue, understanding, and empathy towards all parties involved, ensuring that the community's values and principles remain intact while supporting the well-being and safety of its members.

Value layers of a community
1. the Solidarity Trinity (Labor, Space and Relationships) contribute to the sustainability of the community.
2. the supportive relationships between the member and the overarching concept of the community
3. External observer to the relationships between the member and the outlook of community

Layer 3: the observer value

The third value is what we call as "observer value". We must not overlook the perspective of outsiders and their observations or affirmations regarding individual community members. The recognition and validation from outsiders play a significant role in how community members perceive their contributions to the community and how the community itself is perceived within society. When outsiders affirm the importance of individual community members and recognize their valuable contributions, it solidifies the sense of worth and significance within the community. It reinforces the notion that their efforts and involvement are

meaningful and make a positive impact not only within the community but also in the larger societal context. The external validation from outsiders can also enhance the community's reputation and standing in society. When the community is acknowledged and respected by individuals outside its immediate boundaries, it strengthens the sense of collective pride and reinforces the community's influence and value beyond its members. The recognition from outsiders serves as a final seal, affirming the importance of both the individuals within the community and the community's contributions to the larger society. It bolsters the sense of purpose, fulfillment, and connection within the community, reinforcing the collective identity and its place within the broader social fabric.

Productization of communities

However, the role of the "observer" in art and culture fields raises important questions, particularly when it comes to the potential convergence with the attention economy and spectatorship. Within this context, the value of communities and their practices can sometimes be distorted or misunderstood.

For example, renowned local community practices like DMaS often face the pressure of outsiders' expectations. Curators, scholars, and social innovators may have high hopes and demands for the future of DMaS. While DMaS attempts to uphold its own internal needs and values, carefully choosing when to engage in public events or external collaborations, it is not uncommon for other collectives and communities to succumb to this pressure and lose their sense of direction.

In the arts and cultural fields, the "observer" often unintentionally perceives communities as mere products or projects that exist to perform solidarity for the sake of spectatorship and research. This can be attributed to the influence of communicative capitalism, where community
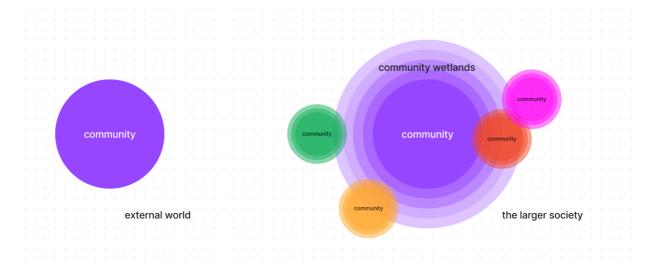
practices are commodified and co-opted for various external interests. However, it is crucial to recognize that the life of a community is vastly different from its performative aspects.

Community wetlands

Another more subtle outcome of the productization of communities is the common assumption that a community is an independent entity that has a rather strict inside and outside. However, our research has shown that the boundaries of a community are much blurrier than previously thought. In fact, the more mature a community becomes, the blurrier the definition of the community becomes.

Therefore, we propose that a community is fostered by its "wetlands," which are intricate networks of supporters that nurture the community's survival and purpose through various means. The wetlands are critical for the vitality of a community, especially when there is a lack of funding or external events to validate the community existence or importance. Community's wetland, like a wetland ecosystem, also has different functions and areas within it, each providing unique contributions and nourishment. Like diverse wetland habitats supporting one another, communities can also benefit from interactions with multiple communities simultaneously. In this ecological approach, a community is not viewed as a singular, isolated entity in opposition to the environment or other communities. Instead, it is seen as a collection of social organs that organically intertwine and grow together, much like the interconnectedness of various wetland ecosystems. This metaphor emphasizes the interdependence and mutual support

found within communities, reflecting a holistic understanding of their dynamics.

In the case of DMaS, they have accumulated a fertile wetland during the artist-led phase (2015-2018), which garnered significant attention and generated sustained interest over time. This phase served as the foundation for the co-op plan, which Yiren Zhao[5] spearheaded and turn the initiative into a community-led one. It is worth noting that most community members originated from the audience that are attracted during the artist-led phase of the initiative, which focus more on open public events. Building upon the groundwork from the previous phase, Yiren Zhao recruited dozens of co-op members from their committed audience through a peer-to-peer approach (instead of an open call).

