

Internalization and Resistance of the Business Self in Activist Performing Artists: A Critical  
Arts-Informed Research Project

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## Abstract

Neoliberalism has been tied to the creation of the "business self" and other flattening subjectivities that inhibit critical thought. Art has the potential to challenge this cultural disimagination through radical imaginaries and societal critique. However, explorations of neoliberal subjectivity among artists raises doubts about its potential for resistance. There is little subjectivity research, though, with those from whom artistic resistance is most likely to emerge: activist artists. The present study uses a critical, arts-informed approach to explore how the neoliberal self is internalized and/or resisted by activist performing artists in Ontario. Interviews, a focus group, and collaborative workshops were employed with four activist artists. A thematic analysis identified nine themes. Findings indicate little internalization of the business self. Rather, the results gesture towards a model of activist artist as care worker. Such a model reframes our understanding of activist artmaking and sheds light on strategies of subjective resistance to neoliberalism.

*Keywords:* neoliberal subjectivity, business self, activist art, arts-informed research, method pluralism, care work

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## Introduction

I have acted in theatre since I was young and have tried my hand at playwrighting and directing. I studied theatre academically where I learned the potential of performance to inspire social change, and then trained professionally where I unlearned this. After my formal training, I signed with an acting agent, went on myriad auditions, and even got a few parts. This, and the part-time work that kept me housed and fed, kept me busy and the importance of engaging in work that might improve society for the better by rallying audiences around a common cause faded into the background. It would have been nice if it came along, but it was not of central importance. I wonder about this for myself and about what it was that guided me away from trying to make a difference.

Certainly, my social location at the intersection of numerous dimensions of privilege (white, cis, male, able, upper-middle class) contributed to a lack of a sense of urgency for activist work. My positionality also gave me access to predominantly white, European, “classical” spaces where careerism is central, privilege is invisible, and social justice is not one’s responsibility. I once took a business course for acting that I have since described in an autoethnography (Ruderman, In Press), which helped me shape my thoughts surrounding the present project. In this course, we learned to do our taxes as self-employed artists. I learned that I was now to become a business in the eyes of the government; not merely engaged in business, not a worker for a business, but a business myself – an entrepreneur. I offer this anecdote not to suggest that at this precise moment I transformed into a career-minded Capitalist, but to highlight how professionalization in the performing arts led me towards a particular kind of self-understanding.



I am now generally perplexed by the environment in which I became enmeshed during my career as an actor and theatre maker. I and most of my colleagues would be thrilled for a chance to audition for a Pepsi advertisement, for example, for its financial and career benefits, and at the same time loathe the product and company. Chasing these financial and career opportunities left little time for passion projects, and, in my case, those untended passions and ideals began to fade. I felt a general dissatisfaction, which, in part, led me to abandon a dream of professional acting and find my way to York University. As a Master's student during this time of a global trend to neo-fascism and spurred on by equity movements for BIPOC communities, I began to explore what is meant by decolonization, beginning with decolonizing the mind. It was this line of thinking that led me to seriously consider the forces that had led me to understand myself as a business first and an artist second.

### **Neoliberalism**

Neoliberalism has earned much scholarly attention since Foucault's (2008) 1978-79 lectures, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, at the Collège de France; this interest has only increased in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Flew, 2014; Foster, 2020). Discussions continue to revolve around its definition, and no two authors seem to agree entirely (Flew, 2014). Indeed, neoliberalism is observed in differing political contexts with differing economic rationales (Peck, 2010), so cannot be thought to be a perfectly unified political-economic ideology, further contributing to its definition confusion. On the one hand, this variety of understandings of neoliberalism has led some to question it as a useful concept (Buitelaar, 2020); I, on the other hand, feel that this multi-faceted nature of neoliberalism indicates that it holds substantial importance, touching many aspects of our lives, and is worthy of continued elucidation.

Roughly defined, neoliberalism connotes a political-economic ideology characterized by a commitment to the market and market rationality in hostile opposition to government (Davies, 2014; Thorsen, 2010). Government intervention is scorned and the free operation of the market is facilitated. It is not, however, solely defined by deregulation, as Sugarman & Thrift (2020) remind us, but is based on the belief that market rationality should be applied to all realms of life and society for increased prosperity. Under neoliberalism, rather than the political-economic system being tailored to the people whom it serves, the system, (i.e. the free market), serves as the model that all institutions and people should emulate (Foucault, 2008; Sugarman & Thrift, 2020). The purpose of the government under neoliberalism, then, is to encourage the free operation of the market, which, ironically, does not necessarily mean a less interventionist government; indeed, the 2008/2009 bank bailout in the United States (US) constituted massive government intervention, but in service of a thriving market, and so was a striking moment for those concerned with neoliberalism in the US (Berge & Slobodian, 2017; Davies, 2014).

Neoliberalism has been conceived as a reinvention, rather than a revival, of liberal thought. The term was first used in 1921 by an Austro-Marxist critic of the ideology, Max Adler (1873-1937), in response to the writings of Ludwig von Mises (1881-1973) (Foster, 2020). In *Liberalism: In the classical tradition* (Mises, 1927/2002), writing in the face of the collapse of liberalism across much of Europe, Mises laments a society where “the tenets of this nineteenth-century philosophy of liberalism are almost forgotten” (p. xvi) and endeavors to outline an ideology that could serve as “a resurrection of the spirit of freedom” (p. xviii). Mises (1927/2002) argues for equality of opportunity to increase societal productivity, but rejects the liberal notion that “all men are equal” (p. 27), and scorns the belief that all should have equal gains. His critics highlighted a fundamental principle of competition that outlined this ideology

(Foster, 2020). Following the Second World War, however, Keynesianism prevailed in North America and much of Europe, and is acknowledged to have ended in the 1970s due to stagflation (Foster, 2020); it was at this point that a reinvention of liberalism emerged from The Mont Pelerin Society and the Chicago School of Economics, two central institutions associated with neoliberal views, to encourage the creation of states and societies based on market rationality (Foster, 2020). Ronald Reagan (1911-2004) in the US and Margaret Thatcher (1925-2013) in the United Kingdom (UK) in the 1980s are the most central figures associated with neoliberal politics, opposing the intervention of the very governments they ran in favour of deregulation and market competition. The implementation of unchecked capitalism and the belief in the natural primacy of market relations in application to all aspects of self and society have been theorized to have numerous interrelated consequences, including increasing wealth inequality, the weakening of democratic ideals, human rights violations, environmental destruction, and the flattening of human experience through the infiltration of the oppressive neoliberal form of subjectivity (NLFS) (Foucault, 2008; Sugarman, 2015; Teo, 2018; Wilson, 2018). It is with the final point that this project is centrally concerned.

Foucault (2008) was one of the first scholars to identify and elucidate neoliberalism in his lectures on *The Birth of Biopolitics* and he has, elsewhere, described the central aim of much of his career: “to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects” (1982, p. 777). It is unsurprising, then, that his lectures on neoliberalism devote significant space to understanding neoliberal subjectivity. Foucault’s focus on how neoliberal governmentality shapes individual subjectivity (subjectification) is carried over into much of the ensuing literature on neoliberalism, as neoliberal subjectivity is now central to an explication of

neoliberalism. Before inspecting the contours of neoliberal subjectivity, however, a discussion of subjectivity itself is necessary.

### **Subjectivity in Psychology**

Psychology as a discipline has paid little direct attention to subjectivity despite its clear centrality to an understanding of the mind, focusing instead on related or constituent elements such as consciousness, emotion, or awareness (Teo, 2017). A lack of an adequate ontological definition has challenged its status as a relevant topic of study in Psychology and driven some interested scholars to psychoanalytic explanations, which are often rooted in the unfalsifiable foundations of psychoanalysis (Rey, 2017). Rey (2017) gestures to Elliott (1999) to illustrate how such explanations of subjectivity often proceed from psychoanalytic assumptions that cannot be explored through research, such as the “primary unconscious... exists as a condition of subjectivity” (Elliott, 1999, p. 26).

Alternatively, Foucauldian scholars, in a reaction against Cartesian/Enlightenment philosophical understandings of subjectivity as individual essence, either focus on understanding subjectivity through discourse or generally neglect it as a useful concept in understanding human life because of its incompatibility with discursive explanations (Rey, 2017). More recently, scholars have challenged the use of discourse as a fundamental ontological principle of human life for reducing our understanding of complex human phenomena to language-based metaphors (i.e. texts and discourses), thus flattening our self-understanding and neglecting concepts that do not easily fit such a model (Rey, 2017). Conquergood (2013) critiques how “even when researchers do attend to extralinguistic human action and embodied events they construe them as texts to be read” (p. 34), and he reminds us that “the hegemony of textualism” (p. 35) – scriptocentrism or textocentrism – is a “hallmark of Western imperialism” (p. 34): “for many

people throughout the world [...], particularly subaltern groups, texts are often inaccessible, or threatening, charged with the regulatory powers of the state” (p. 35). The reduction of human experience to texts, then, carries with it a strong colonial undercurrent.

Rey (2017) puts forward an ontological definition of subjectivity that I favour, one that is *cultural-historical*: “a culturally, socially and historically located human production, characterized by units of symbolical processes and emotions, which appear together as subjective singular configurations, both of which configure social and individual subjectivities in their complex interweaving” (p. 503). Rey’s definition conceives of subjectivity as an open system, and rejects both social determinism, where subjectivity is completely determined by one’s environment, and the Enlightenment understanding of subjectivity as individual essence. Such an understanding, like Foucault’s, acknowledges the crucial role that culture and history play in the formation of subjectivity, and yet it offers the potential for the culture that shapes subjectivity to be changed itself through the subjective process. This might be seen as a kind of subjective resistance:

Subjectivity, according to this definition, is a subversive concept, because its definition implies continuous resistance to and confrontation with the social hegemonic *status quo* throughout the history of mankind, opening a theoretical pathway to explain this resistance” (Rey, 2017, p. 507).

The theoretical foundation for subjective resistance that emerges from Rey’s ontological definition of subjectivity is central to the present paper.

### **Neoliberal subjectivity**

With this ontological definition, we can now sufficiently explain what is meant by neoliberal subjectivity. Specifically, Rey’s (2017; 2019) ontology understands subjectivity to be

constituted of fleeting subjective units of experience – taking place between symbolic processing and emotions, and existing as an amalgamation of the cultural, interpersonal, and internal – which form configurations that feed back in a recursive system to shape future subjective units. Thus, subjective configurations are more stable than the fleeting units, granting a consistency to subjective experience. The neoliberal form of subjectivity (NLFS), then, as a cultural-historical form of subjectivity, can be understood as a set of subjective configurations potentially experienced by those living in neoliberal modernity, which define the lived experiences and shape the actions of both those who internalize or resist it.

The question as to what precisely characterizes a neoliberal subjectivity has invited much theorizing. Teo (2018) offers that the NLFS is composed of characteristic patterns of feeling, thought, agency, and the self. Feelings and emotions are prioritized over thought in the NLFS, largely because of the perpetual stress experienced in a neoliberal society where risk is offloaded from the state onto individuals who are made entirely responsible for their conditions, including management of their resultant stress (Sugarman, 2015; Teo, 2018). This observed attention to emotion and emotion management may appear to be a welcome challenge to the Cartesian thought/feeling dichotomy that associates the mind (thought) with Godliness and the body (feeling) with the animal; however, the NLFS further reifies this fracture through an over-emphasis on feeling and a devaluing of radical critical thought. The domain of thought is valued insofar as it serves an immediate, practical function, and knowledge for its own sake serves no purpose (Teo, 2018). Critical thought that challenges existing norms and market rationality invites derision from the NLFS, contributing to a cultural “disimagination: the destruction of our capacities for critique and radical thinking” (Wilson, 2018, p. 51). A sense of the inability to change the system is intrinsic to the NLFS, which understands the adherence to market principles

as natural (Sugarman, 2015) and therefore attempts to alter it are nonsensical or threats to freedom.

The most theorized element of neoliberal subjectivity, however, might in some ways be located at the root of many of the above features of the NLFS: the neoliberal self. The neoliberal self understands itself as a business, or entrepreneur. Operating under market rationality, this self-as-business, or entrepreneurial self, is locked in perpetual competition with other self-businesses, applying the competitive principle so central to Mises' (1927/2002) writings. As such, the business self engages in behaviours to better compete in the free market: business strategies and models are applied to one's life, as people "invest" in themselves through education, make decisions through "cost-benefit analysis," and maintain "self-brands" to be more professionally and personally appealing (Gershon, 2016; Teo, 2018). Maximal efficiency and productivity of the self-business are crucial and are helped along by advances in personal technologies to structure one's time and monitor oneself (Sugarman & Thrift, 2020).

The neoliberal business self shares much with the liberal Capitalist self, which Macpherson (1962/2011) refers to as "the possessive individual." Indeed, such a self rests on the assumption that "the individual is essentially the proprietor of his own person and capacities, for which he owes nothing to society," (Macpherson, 1962/2011, p. 263) and, ultimately, that "human society consists of a series of market relations" (Macpherson, 1962/2011, p. 264). Perhaps the scholarship on neoliberal subjectivity has unnecessarily overemphasized the difference between the liberal and neoliberal selves; I offer that if they were different only in degree and not in kind, this increased application of market rationality to the self would still be significant. However, subtle but important distinctions have been made, suggesting that the neoliberal self is of a slightly different character. The central difference is a neoliberal

understanding of oneself as business, as opposed to a liberal self-concept as property (i.e., the *possessive* individual) with a transcendental ego selling this property (Sugarman, 2015; Teo, 2018). As Teo (2018) notes, the self-as-business merges the *ego* and the *self* in a “unique reduction of the self” (p. 585); where the ego operated as entrepreneurial salesperson for the liberal self-as-property, the NLFS does away with a transcendental ego, and the self-ego (“myself”) becomes an entrepreneurial entity in toto. When the self is conceived as a business as opposed to property, we can observe meaningful differences, such as a hyper-focus on efficient productivity, a need to brand the self, and an ambitious desire for personal growth. Throughout this paper, I have endeavored to be cautious about the use of the term “neoliberal” in application to the self, and have attempted to make a distinction between those elements of the self that have been convincingly theorized to be uniquely neoliberal, as opposed to those shared by both self-concepts (i.e. “(neo)liberal”), like a hyper-focus on individualism.

Though I have focused above on individual psychological features of the NLFS, it should be noted that the family unit has been theorized to take on greater importance under neoliberalism than in a traditional liberalism that attends primarily to the individual. Cooper (2017) argues that neoliberals “sought to revive an older poor-law tradition of private family responsibility” (p. 313) which “would become the guiding principle of social policy” (p. 313) in response to the 1960s liberation movements. This increased focus on the family led to a contradictory dual emphasis on both the individual and the family as neoliberalism’s primary unit, or “site of freedom” (Brown, 2015, p. 100). Brown (2015) convincingly argues that this incoherence may be tolerated due to,

the gender subordination it tacitly presumes: the individual freedom iterated by neoliberals is not compromised by or in the family because it pertains only to those who



freely come and go from them into the domain of market freedom, not those who perform unwaged work or activity within them. (p. 101)

A masculinist emphasis on both the free, market individual and the thriving family unit, then, also characterizes a neoliberal subjectivity and differentiates it from a liberal one.