Younger communities, on the other hand, face challenges in cultivating their own "wetlands" or establishing connections with other communities. It requires significant effort, time, and support to develop their unique identity and foster connections with other communities, just like wetlands take time to form and thrive. Sometimes, these younger

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[5] Yiren ZHAO is the long-term participants and core resident of DMaS since the artist-led phase. After the leading artist Yun Chen left the initiative in 2018, Yiren began the co-op plan with a group of fellow founding members.

communities may emerge from existing communities, bringing their experiences and perspectives to create something new. In this way, they can be seen as forming their own "wetlands," contributing to the diversity and interconnectedness of the larger social ecosystem. By cultivating their own community and establishing connections with other communities, these younger groups add richness and vitality to the social fabric, much like the diverse wetlands that enrich the overall ecology.

From the wetland perspective, we may have a better understanding of the challenges faced by young communities, particularly those starting from scratch like college students. Young communities typically have thinner wetlands, so much so the wetlands appear like a border. A thinner wetland can make a community more susceptible to failure when funding runs dry or feedback from the public is underwhelming. If the community lacks a resilient support network, it can become insular and struggle to gain attention or engagement from a wider audience. This can quickly diminish the purposefulness of the community . On the other hand, if the community members push themselves to be more open and visible before establishing a solid foundation for individual nurturing , they may exhaust themselves before attracting proper support.

This conclusion give us a nod to the difficulties and direction to nurture a sustainable community from the scratch. Young communities need like-minded individuals or "wetlands" that can provide the necessary support and engagement to nourish and sustain their growth. Without such support, they risk fading away or failing to reach their full potential. The early stages of community formation are crucial, as it sets the trajectory for long-term success and sustainability.

Community as a co-creation between community members, wetlands and the larger society

We posit that a community is not solely a product of its internal dynamics and co-members, but also a result of the broader societal environment within which it exists. The reactions and interactions of community members, as they work with and respond to the wetland of their community, are influenced by the larger social context. This can create a need for specific community groups, such as feminist communities, to shelter individuals from harm within a society that exhibits misogyny. The very existence of such shelters underscores the prevailing gender inequalities and forms of oppression within the larger societal framework.

Consider, for instance, two communities we came across during the research: community A located in an area known for its strongly misogynistic environment, and community B in a city that is comparatively more feminist. When addressing similar gender conflicts within their respective contexts, community B experiences less external pressure to get everything right. This allows them a more equitable opportunity to navigate and work through challenges within their community. However, community A faces immense internal pressure, with heightened expectations for perfection. There is little space for negotiation and understanding for the fact that the community members themselves cannot fully detoxicated from a misogynist environment and need a longer learning curve. Tragically, it is precisely because the extreme repression traumatizes people who then seek shelter in their community, eager for repairment in the community. The more traumatizing a society is, the more people demand a perfectly safe heaven in their social enclaves, and yet, the less likely the community members are equipped with knowledge and experience in handling the issues. Our research dived further into the intrinsic connection between activist trauma and social transformation, yet given the focus of this report, we will require a new space to report our findings.

Above all, it is crucial to grasp the concept that a community is a co-creation between its members, the wetlands, and society at large. They are inherently intertwined and reliant on one another. The community both responds to and reflects the larger social environment. Recognizing this symbiotic relationship is essential in understanding the complexities and challenges that impact the life and death of communities. With this lens, we open a new horizon to approach communities and their relationships with the "outside" world.

The wetlands as observers

On the other hand, we want to reconsider the observer problem above with the wetlands perspective, and propose the observer value shall be gauged by members in the wetlands. Firstly, wetlands indeed offer affirmation and supports in maintaining a sense of purpose and meaningfulness within the community. The wetland serves as a tangible reminder of the community's shared goals and values, providing a physical representation of their collective purpose. The wetland not only strengthens the internal connections and sense of belonging among community members but also serves as a backdrop against which the community's conceptual image can be further validated by external sources.

Moreover, when the observers are not disconnected spectators from society that have extractist and consummerist expectations over the community, but a situated member that live next to the site of commons-making (i.e. the community) and connecting the larger society, it is more likely that the observers value is care-driven and situated.