To quickly summarize, neoliberalism is a persistent political-economic ideology, taking the global stage in the 1970s, that has dramatic and wide-ranging consequences. Among them is its shaping of a characteristic form of subjectivity and business self, which appears to be an exaggeration and partial reinvention of the liberal “possessive individual.” As mentioned previously, an element of this subjectivity is, in part, responsible for the tenacity of political neoliberalism: a devaluing of radical critical thought, fueling cultural disimagination. Since the market is perceived as naturally occurring, and the “end of history” (Teo, 2018, p. 593) is implicitly assumed, radical imaginaries and critical thought are discouraged. Intriguingly, as mentioned before, initial articulations of neoliberalism proceeded from a Foucauldian standpoint, which is a perspective that does not preclude resistance, but has been charged by many to encourage a paralysis due to a focus on ubiquitous power (Pickett, 1996). In other words, the first voice to articulate the contours of neoliberalism and neoliberal subjectivity is also perceived by many, albeit erroneously, to emphasize the hopelessness of resistance. This may, incidentally, have reinforced the persistence of neoliberalism. However, as previously stated, with the understanding of subjectivity as an open system and, therefore, individual and group action as subjectivity-in-process (Rey, 2017; Rey, 2019), we are provided with a theoretical basis for the notion of subjective resistance.

### **Art and neoliberal cooption**

To resist cultural disimagination, it is reasonable to turn to areas that provide societal critique and radical imaginaries: “art practices can promote the imagination of the good and avoidance of the ‘disimagination machine’ [...] Democracy in the 21st century will require the arts, mass communication, and new networks generated by the digital age to inform an educated citizenry” (Hanes & Weisman, 2018, p. 14). Art provides a key potential source of resistance to neoliberalism and neoliberal subjectivity, but this is by no means guaranteed. Capitalist cooption of art has long been of general academic and public interest (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/2020; Jameson, 1991). This cooption has also been theorized at the individual, subjective level. Most research in sociology conceives of arts work as being fundamentally individual self-enterprise, driven by ambitious careerism and self-expression (Alacovska, 2020). Today, entrepreneurial savvy is all-but-necessary to succeed in a competitive arts-work environment and resources are widely available for artists to train in entrepreneurship and business sense (Kenning, 2019; Ruderman, In Press; Win, 2014).

Entrepreneurship in art is in no way unique to neoliberalism, however. Artists have long been forced to sell their artistic services, and to hunt down and exploit financial opportunities; for a historical example, one can turn to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century “when professional musicians and composers confronted for the first time the realities of market economies transforming or supplanting patronage systems, which musicians both recognized and learned how to exploit as necessary corollaries to their livelihoods” (Leppert, 2004, p. 27). The difference in a neoliberal environment is not, then, of the fact of entrepreneurialism, but the degree and manner of its acceptance. The transition from the artist to the artist-entrepreneur in arts training and funding organizations (Haynes & Marshall, 2018; Kenning, 2019; Win, 2014) indicates a unique embrace of market rationality; while acknowledging the long history of arts entrepreneurship, Haynes and

Marshall (2018) describe the cultural shift in focus towards the musician-as-entrepreneur as “an overemphasis on the economic dimensions of their work at the expense of the cultural” (p. 459). Such an over-emphasis could reasonably reflect and instill a neoliberal understanding of self-as-business. Indeed, in Scharff’s (2016) exploration of the psychic life of classical musicians, elements of an internalized entrepreneurial self were identified. Loacker (2013), too, observes self-responsible performing artists, fully committed to their precarious work, who must embrace the self-understanding of “culturpreneur” to get by in a difficult work environment. Implied in research of this kind is that such an internalization on a grand scale may jeopardize art’s resistance, even of artforms that appear intrinsically activist, like graffiti (Mathew, 2019).

In speaking of the internalization of the neoliberal self among artists, special attention might be paid to performing artists. Performing artists (e.g. actors, musicians, jugglers, circus performers, magicians, models, performance artists), in one way or another, make use of their bodies in their art. As such, they may be subject to an additional layer of neoliberal internalization: their physical selves. The neoliberal body is healthy, fit, and attractive (Teo, 2018), all marketable traits that project efficient productivity and hide vulnerability. These physical qualities are highly valued, and in certain popular arts, like TV, film, and modeling, may be more important than artistic skill. Many performing artists go to great lengths to achieve such a form, even at the risk of their own health (Francisco et al., 2012; Kapsetaki & Easmon, 2019; Szabo et al., 2019). Performing artists, then, may demonstrate a more complex and thorough embrace of neoliberal identity by virtue of the demands of their profession.

### **Art and activism**

Despite the well-documented cooption of resistance in the art world, there are many artists who devote themselves to resistant endeavors through the creation of socially engaged

activist art. While the artistic reimagining of the current social context is different from social activism, which concerns itself with immediately moving the material world, they are complimentary. Emotional engagement and a sense of community have been identified as important elements informing activist participation (Brown & Pickerill, 2009; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Talo et al., 2014); a particular strength of art, especially performing art, lies in its ability to create emotional engagement and forge community by bringing artists and audiences together to be moved. By gathering audiences and artistically generating affect therein, the hope of the activist artist is that it will result in a material effect. Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), a seminal figure in the development of political theatre in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, explored the potential of performing art to do just this: “The modern theatre mustn’t be judged by its success in satisfying the audience’s habits but by its success in transforming them” (Brecht, 1978, p. 161). Through audience transformation, Brecht thought to contribute to a larger societal shift (Jovičević, 2014). Duncombe’s (2016) term “aefficacy” (p. 119) is useful here to conceptualize the goal of the activist artist: the creation of a strong emotional response that will lead to practical, material engagement. Thus, the creation of art that is designed to complement and fuel a social activist agenda can be thought of as an indirect form of activism and someone engaging in such work classified as an activist artist. To draw a historical example, the leftist Popular Front of the 1930s had a thriving cultural element, perhaps best exemplified by the extremely influential and widely performed play, *Waiting for Lefty*. The first performance of this production was followed by 1400 audience members chanting, “Strike! Strike!” (Denning, 1996). While the play served the practical function of bringing a large audience of likeminded people together, it might be better thought of as indirect art activism, complementing an activist cause by inspiring emotional engagement and a communal ethos.

Art and social activism need not be merely complementary, however, as art and artmaking can directly participate in altering material conditions. To take another example from history, Robert Purvis (1810-1898), a Black American abolitionist in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, commissioned a painting of the charismatic leader of the *Amistad* mutiny, Sengbe Pieh (1814-1879), not as a slave, but as “a free and noble individual standing before an African landscape” (Lampert, 2013, p. 28). Five hundred reproductions of the painting, titled *Cinque*, were sold to help raise money for Pieh’s legal defense; ultimately, the trial was a landmark victory which resulted in the surviving slaves’ freedom and return to Sierra Leone (Lampert, 2013). By commissioning a portrait to help raise funds for a legal defence crucial to the social activist cause of Abolition, the creation and dissemination of art had a direct material effect. Recently, Marisa Jahn’s (b. 1977) *Domestic Worker App* exemplifies art activism that provides a utility; it is “a call-up hotline that narrates telenovela style stories that inform domestic workers of their rights” (Duncombe, 2016, p. 122-123). Clearly, art can be employed in activist endeavors to varying degrees and fashions, and it can become difficult to cleanly delineate between direct and indirect art activism.

The union of art and activism is sometimes questioned (Duncombe, 2016; Groys, 2014); no doubt, this distrust is in part fueled by the well-theorized Capitalist cooption of art. Beyond this, activist artists may not be considered activists at all, as they do not fit the perfect standard model of activist (Duncombe, 2016); Bobel (2007) found among participants of the Menstrual Activism movement that “exaggerated, even romanticized, abstract allusions to tireless commitment, selfless sacrifice, unparalleled devotion and other conceptions of true activists recurred” (p. 154) and notions of “*real or true* activists who ‘take it to the streets’” (p. 155) predominated. This perfect standard of the ideal activist noted by Bobel (2007) and others

(Craddock, 2018), may challenge the categorization of artists as activists. At the same time, certain artists may bristle at the idea of an instrumental application of art, preferring to see it as having an intrinsic value as a way of understanding and experiencing the world: “accounting for the impact of creativity is often considered a form of heresy” (Duncombe, 2016, p. 115-116). In response to the former argument, I favour a wider definition of activism that allows for any kind of vigorous activity that seeks out the creation of socio-political change (Dittmar & Entin, 2010; Duncombe, 2016). I fear that the narrow use of the term “activist” and “activism” is exclusionary and discourages resistant engagement among those who feel they do not meet the perfect standard (Bobel, 2007; Craddock, 2018). To the latter, I offer that art is made by many different people for many different purposes, and that art made to sell Pepsi or to advocate for social equity is still art, despite a clear practical purpose.

Today, while numerous forms of art activism exist, many activist artists attend directly to the communal and collaborative aspects of performing art, in defiance of individualistic (neo)liberalism (Adams, 2013; Peters, 2015; Sandoval, 2018). In the theatre, community performance serves as an umbrella term to describe activist work created by groups, with no sole author, to preserve and build community within the creation and performance process (Somers, 2009; Vogel & Jackson, 2016). For example, *Jumblies Theatre* in Toronto, founded by Ruth Howard (b. 1957), places “*participation* and *radical inclusion* at the core of [their] project” (Jumblies, 2021) in order to create “transient micro-utopia” (Jumblies, 2021). Community engagement is at the centre of their multi-stage, multi-year process of art creation. Jumblies Theatre’s “*radical*” focus on slow community engagement and collaborative artmaking directly opposes the individualization, efficiency, and product-orientation that characterizes neoliberalism and the business self.

## **The Ontario culture sector and neoliberalism**

Activist artists exist in the same ecosystem as other professional artists and yet, in one way or another, they endeavor to fulfill the resistant potential of art. In Ontario, a quasi-neoliberal approach has been identified in provincial cultural policy and administration. Gattinger and Saint-Pierre's (2010) provincial history of cultural policy highlights a substantially neoliberal approach, initially branded as *The Common Sense Revolution*, from 1995-2002 with Mike Harris' (b. 1945) Progressive Conservative government, and from 2002-2003 with incoming leader Ernie Eves (b. 1946). Austerity and a decentralization of arts resources from the provincial government to competitive non-government organizations characterized this period; by only 1996-1997, "the cultural ministry had reduced spending by 17% and cut its workforce by 32%" (Gattinger & Saint-Pierre, 2010, p. 294), and they focused on "self-reliance in the cultural sector," (Gattinger & Saint-Pierre, 2010, p. 294) shifting away from direct funding of the arts.

Beginning in 2003, the Dalton McGuinty (b. 1955) Liberal government took power and put substantial money back into the culture sector, but with an eye to its potential as a "driver of economic growth, competitiveness, and innovation" (Gattinger & Saint-Pierre, 2010, p. 295), as opposed to the intrinsic value of art for the betterment of life in Ontario. This continuation of a neoliberal attitude, absent austerity, was also reflected in the continued decentralization of the cultural sector, seen in the 2005 Municipal Cultural Planning Partnership – a multi-pronged approach to shift arts and culture planning from the province to the city – and in the continued experimentation with non-governmental funding models (Gattinger & Saint-Pierre, 2010). So, while by 2010 austerity no longer defined the Ontario approach to arts funding, an ideological commitment to neoliberalism persisted in more subtle ways during the McGuinty-led government. In 2014, Kathleen Wynne (b. 1953) took control of the Ontario Liberal Party and

continued this quasi-neoliberal approach. Launched in 2015, the Ontario government's "Culture Strategy" (Government of Ontario, 2016) outlined four goals: to "promote cultural engagement and inclusion," to "strengthen culture in communities," to "fuel the creative economy," and to "promote the value of the arts throughout government." While the first two goals centre on community-building, the last two goals emphasize the economy. The slogan for the Culture Strategy succinctly conveys a quasi-neoliberal approach: "The Ontario Culture Strategy: Telling our stories, growing our economy" (Government of Ontario, 2016).

Now, in 2021, with the Progressive Conservative government of Doug Ford (b. 1964), austerity is once again at play. In 2018, Ford ousted Wynne, running on a campaign that is best "understood within the tradition of Canadian populism defined by an overarching ideological commitment to neoliberalism," (Budd, 2020, p. 171) where "the issues and challenges affecting Ontarians can be boiled down to a lack of individual economic freedom stemming from an inefficient, burdensome and bloated provincial government" (Budd, 2020, p. 177). With the election of Ford, the Ontarian government, then, might be thought to have entered a different period in its relation to neoliberal politics, and may no longer merely be defined as *quasi*-neoliberal. Activist artists in Ontario, then, navigate a work environment characterized by the influence of neoliberalism and one might rightly wonder about the ways in which this governmentality is internalized and resisted.

### **Research questions**

While research has explored the internalization of the entrepreneurial self among professional artists in neoliberal modernity (Scharff, 2016), I am not aware of such work being done within Ontario and, crucially, with activist artists. If activist artists in Ontario provide societal critique and radical imaginaries within a neoliberal province, it is reasonable to wonder



what conceptions of the self would allow them to do so. What elements of the neoliberal business self do they internalize to successfully participate in their neoliberal work environment, and what resistant subjectivities do they demonstrate that allows for the effective creation of their activist work? The answers to such questions can also shed light on the discussions, addressed above, surrounding the definition of activist artist; what do activist artists understand themselves to be?

To address these challenging questions, I embarked on an in-depth, multi-method, qualitative research project. Entering this project, I was unclear whether the findings would reveal a path towards subjective resistance that others may be able to follow or evidence of an internalization of the neoliberal self that could threaten the resistance potential of activist art in Ontario.

## **Approach**

This project makes use of a range of qualitative data. The absence of quantification, however, says little about the underlying theoretical commitments of the research (Allwood, 2012; Tafreshi, Slaney, & Neufeld, 2016). As this is a critical, arts-informed project, these paradigms are discussed below.

### **Critical, participatory**

The central research questions, surrounding the ways in which activist artists in Ontario have internalized a neoliberal self or developed resistant self understandings, are fundamentally critical. There is an assumption in critical research, shared with constructivism, that one's reality is constructed within historical and social contexts (Ponterotto, 2005). Furthermore, because critical researchers are aware of the operation of power through dominant knowledge systems, they are self-conscious about how they reproduce and/or transform the knowledge systems they critique (Ponterotto, 2005; Scotland, 2012). Emancipatory schools of critical research often use the research process as a tool to achieve a liberation agenda, attempting to provide a material benefit for participant engagement in the research and to create positive change (Ponterotto, 2005). There is also often a focus in critical research on leveling the power imbalance between researcher and researched, with the implementation of participatory approaches that do research *with* participants, as opposed to *on* subjects.

In line with the understanding that reality is constructed in-context, the present research focuses on the ways in which the participants experience and understand their work, work environment, and activist artist identities as they are both shaped by and shaping neoliberal Ontario. As an integral participant in the process of knowledge creation, I acknowledge my role in knowledge co-construction. The present research embraces a participatory approach and

follows other critical researchers who lead with an acknowledgement of and engagement with their subjective values. Inspired by critical ethnography and qualitative Filipino Psychology (SP) (Lerum, 2001; Pe-Pua, 2006), I proceeded with the belief that greater proximity, as opposed to objectivity, would both engage the participants more directly in knowledge creation and allow for more insightful, rich, and accurate data and interpretations surrounding participant subjectivity. I recruited from my personal networks and had pre-existing relationships of varied forms with the participating activist artists. A series of arts-workshops, discussed at greater length in the Methods and Process sections, was created for the participating activist artists to actively participate in knowledge creation. Member-checking (Cresswell & Miller, 2000) was offered after completion of the first and second drafts of the Results and summaries of the findings were given to the participants at these times.

Critical paradigms pose unique challenges. First, any or all of the diagnosis of an issue, the perceived source of its cause, and the strategy for its resolution may be pre-determined by the researcher. As such, unsolicited researcher values may be imposed on participants, a problem made worse if the researcher is a distinct outsider to the relevant community. Second, the deeply entrenched power dynamic between researcher and researched is extremely difficult to erase. This is not to say that useful efforts cannot be made to reduce this power difference and soften the impact of this dynamic on participant experience and research outcome, but, even with these efforts, participants' behaviour and experience may still be influenced by a persistent and hard-to-detect power imbalance or subtle exploitation (Lofman et al., 2004; Scotland, 2012). Third, an emancipatory aim is a lofty one and success is not guaranteed. On the one hand, attempting to bring about socio-political change through research may shake participants emotionally by naively building up their hope for change or revealing disturbing issues that appear insoluble,

thus doing more harm than good (Scotland, 2012). On the other hand, change may come, but may be harmful or unsettling (Lofman et al., 2004).

I have endeavored to address these difficulties throughout the process. As an artist with direct connections to the community, I believe I am a partial insider; partial because, while I have relationships with the participating artists and have spent time working as an artist, I did not prioritize activism in my work in theatre and I am currently conducting academic research. I feel my partial-insider status has given me some insight into the difficulties faced by the community, primarily with regards to the work environment. Understanding that this insight is limited, however, I also endeavored to maintain a flexible data collection process with ample opportunity for participants to guide the exploration themselves. This both served to attenuate the researcher-researched power dynamic and to avoid my imposition of a problem/resolution onto the participants. I have deliberately avoided language that may be perceived as judgmental, such as “neoliberalism,” “internalization,” and “resistance,” opting instead for more neutral terms such as “entrepreneurship,” “shaping,” and “alternative.” In this sense, my aim was not to “free” the participants from neoliberalism (an absurd goal on its face), but to work together as a group to identify potential difficulties in negotiating activist aims with making a living in the Ontario artist work environment, and how these difficulties are experienced, given in to, and overcome.

### **Arts-informed**

Critical research is interested in critiquing research itself and exploring novel ways to engage participants in knowledge creation that can challenge scientific hegemony; recently, much of this exploration has surrounded art. Arts-based research (ABR), broadly defined, is the incorporation of any form of art at any stage in the research process, surrounding any topic of interest (Knowles & Cole, 2008). While some useful taxonomies specify subcategories within

this overarching definition of ABR (Wang et al., 2017), common parlance has evolved to differentiate between *arts-based* and *arts-informed* research (AIR) as the two main subcategories of art research. The present study is best understood as AIR, which typically makes use of art as one qualitative method among many to elicit more nuanced data, engage participants in knowledge creation, reach multiple audiences more effectively, and challenge positivist understandings of science (Knowles & Cole, 2008). For these reasons, AIR is compatible with critical research generally. A collaborative arts workshop environment was used in the present study to provide benefit to the participants in the form of introducing them to a style of collaborative artmaking known as “kernelling” and to engage them in an ongoing and participatory process of knowledge creation. The collaborative art workshops are described in more depth in the Methods section.

AIR has particular potential in subjectivity research. While research on subjectivity has centred largely on talk and text data, the incorporation of art into research opens new avenues in our exploration of this challenging concept. Art adds something to research by communicating the *ineffable* (Leavy, 2009), that which cannot be captured with functional language. Art’s special ability to succinctly integrate the individual, interpersonal, and cultural can amount to a dense expression of subjective experience; indeed, the communication of subjective experience appears to be the goal of many artistic traditions. The integration of art as one method among other qualitative ones has been argued to “not merely duplicate data,” offering “complementary insights and understandings” (Darbyshire et al., 2005, p. 417). Additionally, with a cultural-historical ontology of subjectivity in mind (Rey, 2017; Rey, 2019), art creation might be thought of as agentive subjectivity-in-process from which resistance might emerge. Art, then, can be a key tool in our elucidation of subjectivity in general, as well as for its critical application, making

it useful for the present study. Furthermore, the participants in this study are performing artists and, therefore, are accustomed to making meaning through the creation and consumption of artistic media. This makes art an even more suitable method to this research.

In the Results section, artistic data contributed throughout the process by the participants is considered alongside more conventional methods to deepen our understanding of the participating activist artists' subjectivity and the ways they engage in subjective resistance. The integration of art with other more conventional forms of data poses certain difficulties. Art is often deliberately ambiguous, laced with multiple, rich meanings that can transcend description. Throughout the Results section, when invoking artistic data, I make use of accompanying artist description and data derived from the artist's interviews, focus group, and reflections to help ground the derivation of themes from art; it is for this reason that this project is most suitably classified as arts-informed, as opposed to arts-based, research. I have also been careful to emphasize when the interpretations are my own and to include the artistic contributions in full for the reader to conclude for themselves if the data sufficiently supports the created themes. I trust these steps will improve the rigour of the study and the trustworthiness of the analysis.

### **Multiple qualitative methods**

In an effort to explore the complex concepts of subjectivity and the self, I have employed multiple qualitative methods, allowing for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of participant experience (Frost & Nolas, 2011). This pluralistic use of qualitative methods also has the advantage and difficulty of fusing methods and actively involving both researcher and participants in *doing research together* (Chamberlain et al., 2011).

Despite its advantages in exploring difficult concepts and further engaging participants in the research, method pluralism has not been a widely embraced practice in disciplinary

Psychology (Frost & Nolas, 2011). I agree with Chamberlain et al. (2011) who feel that this is rooted partially in Psychology's persistent orthodoxy, carried over from quantitative realms, that a single data point per participant – for example, an interview – is sufficient to capture what is required to answer complex qualitative research questions. One form of data, collected at one time, does indeed seem inadequate for the complex topics of self and subjectivity, so I have integrated multiple interviews, a focus group, regular artistic contributions, and weekly written reflections with a small number of participants to achieve a well-rounded and in-depth understanding. This allowed me to achieve “prolonged engagement in the field” (Cresswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127), improving the rigour of the study. The various methods employed were tailored to be coherent with one another and consistent with the critical, participatory approach adopted; interviews were unstructured and conversational, workshops were flexible and participant-driven, weekly reflections were open-ended and could take any form, and the focus group served the dual-role of giving the group a sense of closure to the workshop environment.

A pluralistic approach is extremely demanding. For this study, it required greater time, emotional engagement with participants, creative thought, and reflexivity. These demands, along with the draining uncertainty of experimenting with method, may dissuade professionals from a pluralistic approach. It should be noted, though, that these challenges appear to lead to substantial benefits to the quality of resultant research, as they encouraged a project with methods better suited to its research questions, deeper reflexivity, and a deepened sense of researcher responsibility to participants.

### **Criteria for evaluation of qualitative research**

In addition to the approach-specific understandings of what makes effective and rigorous critical, arts-informed research detailed above, more general criteria exist upon which the present

qualitative research might be evaluated. Ethical *transparency* is a fundamental component of all scientific research (Moravcsik, 2014). In qualitative research, while the data that is released to the public must be carefully selected and with participants' consent (Monroe, 2018; Pratt et al., 2020), the research process must be thoroughly articulated. For my thesis project, in this Approach section, I outline my theoretical commitments, the Methods section addresses the specific data collection and analytic techniques used, and the Process section reflexively describes the data collection journey, from beginning to end.

Related to transparency, researcher *reflexivity* is one of the most discussed and celebrated aspects of effective qualitative research (Tracy, 2010). In a sense, reflexivity is the full extension of transparency beyond method and into the harder to articulate, but equally important, context of project creation and implementation. To be fully transparent about what happened during the project, a researcher is obliged to describe themselves, addressing several questions, such as: Why was I drawn to the research question? How might my positionality affect the data I collect? How did I feel during the research process, and how might that have affected the interactions I had with my participants? While many relativist qualitative researchers abandon the concept of objectivity altogether, I understand it as an ideal towards which to strive, and that an effective engagement with one's own subjectivity through reflexivity is the only way to approach objectivity; Fine (2006) echoes Sandra Harding, using the term *strong objectivity* to describe the outcome of exercising sufficient reflexivity to “*not* to be guided, unwittingly, by predispositions and the pull of biography” (p. 89), as opposed to the weak objectivity of uncritical, unreflexive science.

To ensure greater reflexivity throughout the research process, I maintained a reflexivity journal (Meyer & Willis, 2019), making entries after every interaction with participants, during



transcription, and throughout analysis. I found this to be an essential aspect of the process, as it drove me to continually ask questions of myself and of the data I was collecting, enabling me to see what I might have otherwise missed in the data and to avoid over-interpretation. The structure of the project, with data collection spread out over the course of approximately a month, allowed for more time to meditate on the ways in which I might have been unintentionally shaping the data and it gave me time to make alterations where necessary. I also had regular conversations with my supervisor who would often help me identify how my own assumptions and interests were influencing the direction of the research and my interpretations. Ultimately, I endeavored to make reflexivity central to the research process as opposed to an obligatory section in my final write-up; this has been emotionally and intellectually taxing at times, but also engrossing and full of self-discovery.

Also drawing from Fine (2006), I offer that *theoretical generalizability* and *provocative generalizability* can be thought of as important criteria with which to assess qualitative research. Fine (2006) highlights how effective qualitative research, in its extreme specificity to its own participants and context, has the potential to highlight dynamics that might be observed among other people in other environments. She refers to this as theoretical generalizability. As a related term, provocative generalizability serves as “a measure of the extent to which a piece of research *provokes* readers, across contexts [...]; to rethink and reimagine current arrangements” (Fine, 2006, p. 98). One’s qualitative research output, then, can be thought of as subjectivity-in-process that itself contributes to a shifting culture, and, thus, has the potential for resistance. Both the theoretical and provocative generalizability of a qualitative research project speaks to the research’s wider contribution, allowing it to move beyond the scope of its deliberately narrow focus.

In some ways these two criteria are outside of the control of the researcher, who hopes that they can find meaningful and impactful findings, but who cannot simply manufacture them. Nonetheless, I have attempted to go beyond surface descriptions and understandings of how participants negotiate their activist work with their work environment, looking for meaningful dynamics that might be relevant outside Ontario and beyond the context of activist art. Indeed, as all work environments begin to resemble the precarious gig-work that has long characterized the arts (Petriglieri et al., 2019), such research becomes widely relevant. Furthermore, I hope that the current project's critical attention to resistant subjectivity can provoke audiences to engage with their own forms of resistance to neoliberalism and neoliberal subjectivity, and that the incorporation of artistic explorations can engage readers on another level in service of greater provocation.

## **Methods**

Multiple qualitative methods were incorporated to explore the internalization and resistance of the NLFS among four participating activist artists who work, or have worked primarily, in Ontario. The entire project was conducted online, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The methods employed included pre- and post-workshop private interviews, a four-week collaborative arts workshop, weekly workshop reflections, and a focus group. For a brief, overall outline of the project, see Appendix A.

### **Collaborative art workshops**

In a critical posture, this project included four, weekly, three-hour, collaborative, process-based arts workshops, as we attempted to learn together through activities that resist (neo)liberal individualism. Building on movements in community performance, this workshop aimed to create a space for likeminded activist artists to come together and experiment with the possibility of their activist causes being explored collaboratively. It was meant as a strategy to help build community among activist artists, in whatever small way possible, as I researched. The direction taken by the art, interactions, and discussions during the workshops was intentionally left open to the group's guidance; the focus of the workshops was flexible to ensure it could be informed by what the participants felt was important to discuss surrounding their work, work environment, and subjectivity as activist artists. As a recurring meeting, it was developed to be a space for participants to regularly ponder the research topic and elicit more considered, complex, and nuanced data. Furthermore, the communal art-creation process provides activities for participants to engage in together and these interactions themselves become potentially dynamic points of investigation into the interpersonal elements of subjectivity.

The workshops were based on a model of collaborative art creation I learned in a two-week devised theatre workshop through *Soulpepper Theatre* in 2015, led by theatre artists Mike Ross and Ins Choi. The collaborative method taught is called “kernelling,” drawing on a metaphor of making popcorn. All participating artists bring in their own “kernel,” which is a small contribution of any sort that the artist feels hold some creative resonance; some examples of this kernel are a line of a poem, a melody, or a newspaper clipping. Each kernel is then passed to another artist, who allows it to inspire them; they create any form of artistic response to the contribution, either building on it or working in reaction to it. The kernel is starting to be “popped,” as these small artistic responses are then passed along to other artists to be further collaboratively developed. Eventually, the pieces are worked on all at once, and finally attempted to be integrated in some fashion. Feedback is regularly offered by the group to help each other develop the work.

As the present workshops were held online, artistic contributions had to be presentable over Zoom or through web links. To reduce participant risk, at the risk of imposing too firm a structure on the group, a three-stage model of artistic feedback was implemented that I drew from a graduate class led by Dr. Honour Ford-Smith at York University (H. Ford-Smith, personal communication, September 24, 2020). When an artistic piece is shared, the group members describe (1) what they saw, (2) how they interpret what they saw, and (3) proposals for future development. Strategically missing from this feedback structure is any evaluation of the artwork to avoid the emotional risks that can emerge from both sharing artwork and providing criticism.

To help build an environment that felt safe and where participants were comfortable with experimenting artistically and grappling with complex issues, workshop sessions were not

recorded in their entirety. This also reduced the sheer amount of data, making analysis more manageable. I made personal notes throughout, kept an ongoing reflexivity journal, and documented the artwork created along the way. In the final workshop, recordings were made of performances that the group generated, which I then edited into a “final” video. Participants mutually consented for the link to the “final” video to be sent around to the group, and for group members to be able to share the link with anyone they feel may find it of interest. For a week-by-week schedule of the collaborative art workshops, see Appendix B.

### **Weekly reflections**

Participants were asked to submit a short reflection after each workshop by email. It was specified that these could take any form, but were typically non-artistic written responses to the week’s workshop. The reflections were meant to serve as ongoing data to track the participants’ development in thought surrounding the research topic, and to evaluate the effectiveness of the workshops as experience, intervention, and data collection method. Importantly, they also served the purpose of monitoring the participants’ feelings of safety and comfort in the research space; happily, no serious issues arose. Also, disagreements can be voiced more safely in this private space than in the communal workshop environment, and differing perspectives surrounding group events can be observed.

### **Pre- and post-workshop interviews**

I conducted unstructured, one-on-one interviews both before and after the collaborative arts-workshop with each participant. The interview is a commonly used qualitative method, allowing for lengthy, individual explorations of complex subject matter. The impact of an online environment for interviewing has been explored, with some researchers highlighting its drawbacks of a limited rapport and potential lack of privacy, and others emphasizing the benefits

of a home environment for providing more personal, reflective data (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; O'Connor et al., 2008).

All interviews were casual, conversational, and unstructured; the precise wording and question order varied between interviews to ensure greater ease and flow. Pre-workshop interviews were developed to inquire about participants' understandings of, and their relationships to, their activist artistic work and their work environments. Questions began generally and proceeded to probe more directly for evidence of internalization and resistance of neoliberal subjectivity. For the list of pre-workshop interview questions, see Appendix C. Post-workshop interviews were intended largely to assess the effects of the collaborative art workshop. They also served as a useful time to pose any questions that emerged in the preceding workshops, reflections, and focus group. For the schedule of post-workshop interview questions, see Appendix D. These interviews were especially useful in granting a sense of closure, saying goodbye to participants individually, and offering thanks.