Wetland weavers

In each community, there are diverse individuals who undertake the role of a wetland weaver, metaphorically weaving together the various wetlands that represent different communities. These weavers navigate the intricate relationships and interactions between

different stakeholders, ranging from friendly supporters to those traditionally seen as antagonistic.

From an ecological standpoint, we can perceive these individuals as distinct types of wetland weavers, each playing a crucial role in stitching together the fabric of interconnected communities. And the community members can therefore have a more strategic apporach to engage with these weavers accordingly. Additionally, there are certain weavers who actively participate in multiple communities, suggesting their ability to contribute in different contexts. It is important to note that these weavers should not be viewed as individuals who are not fully committed to any one community. Instead, they occupy unique and meaningful positions within each community they engage with. However, we must acknowledge the challenges that arise. Some weavers may not feel compelled to interweave the wetlands until they feel secure and respected among all the communities involved. This concern arises from the potential fallout that can occur if the weavers face negative consequences or backlash. Such fallout can have a domino effect, impacting the relationships and cohesion within and among communities.

Last but not the least, we find this a particularly promising direction to rethink the role of institutional practitioners, curators, researchers, funders, policymakers, and so on in a maintenance economy of art. We are looking forward to continue our research and explore the concrete details of it all.

Link back to CIRCE

With a short span of 6-month research, we mangage to obtain a great depth of understanding about communities. We begin to have substantial knowledge to suggest new optics to support communities and socially-engaged art practices, whilst we believe our findings

can resonate in many fields. At the end of the fellowship, we feel like we just finish the groundwork and heading towards building. Currently and able to produce a (hopefully) original framework to begin sketching a possible new economy for the sustainability of socially-engaged art and community practice.
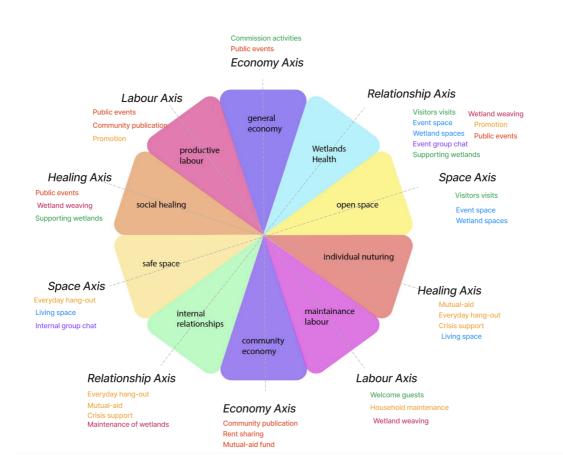
What the heck is a community?

Whilst we can obviously share more details, this report has already stretched the word limits. Hence I would like to offer a conclusion of what we think contains and sculpture the life and death, or the beginning point of a new economic system to come.

We propose a five-axes chart to map out the status of a collective, which naturally contains the solidarity trinity, Space (safe space < > open space), Relationship (internal relationship < > Wetland health), Labor (maintenance labor < > productive labor), Economy (community economy < > general economy) and Healing (individual nurturing < > social justice/healing).

Whilst each axis works more as a spectrum than polarising directions, we also propose a normative feeding circle for a sustainable community: from having a "safe space", a group of people can begin to formulate trusting relationships, which set up the basis of a community economy in which maintenance labour take properly take place in the context of the previous three petals. When the solidarity trinity comes together with material support, the community is equipped to offer individual nurturing. When community members feel safe and nurtured, they are ready to open as a collective front, and ready to connect with more wetlands. Having wetlands will allow actors with resources to bring the community into a general economic activity, and so require productive labor performed by the community. Through productive work, the community reaches a boarder audience with a healing message, transforming society into a

safer place. Thus allowing more safe spaces to open. This normative narrative, of course, can hardly reflect on the much more organic and non-linear process of community-making. But we hope this narrative can inspire principle thinking and broaden people's view when their community runs into bottlenecks.

A creative ecology

With this chart as a conclusion, we hope to inspire people to rethink the creative economies from a market-driven, managerial perspective. And we invite everyone to join our journey for exploring a creative ecology, as well as a maintenance economy of the arts.