### **Focus group**

A week after the workshops concluded, the “final” video was viewed together, and a focus group was held. Focus groups are perhaps the second most common form of qualitative data collection, after interviews, allowing for the collection of in-depth data in a social context (Asbury, 1995). While they are conveniently used to gather numerous perspectives in a short time, I employed them in this research to pose more normative questions surrounding activist arts work, shedding light on cultural and interpersonal aspects of subjective experience of the profession. For focus group questions, see Appendix E.

### **Analysis**

I employed a thematic analysis (TA) to identify themes related to the internalization and resistance of the neoliberal business self. As described by Braun and Clarke (2006), TA consists of six, iterative phases: 1) familiarization and transcription, 2) coding, 3) searching for themes, 4) refining themes, 5) naming themes, and 6) the write-up of the analysis. The steps of TA provide a useful guideline for researchers to develop themes, but it is extremely flexible in its application. The nature of the coding will be determined by the research question, as inductive or deductive approaches might be used (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Drawing largely from Saldana's (2013) coding handbook, I decided to begin the TA with an inductive, "eclectic" (p. 188) approach, combining "descriptive" (p. 87) and "in vivo" (p. 91) coding of small meaning units (Chenail, 2012). I felt that this approach was important to capture the voices of the participants fairly. I then proceeded to pattern code to develop themes (Saldana, 2013). While this was a useful, albeit time-intensive, way to familiarize myself with the data, unsurprisingly it did not sufficiently address the primary research questions; deductive approaches are better suited to the kind of "ideology critique" (Scotland, 2012, p. 14) that in some ways characterizes this work (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and, as I discuss at greater length in the Process section below, my focus had strayed somewhat over time from the intended research question. I ultimately returned to coding with a more deductive approach, drawn from the literature on the business self.

The kind of data used in TA, too, is flexible; while most qualitative analysis is built to address talk and text data, attempts have been made to code and develop themes with other forms of data (e.g., Gleeson, 2011). My initial intention upon developing this project was to analyze any visual artwork created during the workshop – dance, drawings, performance art – alongside the talk and text data – interviews, focus group, written reflections, poetry, prose – to explore any differences between artistic and non-artistic expressions of subjectivity; however, this question

branched too far afield from the primary research question to be addressed in this Masters' thesis. Most of the visual art was accompanied by participant description contextualizing the artwork, so ultimately these descriptions served as the basis for analysis.

TA has invited certain criticisms with its wide implementation across qualitative research in the social sciences. Some appear to feel that an “off-the-shelf” methodology (Chamberlain, 2012) is superior analytically to an atheoretical analytic method, such as TA, as it provides a prepackaged combination of “theory, analytic method and (elements of) research design” (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 38). There may well be legitimate concern about an undeserved assumption of implicit rigour in TA leading to a thoughtless application. My use of TA is not a thoughtless “go to,” and I offer that its flexibility by virtue of being atheoretical has made it appropriate in the context of the present research.

Other analytic approaches were considered, but they all proceed with certain philosophical assumptions about subjectivity that do not align directly with Rey's (2017; 2019) cultural-historical subjectivity. Expanding the concept beyond discursive explanations, the definition used by this research acknowledges the historical and cultural embeddedness of an individual, while understanding subjectivity as an open system and physical action as subjectivity-in-process, thus providing a basis for subjective resistance. The major existing methods of analysis currently used to understand subjective experience – phenomenology and discourse analysis (DA) – proceed from specific understandings of subjectivity that are not entirely compatible with this ontology.

Phenomenology, on the one hand, in the Husserlian – descriptive – tradition, is predicated on the belief that a researcher can “parenthesize” (Husserl, 1983, p. 59) or *bracket* their preconceptions and identify common *essences* of human experience (Husserl, 1983; Sloan &



Bowe, 2013). The ontological understanding of shared subjective essences and the epistemological assumption that one can objectively study them are not compatible with a cultural-historical subjectivity. While the Heideggerian – hermeneutic – tradition more successfully acknowledges the embedded nature of subjective experience and the fundamental researcher interpretation at the heart of such analyses, and thus is more ontologically and epistemically suitable, its focus on exploring how specific lived phenomena (e.g. depression) manifest in our subjective experience (Neubauer et al., 2019) is not easily applied to research aims of identifying internalized and resistant notions of the self in a certain context (i.e. neoliberal Ontario). Notwithstanding intriguing recent attempts at a critical phenomenology (Weiss et al., 2020), a phenomenological analytic method was not suitable for this research.

On the other hand, the research's language of internalization and resistance is compatible with critical discourse analysis (CDA), which employs semiotic and linguistic analysis to reveal, critique, and work to redress hegemonic structures of dominance (Ayers, 2005; Flowerdew & Richardson, 2017). It should be noted, though, that there is some theoretical conflict between critical theory and a Foucauldian approach in which there is no single preferred or emancipatory “truth” (Bischoping & Gazso, 2016; Hammersley, 1997). Furthermore, the lack of attention to resistance within many approaches inspired by Foucault, along with a scriptocentric reduction of human experience to discourse (Conquergood, 2013), are, in part, what Rey (2017; 2019) has developed his ontological definition of subjectivity to address. Applying CDA, then, may inadvertently undercut the benefits of applying an alternate ontological definition of subjectivity. Additionally, by focusing entirely on underlying discourses, often unrecognized by participants, participants can become passive ciphers for researchers to decode, as opposed to active participants in knowledge production, which goes against the grain of an emancipatory approach.

And so, without an established analytic method to properly inspect subjectivity so defined, I opted to make use of the most flexible available analytic method and to tailor it to the critical orientation and ontological definition employed by the research, with greater focus on subjectivity-in-process as resistance. It should be noted that I have not developed a new analytic approach to best explore this cultural-historical subjectivity; such an undertaking, though it would be extremely worthwhile, is beyond the scope of this Master's thesis.

## **Process**

This section aims to provide a practical transparency surrounding the context of data collection. As the first qualitative research project I have conceived and conducted, it has been a messy process of continual learning. I hope that this section will specify the contours of this thoughtful messiness, reveal the source of any perceived strengths or shortcomings of the results, and inspire others to experiment with different approaches to incorporating art creation into data collection. I begin with an overview of how and why the research focus developed over the course of the project in reaction to key ethical considerations. I then proceed to describe chronologically key moments throughout the data collection process.

### **The research question: Considerations of ethics and strong objectivity in critical subjectivity research**

Coming into the project, I had some initial jitters, but I was put at ease by the participants' generous presence and sharing. I write in my reflexivity notes, "I am so appreciative and admiring of these folks." These feelings persisted throughout the project and presented a curious problem that I noted from the very first interviews: "I am realizing how hard it will be to write in any way unflatteringly." I flagged this thought as potentially deeply problematic, insofar as it could preclude any analysis that observes internalization or cooption of the NLFS, which is the central focus of the project.

I believe that it is a good thing to feel the weight of the responsibility of ethical conduct with participants. Such an understanding, crucial to all research, is foregrounded in critical approaches. Getting to know one's participants well and refuting the academic tradition of emotional detachment, as is the practice in much critical ethnography, not only builds trust and data quality in subjectivity research, but reminds a researcher of the real implications of one's

work (Lerum, 2001). However, one must also consider the ethics of producing the most honest possible research in fulfillment of a responsibility to the wider community, about which the researcher ostensibly cares a great deal. As a performing artist who knew the participants before the project began, I felt like a partial insider, and I wanted strongly to both honestly present what I observed and also ensure an enriching experience for the participating activist artists. At the early stages of the project these two ethical obligations had not come into tension, but I could foresee a world where they might. That concerned me greatly.

To avoid this potential tension that is, perhaps, implicit to such critical research on subjectification, I nudged the focus of the research slightly, knowing that research questions themselves can be refined throughout qualitative projects (Agee, 2009). As I proceeded with the research throughout data collection and into analysis, instead of internalization and resistance of the NLFS, I began thinking in terms of how these activist artists navigate a neoliberal work environment. I conducted a TA in this vein, but the outcome of this work contributed little new or worthwhile knowledge and did not do justice to the rich data we had generated as a group. By this point, following a time-intensive and disappointing analysis, I had engaged in deep reflexivity surrounding my ethical commitments and implicit values. I felt aware of the potential stumbling blocks of the work, in part by tripping over a few of them, and I knew the data extremely well. I ultimately came back around in my analysis to answer the question the project was designed to address, with a renewed confidence that I could approach a strong objectivity. I attempted to accurately describe observed dynamics related to the business self in a nonjudgmental way that rightfully targets the system in which we are all enmeshed.

### **Recruiting participants**

When I decided I would recruit through my networks upon initially conceiving this project, I did not know at the time just how profoundly knowing my participants would shape the process. At the stage of recruitment, reaching out to my networks for participants aroused a variety of confusing feelings. Self-doubt, social isolation, guilt. Will they think I have stopped creating art? Am I still an *insider* among performing artists? Will they understand the value of what I want to do? Will they feel I am exploiting our friendship? Generally, the response was comforting, with friends wanting to help, sending along their colleague's contact information with words of encouragement surrounding the project topic. A notable response I received from multiple contacts, though, rattled me. They wondered if it was compensated. Well, it was not at the time, and I said as much. Okay, I'm not interested, they replied, or, Ah, too bad, my interested friend only does projects that pay.

Indeed, the project went through ethics review without an inducement included. I felt that it provided enough benefit through the workshops, which in some contexts would incur a fee, that an inducement would be unnecessary. I also worried that an inducement might unethically encourage participation, having participants view the project as a "gig" as opposed to a research project. The responses I received made me question this decision. While I was working through these difficulties, I was also receiving emails of interest for participation, ending with four activist artists who would make an excellent workshop group. I decided it would be best to make an amendment to the project for a \$50 inducement per participant as a gesture of goodwill. Such a change required ethics approval in a process that would likely take one month, so I made the decision to proceed with the interested participants and surprise them with an inducement down the road as gesture of goodwill and support of the community. While this strategy seemed to work out, in future, I would not embark on a project with this community had I not initially

secured enough funding to adequately compensate them. For recruitment messages, see Appendix F.

### **The group**

Four participants were accepted into the arts-research project. The names given are pseudonyms, selected by the participants themselves. I will describe the participants briefly here, with enough detail to provide context, but obscured enough to assure confidentiality. I hope these descriptions will be useful references when reading the Results. Of course, the participants had much to offer that these brief descriptions cannot illustrate and I was extremely fortunate that all four gave their time to participate.

#### *Michelle*

Michelle is 20-29 years old, ethnically Hispanic, female-identifying, and has an invisible disability. While she has a theatre background, she currently does experimental performing art, and other forms of contemporary fine art. Her activist artwork primarily surrounds both disability and youth.

#### *Raven*

Raven is 20-29 years old, gender non-binary (pronouns zey/zem), ethnically mixed-race, and identifies as having a disability. Zey work primarily as a musician, but have a theatre background and have worked as a drag king. Along with dragging, zey do other activist artwork surrounding queer issues, the Black Lives Matter movement, and with youth.

Raven and Michelle were friends with each other before the project took place. I was slightly concerned about this at the outset, as I worried other participants may feel excluded; in the end, though, I felt it provided a nice energy within the group and allowed there to be more

ease and trust throughout the project. I was connected with Michelle and Raven through a third party.

### *Charlotte*

Charlotte is 30-39 years old, white, female-identifying, queer-identifying, and identifies as being part of the Mad community. Charlotte holds a doctorate and identifies as an alt academic. Her activist performance art and academic work surrounds queer, feminist, and low-income issues. I knew Charlotte personally and professionally before the beginning of the project.

### *Delaine Greè*

Delaine Greè is 40-49 years old, ethnically South Asian, and female identifying. Her main artistic media are dance and theatre performance. While she has experience in the arts, she also has a professional background in marketing and advertisement. Her main causes of interest that she engages with artistically and otherwise are human trafficking and domestic abuse. I knew Delaine Greè casually beforehand from an educational environment.

## **Pre-workshop interviews**

I found the pre-workshop interviews extremely rich and rewarding. I was struck immediately, though, by how I had to negotiate past existing relationships and my partial insider status with the researcher relationship. Having pre-existing relationships with participants allowed the conversations to flow more easily in some ways, but as I note in my reflexivity journal, “I felt like sharing my stories and praising [the participant] for their [point of view].” I see that this emerges, in part, from pre-established reciprocal relationships between myself and the participants, making my continual asking of questions almost feel rude without sharing my own stories. In line with feminist interviewing strategies (Oakley, 1988), this can be seen as a

strength by reducing the researcher-researched power imbalance and putting participants at ease. I fear, though, that it may have led participants too much instead of allowing them to have control of the direction of the unstructured interviews; I wrote, “try not to steer going forward.” Later, upon transcribing the early interviews, I noticed that “I ask the question, then get nervous and talk more to clarify. I fear this leads to certain kinds of answers.” I do not think this drastically affected the data collected, but I felt it was important enough to make a reflexive note.

As I reflect now, I wonder if my sharing of personal stories also results from the desire to assert my partial insider status as a performing artist. I feel this is destructive to the extent it was at play. I have not consistently engaged activist causes through my art and I am turning to those who have for their knowledge and experience; throughout the project, I endeavored to communicate my ignorance and my desire to struggle through these questions together with the participants, but I fear this did not always come across. I look back on some moments of oversharing on my part with embarrassment.

### **The next month: Collaborative workshops, transcriptions, & the “final” video**

The workshop process vacillated between great excitement and joy, and self-doubt and concern. For me, the former largely outweighed the latter, due in no small part to the infectious engagement of the participating activist artists, and their often-stunning artistic contributions. My reflexive notes become wilder and more energetic as the workshops went on; they crescendo nicely as everyone got more used to each other and started having some fun: “so fun and creatively energizing/exciting. An exhale indeed. No stress.” Participants later told me that they felt free to express themselves and that they enjoyed each other’s (virtual) company. At the end of the project, participants expressed a desire to share their contact information with the group, so they could stay in touch going forward.



The unexpected fruitfulness of the workshops as methods of data collection was also a source of personal excitement. While I hoped it would be useful as a method, I was taken aback by how rich, layered, and ample the data was. The sessions were not recorded for data reduction and to create a safer, welcoming art-creation environment, so a lot of rich information was not sufficiently collected. In retrospect, I would have recorded these sessions and omitted other data collection methods, like the interesting-but-redundant focus group. The feedback sessions, in which the group described, interpreted, and made development proposals to a participants' artistic contribution, were particularly revealing. Also, the practice of kernelling allowed people to engage in conversation and disagreement, while maintaining a positive energy. Where a participant might feel hesitant to publicly disagree with another group member in the context of a focus group, in the kernelling process artistic reactions expressing disagreement felt less antagonistic. For example, Charlotte brought in a syllabus that offered that entrepreneurialism might be thought of as intrinsic to marginalization and, thus, challenging the image of a hegemonically masculine, white, and wealthy entrepreneur. Delaine Greè, then, wrote a poem about racism in response to this syllabus, bitterly reflecting on how people of colour must engage in "much shunting" that is not required of "fair sons." Delaine Greè's poem appears to concede that entrepreneurialism is an element of marginalization, but does not celebrate this fact as the syllabus appears to. In this environment, then, textured disagreements and elaborations can play out artistically, with a greater feeling of emotional safety. Finally, the weekly reflections also provided a space to voice disagreements and explore others' contributions without having to publicly disagree or argue. These reflections served as a useful addition to the workshops, capturing important information that was missed in the flow of a group workshop and providing a space for more participant reflection.

Some reasons for my self-doubt and concern have already been described surrounding ethical considerations. Other concerns emerged from the transcription process, which I was conducting over the weeks that the workshops were taking place. Transcription is an important, time-intensive element of qualitative research that often is ignored in reporting (Davidson, 2009). I believe, though, that the transcription process meaningfully informed my demeanor in the ongoing workshops and my understanding of the data. The transcription required me to watch myself in interaction with the participants for hours at a time, and I found it difficult not to focus on flaws in my research approach. This did not help me feel more comfortable in the already peculiar virtual environment as I facilitated the workshops. It also created somewhat skewed relationships between me and the participants, which I recall remarking on to Delaine Grée; it felt to me as if I was spending a great deal of time with the participants as I transcribed the video interviews, but, in reality, we saw each other fairly little over the course of the project. I felt the need to consciously avoid over-familiarity because of this.

I deliberately created a flexible environment in the workshops to allow participants to lead the exploration into how the work environment shapes activist artist subjectivity. I provided a schedule for the workshops and jumped in when guidance was needed, but ultimately attempted to take on the role of fellow group member. The project flexibility was identified by Raven after the workshops as feeling “empowering,” and a general strength. After the second workshop, however, I grew concerned that the focus of the art creation was leaving the intended topic of exploration. I decided to start the third workshop with a restatement of the intent of the project, which I felt perhaps I had insufficiently articulated. I feel this provided some useful focus, as this third meeting marked what I see as a breakthrough in the workshop series. Play within activist art, in reaction to pressures of perfectionism, emerged as a central discovery of the

workshops; this is discussed in more length in the Results section. This discovery took the “final” performances we created into an exploration of play in activist art and the politics of play. The flexible structure, then, was crucial to the benefit of the workshops, the main discoveries of which emerged in real-time, directly from the artistic, emotional, and intellectual experimentations of the participants.

In the last workshop, the group recorded the “final” results of the kernelling process. As a process-based workshop, no perfect artistic creation was attempted, only experimentation; these “final” performances are meant to be themselves inspiration for more fully formed works and to demonstrate the fruitfulness of collaborative experimentation. Once recorded, the group collectively decided how best to edit them together into an impactful single video file. Notably, Charlotte offered to edit the file according to the group consensus. We all agreed, and it was not until I had turned off the Zoom meeting that I realized she would not be able to take over the editing. I had fallen so comfortably into a group member role that I forgot that the recordings were confidential project data; I could not simply send them over to a participant. I sent around an apology email and edited the video myself according to the group’s specifications. This anecdote speaks to some of the challenges of conducting unconventional arts-informed research. Roles and methods can become blurry and it is crucial to be vigilant about ethical obligations. Now, all participants have consented for the video to be included in this thesis, with faces unblurred (*"Final" piece*, 2021).

### **Focus group & post-workshop interviews**

At the beginning of our recorded focus group, we watched the video together. This was a nice exercise, as it allowed all of us to reflect on the past few weeks and consider what we have

created. It was also a useful way to launch into a discussion surrounding normative understandings of art activism and the professional arts work environment.

The focus group ended with a suggestion, from Raven and Michelle, that I might have better addressed social location in the project. They expressed a desire for more in-depth questions surrounding what makes one an activist artist and how one's positionality affects their experience and engagement in their craft. I agreed that this had not been adequately addressed, due in no small part to my positionality at the intersection of numerous dimensions of privilege, and I devised a question to address it in the final interviews.

The discussions of these post-workshop interviews were significant for me. Almost all the participants individually echoed that they felt a major success of the workshops was that the diverse group felt comfortable and willing to show vulnerability with one another, but that had I led it differently, or had another man at my same privileged social location facilitated the group, they feel the project could have gone very badly. I attribute this success in part to both its flexibility, which ensured the participants would lead the direction of exploration, and to the pre-existing relationships between myself and the participants, which allowed us to begin the project from a foundation of trust. However, I now reflect on how fortunate I was for the project to have succeeded, and how I might encounter substantial barriers to researching activism in other contexts with other participants. These discussions also encouraged me to further interrogate my positionality in the research context in order to approach strong objectivity more effectively.

### **Thematic analysis results**

I constructed the following themes in conversation with the data; I emphasize this to avoid the positivist mistake of claiming that the “findings” were lying dormant in the data until I came along to scoop them up with this analysis. I have spent ample time with the large amount of data, attempting to understand it as best I can by exploring different potential meanings while interrogating my own assumptions and expectations. I coded all text, artistic or not, conscientiously. In line with strategies to assure rigour in qualitative methods (Cresswell & Miller, 2000), I searched for disconfirming evidence for all developing themes, giving me more confidence in the thematic map and providing nuance to the write-up that I am not sure would have been possible otherwise. I also engaged in member-checking (Cresswell & Miller, 2000) to improve confidence that my results adequately capture the participants’ experience. After an initial draft of the Results, I sent a message to the participants with a brief summary of the findings and an offer to look through the entire analysis. Raven and Michelle both replied with interest and approval of the summary, and Raven requested a draft of the findings to look over. Charlotte and Delaine Greè did not respond. After a series of modifications to the analysis, I distributed another summary of the Results and Discussion. Both Delaine Greè and Michelle expressed approval, while Raven and Charlotte did not respond. Out of respect for Charlotte’s decision not to participate in member-checking, I have not sent further follow-up emails. The feedback received from member-checking gives me more confidence in the accuracy of the results as only approval was voiced by participants; however, I will remind the reader that not all participants engaged in member-checking throughout the process and social pressures may have inhibited critical feedback.

I have created themes that are common to the participants, but I mention regularly throughout where one or more participants diverge from the others. The themes probe for the following important elements of the business self and explore to what degree and in what ways they are internalized: the understanding of artist as entrepreneur, professional relationships that are defined by competition and utilitarian networking, a perpetual need for an efficient use of time, self-branding, a decontextualized responsabilization, and a product orientation. The ways in which these key elements of the business self are resisted and the forms of alternative self-understandings that emerged throughout the research process are also considered.

### **Theme 1. “I was born and then there was art”**

As self-identifying artists, the participants’ understanding of the artist and professional artist identity might grant insight into their subjective conception of the self. This, however, is only true to the extent that they feel their identity as “artist” is truly important and related to their personal self. As such, illustrating how this appears to be true among the participating activist artists seems an important initial theme.

All four participating artists report engaging with art from a very young age, suggesting a close personal identification with being artists, prior to any professional engagement. Delaine Greè indicates an association between art and life: “I would say I was born and then there was art [laughter]” (pre-workshop interview). Memorably, Raven describes what zey were told was an early engagement with music: “I was breastfeeding and humming, uh, *Baa Baa Black Sheep*” (pre-workshop interview) and “I wrote my first song when I was eight years old” (pre-workshop interview). In her pre-workshop interview, Charlotte described theatre as the only interest that persists from her youth (“it just was the thing I could never quit, you know, was theatre”), and

Michelle's engagement with art began at a young age as well: "from a young age, like, I wanted to be a singer" (pre-workshop interview).

Currently, participating artists appear to all be invested in the professional designation of artist, but some struggle with what that means. Charlotte, who is currently employed at an arts non-profit organization, is busy doing art-adjacent work and is "not really doing art right now" (pre-workshop interview); this has caused identity confusion and discomfort: "my work is honoring me as [...] an advocate for the arts. And it's just funny 'cause I'm, like, I *am* an artist. [laughter] Like..." (post-workshop interview). This discomfort speaks in part to Charlotte's attachment to her self-understanding as an artist. In a similar vein, Michelle does not want to open a studio to teach performing art to children because she will then identify more as a business owner than a "creative." Raven, too highlights some discomfort with *zeir* identity as an artist being troubled by professional engagement:

So, thankfully I get to be an artist at my place of work, but that means so many things.

And, like, basically the running joke of my life is none of my friends know what I do. [...] there's so much that goes into [air quotes] being a working artist [end air quotes]. And I don't even know what that means anymore (focus group)

Again, the discomfort seen here surrounding Raven's unclear artist identity indicates a personal attachment to being an "artist."

With the understanding that the participants seem to value their artist and professional artist identity and experience discomfort and confusion when this identification is rejected or troubled, we can proceed to explore how the activist artists' understandings of professional artmaking may create the conditions to foster or reject an understanding of the self as a business.

## **Theme 2. Art as business, artist as entrepreneur**

Participating artists indicate an acceptance that, as professional artists, they are entrepreneurs engaged in running an arts business. Though conflicted, Charlotte stated quite plainly:

[...] I would definitely identify as an entrepreneur. Like, when you read the word and the definition I'd be like: yeah, that's what I am. And I definitely think there's more work to be done in educating artists about the business of art because it is business at the end of the day. (pre-workshop interview)

The entrepreneurial aspects of their work were the focus of much discussion throughout the project. This part of their profession was experienced both positively and negatively and participants described and demonstrated notable attempts at resolving these tensions throughout the research process.

### ***Subtheme 1. Entrepreneurship as a positive***

A variety of benefits were identified in association with engaging in the entrepreneurial aspect of the arts. These were generally associated with both professional and activist-artistic success and satisfaction.

Professional benefits surrounding art-entrepreneurship included avoiding exploitation. Michelle described the need to cultivate her business skills as she developed as a working artist, following a challenging experience where she felt her work was exploited: “So after that I was like: I'll only take work that pays. Um... But most of the time I was running with this idea that, like, any payment is okay payment. [...] And it took me a very long time to realize, like: no, that's not okay” (pre-workshop interview). The strategies here described were observed during the recruitment process of this project; otherwise interested activist artists would not join the project because they would only do projects for pay that involved their art. In my experience,



young artists are often asked to work for free with the spurious promise of “exposure” and “skill development,” so many artists employ these strategies to avoid exploitation; real consequences emerge, then, for artists who do not embrace the entrepreneurial aspect of their work, and both Raven and Michelle also articulated the desire for more training on the business side of art numerous times throughout the art-research process.

Entrepreneurship had a distinctly positive connotation at times. For Raven, a musician can be “entrepreneurial in their art;” this was seen as a positive trait that means the music can “stand out.” While a relatively small moment in our pre-workshop interview, I feel this use of the term is telling. Entrepreneurship can be applied to the art creation process to create music that will stand out and, thus, be more marketable.

Delaine Greè demonstrated little discomfort with the business side of being an artist. She spoke of the entrepreneurial activities of the arts generally, specifically grant-writing, in a common-sense manner: “a product of having to do art economically. Viable, viable art in [...] a certain kind of system which the world has adopted” (pre-workshop interview). Though she does not like the “paperwork that comes with it,” she articulated the joy of creative entrepreneurship:

where you start something, where it, it propagates, where it then provides employment to others and there's this ripple effect of, of growing through that. And you have the satisfaction of knowing that this is all something that germinated in your brain or [...] together with, in collaboration with others. Um, there is also the satisfaction of quite frankly making money from it. (pre-workshop interview)

It is possible that Delaine Greè’s comfort with entrepreneurialism and business thinking may, in part, result from her career in marketing and advertising. While she has long practiced

artmaking, her career transition to the arts is recent, so may find more ease in the application of business models to the art world.

Interestingly, some activist-artistic benefits were associated with entrepreneurialism, though it should be noted that they are substantially outweighed by the professional. Practically, Charlotte felt that the business-related work of marketing, advertising, and managing her performances provided her a sense of calm, experienced as a welcome reprieve from the anxiety surrounding the performance itself. In this way, Charlotte experienced the artistic and entrepreneurial as complementary.

A lesson Delaine Greè learned from the art-research process was to embrace entrepreneurship more fully, to spread her work more effectively:

there are opportunities and if we don't [...] make the change, then who? If not now, then when? So, it encouraged me to stop being so complacent just because I can afford to do so in my life, and to, to be more entrepreneurial and, and, you know, light that pathway for others. (post-workshop interview)

By engaging in entrepreneurship more directly in relation to her activist art, Delaine Greè, then, hopes to better disseminate her activism. Michelle, too, briefly spoke of the benefits of the entrepreneurial in art creation, as a means for achieving greater honesty in, and ownership of, her socially engaged work: “when I work for myself [...] my positionality is able to just kind of, like, lead the way and it's great and I feel completely free and, like, not stifled and it's beautiful” (post-workshop interview).

### ***Subtheme 2. Entrepreneurship as a negative***

In tension with the many benefits identified above, a deep discomfort exists surrounding the understanding of arts work as a business and the artist as entrepreneur, particularly among

Charlotte, Raven, and Michelle. The participants appeared to feel that business models were incompatible in important ways with creativity, and they were uncomfortable identifying as a business on their taxes.

Michelle spoke strongly about the difficulties of balancing business with art as an art-entrepreneur. She said they are “like oil and water” (pre-workshop interview) and that “worrying about money in any sense does not help my creativity” (pre-workshop interview). Indeed, the impact of financial anxiety on creativity featured strongly in Michelle’s responses. The complete incompatibility described by Michelle indicates a kind of refusal or inability to conceive of herself as a business: “I just don’t know how to make the two worlds meet” (pre-workshop interview). For Michelle, these responses might be associated with an opposition to Capitalism, generally. In support of this, as an artistic reaction to images that I presented in our first workshop (Image G1; Image G2), Michelle offered a word association; among other associations, she matched Image G1 with “Capitalism,” “Manufactured,” and “What mainstream society wants,” while Image G2 was paired to “Activism/Radical Change,” “Organic creation,” and “what [society] needs.” I selected the two images deliberately to address the topic of the workshops; Image G1 was drawn from a website advertisement for an arts-entrepreneur seminar, and Image G2 is a photograph taken by environmental activist Chip Thomas, known as jetsonorama (Thomas, n.d.). The images were presented together without judgment to provide an opportunity for the participants to meditate on how entrepreneurialism and activism in art clash and/or can be complementary, and to introduce the participants to the technique of “kernelling.”

Charlotte, too, spoke of the incompatibility between entrepreneurialism and art. She is “very skeptical about entrepreneurship” because she feels it is a “wolf in sheep’s clothing,” as a

“neoliberal corporate model that is, like, disguised as a community-based project” (pre-workshop interview). Simply, she said:

Charlotte: [...] I also think in many ways, uh, the way business models and entrepreneurship models are framed now are very antithetical to, um, what makes successful artwork.

Mike: Right.

Charlotte: And by successful I don't mean financially successful, I mean emotionally fulfilling. (pre-workshop interview)

Charlotte went on to further identify business and entrepreneurship models as “degenerative.” Her explicit articulation of a definition of “success” that is not rooted in finances is telling. It indicates that she knows there are individuals who may define artistic success financially, and that she is not one of those people. In a memorable anecdote, Charlotte describes an artist “entrepreneur” who gave her the sincere – unsolicited – advice to comedically play the musical theme to *Jaws* under her dramatic feminist performance art piece. This selection of “the more popular choice” artistically is “offensive” to Charlotte, as she positions her approach in opposition to the artist-entrepreneur in the story.

Participants also demonstrated a discomfort identifying as a business, despite an acknowledgement of their work environment. In our focus group, Raven demonstrated an unease with filing *zeir* taxes as a business:

there's so much more that goes into if you want to be an independent freelance person, 'cause then you should probably register as your own business. What then? How does the government, like, receive you as your own person, as your own business-person, like... What do taxes look like then?

Charlotte agreed, later responding: “your tax comment really resonated with me. I had to do all that recently and it's a bit of a thing.” While Charlotte and Raven do not detail their precise discomforts, they indicate an uncomfortable acceptance of their status as businesses in the eyes of the government.

I also recall having a realization surrounding filing my taxes as a business, which I have spoken to elsewhere (Ruderman, In Press). My discomfort surrounded the destabilizing shift towards understanding myself *as* a business, rather than simply participating in business. While we must not project my feelings onto the participants, this may be at play when we consider Raven’s correction of “person” with the term “business-person.” This shift appears to echo what has been theorized to be the shift of self-understanding from the liberal self, who understands their self as property to be sold by an entrepreneurial ego, to the neoliberal self, who understands themselves as a business (Foucault, 1979/2008; Teo, 2018).

It should be noted that the identified benefits surrounding entrepreneurship in art-activism centre around self-oriented professional considerations, while its artistic benefits appear to be substantially outweighed by its drawbacks. Both the perceived incompatibility of business models with creativity and the discomfort associated with identifying as a business hint at the presence of an alternative understanding of activist artist that the participants may cleave to with more strength than that of entrepreneur.

### ***Subtheme 3. Resolving tensions***

Clearly, tensions exist between the perceived good and bad of the application of business models and entrepreneurialism to art. For Michelle, these tensions loom large, and she appears to make attempts at resolving them. She is drawn to apply to artist residency programs, because these programs feel “you should be paid for your creative time and for the product that you put

out into the world” (pre-workshop interview) and she imagines potentially working for a company that will enable her to do some artmaking. It appears, then, that, to avoid the job of entrepreneur that is perceived as incompatible with creativity, Michelle endeavors to find a kind of shelter, where she can simply practice art without worrying about business: “because having a space where I’m- I don’t have to worry about my bills and I can just, like, focus on intaking as much from the world and then producing: that allows the artistic creative flow to just be so... Nice [laughter] and so easy” (pre-workshop interview).

Also aware of these tensions, Charlotte explains, “I hustle the fuck out of my shows. I sell the fuck out of them. Um, but [finances are] not part of a creative process and they don’t inform creative decisions” (pre-workshop interview). So, while she is engaged in a business, she attempts to avoid its infiltration into the creative process, allowing the business and the art to run alongside one another, without intersecting. Michelle says, “I respect the hell out of people who can do it” about professionals who can be effective as both artists and entrepreneurs (“a dual-personality” (Michelle; pre-workshop interview), and Charlotte seems to exemplify such an artist-entrepreneur, balancing what she describes as “two very different models” (pre-workshop interview) and enjoying both.

Intriguingly, Charlotte employed another strategy during the workshops to help resolve this tension. Charlotte expressed a desire to complicate the notion that the two images I presented in our first workshop (Image G1; Image G2) were opposites, and that one was good and the other bad; she expressed this in a poem she wrote as a weekly reflection:

I hope too that we can mix metaphors more  
that we can move beyond image 1= good  
and image 2 = bad

because isn't that just as reductive  
 as the binary  
 and if we're so prescriptive in our definitions,  
 at what point do we risk re-binarizing the very stuff  
 we seek to place beyond either/or.  
 Is there a messier method  
 that we can invent?

Such an approach leaves room to embrace certain elements of entrepreneurialism into her self-concept. Furthermore, prior to the art-research process, Charlotte had been asked at work to advocate for creative entrepreneurship; she felt some discomfort with this, but came across a 2008 syllabus that struck her as “refreshing.” It was for the course *Minority Voices in Entrepreneurship* taught by Dr. Mary Godwyn at Babson College. Charlotte brought in an excerpt of the syllabus as a contribution for the group to build from artistically. Below is part of this excerpt:

Inherent to entrepreneurial enterprise is the valuation of change, novelty and difference; therefore, entrepreneurial vision is by definition a minority perspective residing outside of the norm. Despite the use of entrepreneurship by women and minorities to provide income and establish a place in social discourse, the archetypal image of business leader has so far remained white and male.

This syllabus, then, served as an attempt to help resolve the aforementioned tensions by associating entrepreneurship intrinsically with marginalization, and, indeed, with oneself, as Charlotte identifies with certain dimensions of marginalization. Such an attempt appears to be in line with critical scholarship that advocates for an increased focus on the emancipatory potential

of entrepreneurship (Verduijn et al., 2014), as opposed to the resistance of entrepreneurialism altogether. It should be noted, however, that it has been shown that the attribution of entrepreneurialism to marginalized and oppressed groups of people is not received as liberatory in all contexts (Verduijn & Essers, 2013), but Charlotte appears to perceive this as the co-option of Capitalist models in the service of social justice as opposed to a Capitalist co-option of social justice activism. While Charlotte's offer of this syllabus might be read as an attempt to overcome the discomfort of applying business models to art by more thoroughly internalizing an entrepreneurial self, the extent to which this attempt was successful is unclear. The piece was brought in as food-for-thought for the group, and Charlotte continued to express difficulties navigating a professional environment that is "not black and white" (post-workshop interview).

As discussed in the Process section, Delaine Greè wrote a compelling poem in response to the syllabus contributed by Charlotte, which was further collaboratively developed into a performance piece:

Yes we have come this far  
 By the blood and sweat of our toil  
 Leaps and bounds, yet not on par  
 With these fair sons of the same soil  
 I'm creative, intelligent and hard working  
 This may be so even with you  
 Yet my success requires much shunting  
 While you stand tall on the podium of your hue

Delaine Greè's poem acknowledges an entrepreneurial aspect of marginalization by conceding that progress ("leaps and bounds") has been made through "blood and sweat;" however, the



speaker appears to resent that this progress requires engaging in the entrepreneurial (“much shunting”) when “these fair sons” can simply “stand tall.” A frustration pervades the poem and the potential of entrepreneurialism to truly provide emancipation is called into question; in describing the poem in an email to me, Delaine Greè wrote that “it defines the fallacy of ‘equality’ as touted by a privileged society, where the starting line for the not-haves is far behind the rest.” This “fallacy” is amplified through her accompanying performance piece, in which the performer methodically wraps her face with her own hair in a labour that appears to self-suffocate and remove identity (see Image G3). In describing the piece, however, Delaine Greè is not hopeless, emphasizing that success is still possible “in spite of a longer and harder journey.” So, even though Delaine Greè demonstrated some comfort with art-entrepreneurship throughout the research process, her artistic response to the suggestion of its emancipatory potential was characterized by frustration and distrust, though not hopelessness. Delaine Greè, then, appears to agree that entrepreneurialism provides hope and potential for success, but she does not concede that it provides “equality,” implying that other avenues must be pursued for true fairness. This poem and performance piece, then, offer some doubt to the emancipatory potential of the entrepreneurial and might be thought of as a kind of counterpoint response to the syllabus Charlotte contributed, rhyming with Verduijn & Essers’ (2013) findings that indicate that the entrepreneur is not always a welcome identity for those who are part of marginalized and oppressed groups.

### **Theme 3. Art as healing, artist as care worker**

Though the self-enterprising and self-interested perception of the artist has predominated in scholarship surrounding creative work, it has recently been suggested that the socially engaged artist might be better described through a model of care work (Alacovska, 2020; Alacovska &

Bissonnette, 2019). Such a model suggests that the artwork created can be thought of as creative “acts of repair” (Alacovska, 2020, p. 737), which seeks to heal societal wounds.

In line with Alacovska’s (2020) model of the socially engaged artist as care worker, throughout the research process all participants spoke to the role art plays in healing on a societal and personal level. In our pre-workshop interview, Delaine Greè spoke passionately about the potential for art to address mental health on a global scale:

[...] we wouldn't have half the mental health issues that we have today, again, worldwide, if we actually pursued arts. If we, if we satisfied that, [...] if we were able to help other people therapeutically through that. [...] Instead, now we're trying to help that through medication. We've come to that point where many people have to take medication. And yet, in Europe, there are social prescriptions.

Delaine Greè’s description of art as a potential “social prescription” for mental health issues suggests that she not only understands art to be pivotal in healing, but also artists to be themselves therapists of a kind (i.e. “if we were able to help other people therapeutically”).

Michelle, too, emphasized the therapeutic value of art and also drew comparisons to the healthcare system:

[...] Creativity is something that can be therapeutic, like this shift in view of what creativity and art can bring to an individual. I think that's where everything has to shift on a full societal level because nobody will be willing to fund [art] [...] if people don't at a very basic level, think that it's important. But if everybody was kind of like: you know, art is just as important as health care, right? Like if those two things were equated on the same level, which really they should be. And there's, you know, so much science to show that they live in a very combined way. If, if art and arts education and arts cultivation

and, and, you know, incubators for artists, like, if all of that was put at the same level of health, and mental health, physical health, all that [...] If art was seen as: art is important. I think that would be where the change would really start. (focus group)

Both Michelle and Delaine Greè, then, emphasize the potential for art to contribute to large-scale healing and feel it should be valued alongside the healthcare system for improving mental health.

Charlotte also demonstrated a desire to connect art with healing, though with more trepidation. While Michelle increasingly uses the creative space as self-healing (“I’m learning that the more I just make art about what I have gone through and art that helps me heal, I’m then helping other people heal;” post-workshop interview), Charlotte avoids this approach (“now I’m reading plays where, if they’re therapeutic for me, I’m like: danger, danger. Don’t go there;” pre-workshop interview) because of a negative performance experience:

[...] I kind of put my audience in the position of therapist, but then I kind of put myself in the position of their therapist. So I had in these plays, like, these weird experiences afterwards, where people would come up to me and tell me all of their shit. And I would just like take all their shit. And then, like, after a show, I’d be like: oh my God, like,

I, I just, like, held a woman I don’t know while she was crying. (pre-workshop interview)

Though she is now hesitant to engage with theatre that is therapeutic for herself, it does not mean that she is not interested in audience and societal healing through her work; Charlotte describes her ideal artistic model as “regenerative,” in opposition to “degenerative” business models, implying that art should restore: “I should be giving my audience more than I am getting back, so that they can then give, you know. Like, that’s, to me, what a regenerative model is” (pre-workshop interview).

Importantly, artwork conceived as healing need not be gentle, as artistic acts of societal repair may require issues to be addressed with agentive ferocity. Both Raven and Charlotte made comments suggesting a degree of provocation in their work. In their pre-workshop interview, Raven said, “I like to ask questions of my audience” and “I like to poke and prod.” In describing her work, Charlotte exclaimed, “I tricked you 'cause that's what I do” (focus group). In line with their other comments and stated activist aims, such comments can reasonably be interpreted as being part of a larger gesture of a societal and audience healing that forcefully roots out harm. Charlotte captured this well when she spoke of creating artwork about sexual assault: “I wanted to find a way to talk about that in a way that's not just, like, upsetting and weird and triggering. I wanted to find a way to talk about it that was, like, upsetting and weird and triggering and then healing. [laugh] You know?” (post-workshop interview)

In conclusion, participating activist artists understand their work as a business, benefitting from entrepreneurial skill and knowledge. These benefits are predominantly professional, avoiding financial exploitation and allowing for greater career growth. While some artistic benefits were noted, they were outweighed by the creative drawbacks associated with pairing art and business; for certain participants, these were so pronounced that the two were deemed incompatible. Furthermore, participants indicated a discomfort with associating themselves with a business on their taxes. Attempts were made to resolve the tensions that emerged between business and creativity, including finding shelter from the entrepreneurial in a company or residency (Michelle), nurturing both while keeping them separate (Charlotte), and embracing entrepreneurialism for its emancipatory potential (Charlotte). Taken together, it appears that the realities of the workplace necessitate an entrepreneurial understanding of the activist artist, thus laying the foundation for an internalization of the entrepreneurial self;

however, an alternative understanding of the profession may hold greater strength. I identified in the data an understanding of art as healing as one possible alternative conception of art demonstrated by the participants. This understanding of art is supported by research that emphasizes the reframing of socially engaged arts work from a focus on neoliberal motivators to an ethics of care (Alacovska, 2020; Alacovska & Bissonnette, 2019). This framing continues to offer insight, and find support, in the following theme.

#### **Theme 4. Competition vs. Collaboration**

##### ***Subtheme 1. Resenting workplace competition***

The free market is defined by competition; in the marketplace, a business cannot exist outside of its competitive framework. Under neoliberalism, the logic of competition as a driving force behind prosperity and innovation is fundamental (Foster, 2020), as “competition, and only competition, can ensure economic rationality” (Foucault, 1979/2008, p. 119). The self, when conceived as a business, is locked in competition with other self-businesses, further reinforcing the individualization of the modern self.

Participants describe an arts work environment characterized by occasional competition, which is typically discussed resentfully. For example, Charlotte described a conflict she had as a director with one of her cast members:

Charlotte: [...] I'm getting more established. People are going to come for me, they're just going to come for me. They're going to say: why are you on top when I should be on top? And I remember being a twenty-year-old and talking shit about, like, this director and that director and being like: well, fuck them. Why are they on top? I should be on top. And now that I'm [older], like, not a lot has changed, but I do see that people in their twenties are being like: why are you in power? Why are you in power?

Mike: Right.

Charlotte: And the power is meaningless. (pre-workshop interview)

Notably, Charlotte's solo-practice, in which she writes and performs one-person shows, initially developed as a way of avoiding auditioning: "I just hate, I hate auditions. I hate them. [...] And I'm not good at them. [...] To me, it's, like, the opposite of the environment I want to be in in a, in a sort of theatrical environment" (pre-workshop interview). Though practices vary, auditions are framed as competitions, in which a series of actors perform short pieces for one or multiple auditioners, who ultimately select the most suitable performer for the role in question. While the audition space can be stressful, the waiting rooms can also be tense, as the actors in competition wait in a room together for their turn to perform (Ruderman, In Press). So, though not explicitly stated, an aversion to competition, and the evaluation embedded therein, is likely at play in Charlotte's distaste of the audition environment.

Michelle also indicates a distaste for the competitive. In describing her approach to working with children on theatre projects, Michelle speaks of trying to incorporate the positive elements of the "toxic" musical theatre education she received, while making sure it was "not competitive" (pre-workshop interview). This suggests that a competitive environment in her arts high school might have been responsible, in part, for her putting her health in jeopardy.

Memorably, Raven described participating in a music competition in *zeir* pre-workshop interview. In such an environment, one might expect competition to take centre stage; however, Raven did not mention whether *zey* won or lost, nor did *zey* describe any ill will towards or from other competitors ("The other artists were very lovely, actually"), rather focusing on the judges as antagonists ("it was the judges. It was the people that were, like, older"). Interestingly, by directing animosity towards the judges, as the "older" individuals who held the power in their

interactions to evaluate and provide feedback, Raven might be seen as challenging the competition itself. Despite the competitive environment, the artists' "lovely" behaviour indicates that the competitive aspect of the self-as-business has been rejected in favour of a resistant compassion. Competition, then, appears to be a negative feature of the arts environment for the participants, one which they refuse to embrace as a feature of their work.

***Subtheme 2. "networking is really important"***

Though competition is the defining element of social relationships encouraged by an internalization of the self-as-business this is not to say that businesses cannot use each other to their advantage through mutually beneficial partnerships; self-businesses, too, have such relationships, making neoliberal "networking" another key form of socializing for the business self. The primary goal of *neoliberal* networking, which I see as the extension of corporate utilitarianism to social relationships, is to advance the many potential interests of one's own self-business (Teo, 2018). It is defined by utility, in which care for others and the value of relationships for their own sake are secondary considerations at best.

Networking seems to be a valuable practice within the arts in Ontario. When asked what non-artistic activities she felt the need to engage in as an activist artist, Charlotte's second of two answers was, "I also think networking is really important." Charlotte felt the pressure to network acutely in the theatre community:

there's this kind of feeling like you have to go to everyone's show so that everyone will then come to your show. [...] there is this kind of weird social contract that you make through kind of going to other people's shows. And then, and then related, once you're at those shows, you want to be seen being at those shows. It's, like, tale as old as time with,

like, the social capital you get from being at a show that someone else is at and then saying hello to them. (pre-workshop interview)

While not specifically articulated as networking, other participating artists also described or demonstrated the need to network. Delaine Greè, for example, lamented a time that she did not attend a theatre audition: “I could have gone to the audition and I know I would have gotten it just because I know all the people who [...] were selected and, and I met the guy who's producing it later on as a friend, and he said: oh, you should have come” (pre-workshop interview). Though she ultimately did not go to the audition, in her certainty that she would have had the part, Delaine Greè indicates the effectiveness and importance of networking in the arts environment. Michelle, too, demonstrated this: “in all my other jobs in the past, I've never actually had to apply for many jobs. I've kind of just gotten them through word of mouth and connections” (pre-workshop interview). During our initial interview, Raven demonstrated networking practice, in real time, when zey kindly informed me of an appealing professional opportunity: “You would really like dig my organization, we're always looking for puppeteers [...] you would be able to be trained. It's paid. [...] if you have, like, friends, like, want to do it too.”

So, while competition is experienced uncomfortably by the participating activist artists, their reaction to networking appears to range from embrace to ambivalence. However, as previously mentioned, *neoliberal* networking is understood to have the primary goal of furthering the self-business. It is unclear to what extent this is true for the participating artists; in fact, there are indications that joy in interpersonal interaction and care for other artists are primary motivators for their networking. Charlotte spoke of taking great joy in her current work in which she helps provide resources to artists. Memorably, during the focus group, she



encouraged the others to reach out to her in the future for professional help: “let's all connect after this and as long as I can give you money and as part of my [job]. I will try to do that for real. Like, let's try to find some collaborations, and I can give you money to do stuff. I'm not even kidding.” Charlotte's joy and excitement in being able to provide resources for other artists, including the participants, seems to gesture towards a kind of *caring* networking that differs in kind from the neoliberal form.

### ***Subtheme 3. Making caring collaborations***

Generally, a caring collaboration appeared to take precedence among the participants as a defining form of professional relationship, contrasting competition and superseding furthering the self-business as the primary motivator for networking practice. As an important caveat, the workshops were described as *collaborative* workshops and there was a question in the initial interviews surrounding the extent to which the participants see their work as collaborative. This focus on collaboration likely signalled that I valued it and perhaps discouraged participants from demonstrating competition or expressing that it was a value that they may hold. That said, participants seemed willing to discuss the difficulties of collaboration and in no way painted a rosy picture of its application to activist art; this gives us some confidence that the phenomena explored by this theme are not merely a product of the art-research process.

Michelle discussed artistic collaboration with perhaps the most ardour. As someone who recently has shifted her focus away from what she sees as the more collaborative artform of theatre towards a more “introspective” practice of contemporary fine art, she said, “If I could make theatre with amazing people all day long, that's everything I would ever want to do. Like, I love it. I love it so much. I miss it daily” (pre-workshop interview). The emphasis on the “amazing people” resonates with what, to her, is exciting about theatre as an artistic form:

in theatre, the creative process up to a performance is, like, the meat and bones of, of it for me as an artist. Like, that's what I love is just creating that community within that and then those people go on to take those tidbits of experience and then put it into their work and it's like this whole [gesture] big web (pre-workshop interview)

And:

I feel that with, with theatre I have been blessed that I have been able to work with amazing people. And honestly it- I just- I always wanna go back to working in theatre because of the, the sense of community and building things with other people and sharing a likeminded goal. I love it. I find it's easier in performing arts than it is in, in, like, any other type of artform. (pre-workshop interview)

For Michelle, then, collaboration is central to the enjoyment of theatre creation, and not merely as a tool to advance the self-business. She also suggests collaboration may be thought of as intrinsic to the performing art of theatre.

Though her passion for the collaborative was not as present, Delaine Greè, too, expressed a belief that collaboration was all-but-intrinsic to performing art, and indicated that this was a positive element of it. She said, "the medium helps in, in terms of being collaborative," and "most artists that I have worked with I've enjoyed. I have learned, we have grown together. If there were differences, we would take a break and figure it out" (pre-workshop interview).

Charlotte, in describing her aforementioned difficulties with the pressure to network, said, "I love it and I hate it." I later followed-up on this:

Mike: You mentioned that you love parts of the networking, too. Is it, is it the...?

Charlotte: Well, I, I do. [laugh] I do like the social aspect of it, yeah.

Mike: Yeah, yeah.

Charlotte: Like, you know, there is, there is something really lovely about running into someone that you like in a public space (pre-workshop interview)

So, while the elements of networking surrounding accruing “social capital” evoke hatred from Charlotte, the “social aspect” is “really lovely.” Charlotte, then, appears to hate the instrumental use of others to further one’s career and status, but loves social interaction for its own sake.

In a similar vein, when asked about collaboration, Raven said: “I’m a very collaborative person in general. I, I love being with people” (pre-workshop interview). Raven places a large emphasis on collaboration in *zeir* music practice, proudly incorporating other musicians and artists into *zeir* most recent album. This emphasis was justified by an argument for the value of collaboration, rooted in *zeir* own personal history:

my mom, who is a single mother who raised me, like, also had a lot of siblings who would, like, help me be raised, too. So, like, I remember having lessons from my aunts and, like, you know, talking with my uncle about certain things. So, it's like, with different people comes different perspectives. So, I really do love, like, all the different perspectives that I got, um, for my album. And so that was really really nice. (pre-workshop interview)

The fundamental value of differing perspectives offered by different people captured in the above excerpt indicates a rejection of the perception of the self as a competitive agent locked in competition with other self-businesses. It also rejects the self as neoliberal networker that uses others to one’s own ends; though Raven also suggests collaboration is useful in that it can lead to a higher quality of art (“it brings the album together in a really nice storyline and like a really nice arc, um, because of that constant collaboration;” pre-workshop interview), which might suggest the kind of mutually beneficial relationship that characterizes neoliberal networking,

artistic collaborators are indirectly compared to Raven's family, indicating a fundamental valuing of their perspectives outside of personal gain ("I really do love, like, all the different perspectives;" pre-workshop interview). When asked if there were any other topics zey wanted to discuss during zeir initial interview, Raven said, "Yeah, I think I'll talk a little bit about collaborating with friends," further indicating its importance to zem.

The participants' focus on collaboration was not uncomplicated. Numerous risks and difficulties associated with collaboration were discussed. In the focus group, Michelle captured nicely the difficult terrain of artistic collaboration:

when you are doing anything collaborative, there's risk. There's risk of your own integrity, of your own, um, you know artistic and personal integrity, and style and just, you know, all- even just, um, reputation as a collaborator, right? Like there's so many things. And there's just levels of even interpersonal things of, you know, respecting each other's opinions and and each other's- You know, when we're all kind of not sure what we're creating, but we're all trying to respect one another and and trust one another.

Numerous risks are identified here, such as those of jeopardizing one's artistic integrity, reputation, and interpersonal relationships; these concerns hint at important underlying assumptions about art and activism, which will be discussed in Theme 6.

Perhaps, the most salient trouble with collaboration was the reported damage to friendships. While collaboration with friends had upsides ("I think in the art, like doing the art, it's much nicer with friends" (Raven; pre-workshop interview), it also often led to conflict:

it was OK, but there were a lot of- there was a lot of yelling, screaming, crying, hair tearing, calling names. [laughter] thing and, yeah. Some of us are still friends. [laughter] (Delaine Greè; pre-workshop interview)

I regret behaving that way. 'Cause it's, it's- The friendship isn't over, but it's damaged and it won't be the same. (Charlotte; pre-workshop interview)

I was like: OK, like I'm never gonna work with you again. (Raven; pre-workshop interview)

Notably, though, few of these conflicts seemed to emerge from feelings of competition. High stress situations, differing opinions, and poorly demarcated boundaries tended to be identified as the sources of conflict.

Despite the difficulties of collaboration and the presence of opportunities for competition, participants spend significant time and effort thinking about collaboration and honing relevant skills. Raven described zeir goal to learn more about music producing, “not to not have a producer, but to just be able to know, like, like what sort of words I should be saying [to the producer in the recording studio] instead of: can we make this higher?” (pre-workshop interview). Raven was also working on other skills:

Yeah, so I, I realized, like, I've been trying to work on my communication skills and my assertiveness and, like, really have a [fleshed] out idea of what I want something to sound like or look like before I go. [...] sometimes I'll even write it down, like, all the things, [so], like, I don't forget. (pre-workshop interview)

Charlotte, too, focused on collaboration (“collaboration is something that I think is essential to process;” pre-workshop interview) and she frequently articulated an insecurity surrounding it: “I have this, like, fear that I’m a horrible collaborator. I have this, like, deep fear, um, that I’m bad at collaborating” (pre-workshop interview). The depth of this concern further indicates that she puts a high value on collaboration in her vocational relationships. In the focus group, Charlotte demonstrated a commitment to improving her skills of collaboration, by deferring to Raven, who had not been as vocal:

Charlotte: Do you have any thoughts to share [Raven]? I wanna offer you the stage first before I talk?

Raven: No, no, feel free to, um, go off.

Charlotte: Great, awesome. I’ve talked a lot, so I want to be conscious of, um, that.

Furthermore, Charlotte expressed a desire to shift her focus away from solo performances to writing plays for others. So, despite the difficulties of collaboration, the participating artists still value it deeply enough to persist. As Delaine Greè said, “that is still how I would do it. I would still collaborate with people” (pre-workshop interview).

With the understanding that participant responses may have been guided towards collaboration in the process of the art-research project, I have attempted to demonstrate that competition does not predominate in the participant activist artists’ understandings of social relationships, despite an environment that is at times competitive. Neither does observed networking practice necessarily indicate *neoliberal* networking; indeed, taking joy in interaction, care for other artists, and valuing the collective also encourage a networking practice, but one not rooted in the business self. So understood, participating activist artists are able to meet the necessary conditions of a neoliberal work environment by engaging in networking, while

adopting an alternate subjectivity that resists the understanding of the self as a business. This observation aligns with Page's (2020) analysis of neoliberalism in the academy, wherein resistant academics might still engage in career-promoting behaviours, but with a goal to topple the very neoliberal structures upon which they rest: "The difference is the locus of meaning, the exploitation of existing frameworks and practices for their own means" (p. 597). Caring, collaborative networking, then, might be thought of as a kind of resistance to the competitive and coldly utilitarian self business.

I am inclined to draw a connection between the participants' high value on the collective and their caring networking practice to the understanding of artist as care worker, as described in the previous theme. While audience and societal healing were the focus of Theme 3, the conception of art as care work also speaks to a communitarian care of the other (Alacovka & Bissonnette, 2019), rhyming with the present theme which demonstrates care of a collective of other artists. In this way, we may be observing a subjectivity emerging from an identification with the artist as care worker that resists the fundamental neoliberal competition and utility that defines the neoliberal social relationship.

### **Theme 5. The need for "slowness"**

To the business, time is money. Time must be used efficiently to minimize expense and maximize profit. When applied to the self, one's experience of time is affected by a focus on personal efficiency and productivity. Sugarman and Thrift (2020) conceive of neoliberal time as distinct from the time of traditional Capitalism, by virtue of the digital shift. Transactions are made copiously and immediately, and systems of organization have been refined. On an individual level, such transactions might be thought of socially, for example through social media and texting. Furthermore, maximizing one's time for productive and efficient endeavors

has become easier with the help of advances in self-monitoring technology. For Sugarman and Thrift (2020), this need for perpetual productivity, married with an improved ability to manifest it, has led to a perpetual sense of urgency and, paradoxically, the feeling of not having enough time. A persistent lack of time and perpetual busyness was identified in Scharff's (2016) musician participants, which she concluded aligned with an entrepreneurial subjectivity. It is natural for us, then, to inquire about how the participating activist performing artists in the present study experience time.

To describe the fast-paced life of an artist attempting to support oneself, Charlotte used the term I also favour: “the hustle” (pre-workshop interview). She described “the hustle” as “attractive” and “energizing,” but also “too much.” Michelle described her engagement in entrepreneurial activities associated with the arts in a similar way: “I felt empowered at first, but then very drained by the end” (pre-workshop interview). This feeling of perpetual and exhausting motion rhymes with theoretical literature on neoliberal time (Sugarman & Thrift, 2020).

Generally, the participants experienced a lack of time when arts work had to be balanced with activities that would generate more income. For example, Michelle discusses how working a non-arts job can take up all of one's attention, leaving no room for art:

Michelle: [...] And a lot of friends of mine, I see that, yeah, they'll teach. Whether it's, like, teaching languages or teaching art or teaching kids,

Mike: Mhm.

Michelle: and it's like, you know: yes, get the money you need, like, that's amazing, uh, but then you have to I feel have the side drive to really, you know, create the stuff you actually want to create. (pre-workshop interview)



Further to this point, in a weekly reflection, Charlotte describes how her current job is making it difficult to engage to the degree that she would have liked: “I want to keep working on the thing we created outside of the workshops, but I also am finding it hard to find the time while working full time.” This lack of time when balancing activist artmaking with non-artistic jobs may well be a factor drawing artists towards making art their business.

A perceived lack of time is characteristic of the neoliberal experience; however, I am cautious to conclude that this speaks to an internalization of a neoliberal self. Indeed, the work environment appears to require an amount of time that makes art creation difficult; such an experience does not necessarily reflect a belief in the need for perpetual efficiency. The question, then, becomes to what degree do participants feel an urgent need for efficient and productive use of their time when there are no external pressures demanding it of them. Where Scharff (2016) identifies a need to “always be doing something” (p. 112) even when one attempts to relax, I identify a different relationship to time among the participants in the present study.

In describing *zey* experience during *zey* music shows, Raven explains that *zey* are unable to remain still, even if there is nothing to do, because of the stress of managing *zey* own performance; however, *zey* say that when *zey* perform as a drag king in other people’s shows, *zey* are able to relax. Raven concluded that *zey* prefer being in someone else’s show because *zey* do not have to engage in the stressful management aspect of the job. For Raven, then, once the work environment no longer requires strict management of *zey* work, *zey* do not feel antsy, and are able to relax.

Speaking about the COVID-19 pandemic, Charlotte mentioned more than once that it offered an important break: “the pandemic for me was, like, really nice to kind of put a pause on that world” (focus group). While the participants were upset about the many cancellations

suffered during the pandemic, this appreciation for taking a break appeared genuine. So, here, too, we see that once the external pressure is relieved, the urgent need for efficiency is also removed, suggesting that it is not deeply internalized. Any form of break seemed to be deeply appreciated by the participants. In the focus group, Michelle expressed a frustration with the pressure to continually work and an appreciation of the focus on play during the workshops: “it's always this, this cycle of like: OK, we gotta create, you gotta keep doing, you gotta keep keep keep keep. And it's like: can't we just take a moment, breathe, play, like, uh, exhale kind of a thing.” As we will continue to see, breath and space were often associated with free time, suggesting “the hustle” is breathless and claustrophobic.

Strikingly, despite Charlotte's aforementioned attraction to “the hustle,” she emphasized the importance of “slowness” in her work to improve its “rigour”, which “others might call bullshit or unnecessary” (pre-workshop interview). In seeming defiance of an atmosphere of speed and productivity that she feels surrounds her, Charlotte's focus on slowness might be thought to serve as resistance to the neoliberal through a rejection of this element of the business self. In a similar vein, Charlotte's description of her PhD, during which she was able to focus significantly on her activist art creation, is telling beyond its spatial metaphor: “So, it's not a ton of money, but what it is is, like, open field of time. Like you just have all this time” (pre-workshop interview). Charlotte's prioritization of time over money suggests that she may hold a conception of time that is dissimilar from *time is money*, which characterizes the business self. The question, then, of what makes time valuable becomes central.

Charlotte described “getting a lot of life in” during this time, by widely touring her solo performances. The benefits of this time, then, seem to surround opportunities for personal growth and creative engagement, which are linked. Michelle seemed to place a similar value on the

importance of time for creativity and wellbeing: “Having a space and having enough time to, like, intake information is super important” (pre-workshop interview). Since starting a university program, Michelle has had more time to “decompress” and begin “thawing.” As a result, she said, “my art has been stronger and clearer in vision and I feel more connected to me and therefore my art has a clearer message” (pre-workshop interview). In describing a potential benefit of the COVID-19 pandemic, Michelle said, “I think people's individual creativity is, is coming out. [...] there is time to be creative. Creativity is something that can be therapeutic” (focus group). Taken together, Michelle, too, appears to feel that time is not money, rather its value lies in creativity and personal health.

So, though the participating artists identify the need to engage in “the hustle” and experience a lack of time, once the external pressure is removed, they appear to relish the time to pause, in contrast to the musicians in Sharff’s (2016) research who were unable to relax because of a drive of perpetual efficiency. I believe this indicates that the experience of a lack of time does not reflect an internalized notion of self-as-business among these activist artists, but rather a real requirement of the neoliberal job environment with which they struggle. It is *what they must do*, rather than *who they understand themselves to be*. Ultimately, the participants’ reframing of time as space for creativity and an associated self-knowledge does not characterize the self-business’s understanding of time, as psychological health and improved creativity, as opposed to money, is time’s true value.

## **Theme 6. Authentic self-expression**

To improve public opinion and better capture customers, businesses develop outward-facing images, often known as “brands,” which offer “a crucial point of differentiation and a sustainable form of competitive advantage” (Beverland et al., 2007, p. 394). A company’s brand

does not necessarily require an authentic relationship to its product, but serves as an easily identifiable image targeted at a certain audience to make it more inclined to engage with the business.

For the artist, developing a brand is encouraged; for example, from my personal experience, actors are trained to identify their “hit” (the kind of person they seem to be on first glance) and use this understanding to their career advantage. With performing artists, whose body is deeply intertwined with the artistic product, the development of one’s brand might become interwoven with a branding of the self.

Raven spoke freely about the pressures zey feel to develop a brand (“I do feel pressure to sort of make it into something more crisp, something that can, like, be put into a box;” pre-workshop interview), felt all-the-more strongly at the music competition in which zey participated:

Um, yeah, I was part of a music competition this summer and they they were asking me to, like, dye my hair and they were asking me to, like, [...] do things that were very, like, industry. Um... And sort of just, like, like, they were, like, trying to mold me into a certain person. (pre-workshop interview)

Generally, Raven was not comfortable with developing a brand, but did give value to brand-development as a skill for a working musician:

Raven: [...] I think this is more so one of my weaknesses, is, like, my promotion in my brand.

Mike: Yeah, fair.

Raven: Because, like, as a person, I'm a very variety person, but people are supposed to see your brand and just know.

Mike: Right.

Raven: And just like: oh, like, I've seen this. Same logo over and over and over and over and over.

Mike: Right.

Raven: But I'm like: oh [uncomfortable groan, with uncomfortable gesture]. Like, you know, um... So it's not great from, like, an industry perspective. (pre-workshop interview)

While this discomfort was explicitly acknowledged, some branding terminology was used near the beginning of our initial interview in application to the self when discussing the causes that meant the most to zem:

Raven: Like, I'm not- my brand isn't necessarily, like, environmental causes or, like, animal causes.

Mike: Yeah.

Raven: Not that I don't care about those, but that's just, like, I'm less so focusing on those.

The description of zeir cause as a “brand” gestures towards an understanding of the self-as-business, where one’s activist causes come together to shape a business brand. While I do not believe that Raven thinks zeir causes are hollow or merely presentational, the infiltration of business language into domains of the self is notable; at the very least, this use of language demonstrates an unacknowledged metaphor, comparing one’s deeply held convictions to the marketing of a business.

While branding pressures were discussed most explicitly by Raven, other participants also contributed to the theme. In her pre-workshop interview, Delaine Greè remarked that, as an

actor, there is “a general pressure to maintain a certain body image, to maintain a certain image in public,” but that she does not “necessarily succumb to it.” Unrelated to the body, Charlotte mentioned that we could have “a whole other conversation” about “why clout matters in feminist work” (pre-workshop interview); while we regrettably did not have this conversation at length, during the focus group Charlotte said, “I have, like, this anxiety about not being a good enough artist, not being a good enough activist, not being a good enough feminist. [...] And I think that's why, like, so much of my work is grounded in academia, 'cause I'm like: clout, clout, clout. Look at all my clout.” The academic, then, becomes a presentational tool for the public. This excerpt suggests that the academic grounding of her performance work serves to develop a sort of brand that justifies her activism to an audience.

The participating artists were generally uncomfortable with the pressures they experienced to brand themselves professionally. Raven recounted numerous other elements of the music competition zey found challenging, for example:

Raven: [...] one of the first questions they asked me, that they were like: so, like, who are you as an artist? Give me 3 words that tell me who you are as an artist.

Mike: Yeah.

Raven: I was like: [stunned expression, with strained “uh” sound].

Mike: [inaudible], yeah.

Raven: And, and- But a bunch of, like, most of the other competitors, like, had no problem with that. (pre-workshop interview)

Charlotte described how artists are required to fit certain “templates” in order to be deemed worthy of funding, which she feels is “frustrating” and “limiting” (post-workshop interview). Also, less obviously associated with branding, though in some ways more to the heart of the

matter, Charlotte spoke of a project she was working on: “I’m working with someone who, who, who I think just wants me on their thing so they can have someone who’s, like, [air quotes] woke [end air quotes], you know? And I’m kind of like- The whole thing makes me, makes me kind of...” (pre-workshop interview). Here, Charlotte suspects that her incorporation into a project was ultimately a branding decision on the part of her fellow artist, so the project would appear more progressive, as opposed to a genuine desire to collaborate. Her trailing off at the end of the excerpt conveyed a distinct discomfort that may be lost in transcription, indicating an uneasy awareness of the apparent cooption of her activism for the branding of her colleague’s artistic product.

Neoliberal subjectivity has been associated with a rejection of vulnerability (Layton, 2010) and a determination to stay positive (Binkley, 2011), which may be thought of as a form of branding of the self; to remain competitive, a business must not reveal its weaknesses. In contrast, the participating artists demonstrated vulnerability, and were extremely forthcoming with negative aspects of their experience, even in group settings. For example, Delaine Greè was brought to tears by the beauty of a poem written by Michelle during our second workshop, and Michelle was open about “trust issues” she had developed by virtue of working as an artist, which was received warmly by the group. The willingness to be vulnerable and comfortable with negative aspects of experience indicates that the participating activist artists have not internalized these identified branding strategies of the business self.

Though their work environment pressures these artists to brand themselves, and they sometimes engage in the practice, a significant discomfort is associated with indulging in branding. It is natural to inquire after the source of this discomfort and reasons for why it has not been internalized in the form of a repudiation of vulnerability and hyper-focus on the positive. In

part, I identify this as stemming from a key value demonstrated by the participating artists: that of authentic self-expression.

Authentic self-expression was understood to be a key value of artmaking. Raven was interested in exploring the difference between creating art for an organization, as opposed to creating art for oneself: “I’m being commissioned, right, and, like, when you’re commissioned, you’re not doing your own art. And, like, I’m being paid to write music for this and this and this. It’s my music, but it’s not necessarily what I would want to write” (post-workshop interview). To Raven, then, creating the art does not make it one’s own; rather, it must germinate with the artist as an authentic form of self-expression before they can have true ownership of it. When asked what a regret of *zeir* artistic career has been, Raven replied: “I really haven’t been like my authentic self in a lot of ways. Um, and been like [air quotes] dimming my shine [end air quotes]. Or, like, you know, shrinking myself” (pre-workshop interview). That lacking authentic artistic self-expression has been Raven’s foremost regret suggests it is highly valued. Charlotte, too, espouses the importance of authentic self-expression in art: “we don’t want to be misinterpreted, right? [...] we want our values to align with what kind of works we’re creating” (focus group). While their artwork may take the form of creating provocative work in order to, as Raven says, “poke and prod” the audience, underlying this appears to be a desire for an authentic expression of one’s thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and values.

This valuing of authentic self-expression does not stop short of the artistic, however. It appears to play a role in interpersonal interaction. Workshop interactions were characterized by openness and honesty; each workshop began with a “check-in,” in which participants were free to share whatever they liked about how they felt and what happened that day. This is a typical theatre practice, and there is no expectation of excessive sharing. Participating activist artists



were quite forthcoming; for example, in the second workshop, Delaine Greè shared the terrible news that her friend had just passed away. Entering the focus group, I expected participants might be more reserved and less forthcoming about their personal fears and anxieties than they had been in their private individual interviews because of the presence of the other participants, but I did not find this to be the case; rather, participants seemed very comfortable taking the space to express difficult emotions. While I cannot know what the participants decided not to share, I feel that a value of authentic self-expression explains the kind of interactions we were able to have throughout our art-research process. By centring authentic self-expression as a key value in interpersonal relationships, the aforementioned discomfort with professional branding also comes into greater focus.

While holding this value appears to conflict with branding of the self, and branding the self is an element of the self-as-business, I am hesitant to claim that authentic self-expression is a value that is resistant to the neoliberal self, generally. This is because the definitional understanding of art as self-expression has strong connections with Romantic liberalism (Gustavsson, 2014), a history of quelling resistance, and may be associated with interpersonal conflict when attempting to engage in activist collaboration.

John Stewart Mill was an important figure in the development of classical liberalism, in no small part due to his writings on free speech and the marketplace of ideas (1859/2011). Mill highly values free individual self-expression, based on the metaphor of the operation of the marketplace: simply put, the more ideas that are expressed in the marketplace and, thus, put into direct competition with one another, the better the public will be able to identify the best ideas. Liberal competition, then, may serve as a basis for a high cultural value on authentic individual

self-expression, and the importance of the individual, so fundamental to liberal thought, is central to such self-expression.

Self-expression as a key value becomes perhaps most realized in the Romantic period, as Taylor (1989) notes in his historical exploration of the formation of the modern self. It was during this period in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century that a shift took place in which “access to the significance of things is inward, that it is only properly understood inwardly,” and so “God, then, is to be interpreted in terms of what we see striving in nature and finding voice within ourselves” (Taylor, 1989, p. 371). With such an understanding, it is a responsible act to give voice to inward experience, as it is through this self-expression that meaning is created. Taylor (1989) identifies this as one of the key shifts in the development of the modern identity. Romantic liberalism’s focus on authentic self-expression is still very much with us; for example, Gustavsson (2014) argues that it is responsible for arguments that defend the creation of provocative artistic material, like cartoons, that undermine the autonomy of people in marginalized communities. So, though in conflict with a neoliberal branding, the value of authentic self-expression has its roots, at least in part, in liberal thought.

Notably, the framing of art as fundamentally self-expressive has a more recent history. During the Cold War, the United States’ Central Intelligence Agency implemented a cultural policy to shift the art worlds’ focus away from the political Socialist Realism of the USSR, towards Abstract Expressionism, most prominently characterized by figures such as Jackson Pollock (Gearon & Wynne-Davies, 2018; Redmond, 2017). Therefore, since art as individual deep expression has been historically encouraged to quell resistance, it is reasonable to question the extent to which a conception of art that primarily values authentic self-expression can be seen as resistant, despite the tension it creates with the branding of the self-as-business.

The value of authentic self-expression also makes sense of some of the difficulties observed in Theme 4, surrounding artistic collaboration. For example, when asked if she enjoyed the collaborative elements of her work, Delaine Greè replied that she did, “as long as they're real artists and not, not people who are just trying to, um, fake it with a stake of: oh, look at me [...], I'm taking up a cause, so I must be a good person” (pre-workshop interview). Here, issues with collaboration emerged when fellow artists were not authentic in their self-expression surrounding a cause they were addressing with their art.

Upon discussing the benefits of entrepreneurialism in art, Michelle said:

when I'm the one in charge at least I feel safe as an artist. There's still a bunch of risk, there's still a bunch of, you know, uncertainty, but at least my integrity and my heart as an artist is safe. Whereas when I work with other people, I never quite know what's going to happen [laughter]. (focus group)

Being able to preserve one's integrity is paramount to Michelle, and a challenge to this is a challenge to her safety as an artist. This challenge appears to emerge from others, as the risk arises of someone influencing one's product and therefore hampering one's authentic self-expression. At the heart of the challenges associated with artistic collaboration, then, appears to be the difficulty of fully expressing oneself when there is someone else's self-expression to respect. When art is understood as authentic self-expression, collaboration becomes intrinsically difficult: “I think we need to acknowledge that collaboration is just hard, and it's, and it's kind of supposed to be hard. Like you're supposed to kind of kill your babies and fight for what you believe in” (Charlotte; focus group).

Ultimately, though the observed focus on collaboration resists (neo)liberal competition (discussed in Theme 4), and the desire for authenticity abuts the branding of the business-self,

the underlying belief that art is defined by individual self-expression seems to align with (neo)liberal and anti-activist understandings of the self, creating tension with collaborative resistance. However, crucially, while a focus on authentic self-expression makes collaboration difficult, this discussion is complicated by the fact that the authentic self-expression that participants want to achieve seems to be a political-activist self-expression, as opposed to the deep expression of Romanticism, gesturing towards a resistant understanding of the self. This complication is further elucidated in the following two themes.

### **Theme 7. The artist in context**

Businesses operate entirely under the logic of an all-encompassing and naturally occurring market, within which they are freely competitive agents. Therefore, success and failure cannot be the result of systemic or historical issues; rather, businesses succeed and fail by virtue of the effort and ability of those who create and operate them. Furthermore, since success within the given system is the goal of the business, changing the system itself is nonsensical. When this decontextualization is applied to the self, it manifests as a responsabilization which over-emphasizes hard work and rational choice, ignoring the importance of the socio-politico-historical elements of subjective experience (Sugarman, 2015; Teo, 2018). In Scharff's (2016) exploration of classical musicians' internalization of the entrepreneurial self, participants were found to disavow systemic inequities and focus inwards, with self-, rather than social-, critique. Such an inward focus comes at the expense of societal critique, demonstrating a dynamic that is thought to be responsible for inhibiting societal resistance. My analysis of the present data runs in direct opposition to Scharff's (2016) findings, as the participants demonstrated a contextual understanding of the self, focused little on self-critique, and readily challenged perceived systemic inequities.

*Subtheme 1. Emphasizing social location and structural inequities*

During the focus group, Raven felt that the participants' positionality, and how it affected their desire to engage in activist art, had not been sufficiently addressed in the art-research project up to that point. In retrospect, I feel this is accurate, likely an oversight arising from my many intersecting identities of privilege, leading me to be ignorant of the central importance of one's personal experience with marginalization and oppression in activist art creation. I took Raven's suggestion, adding a final question surrounding this in our post-workshop interview and taking note of the centrality of social location in the participating activist artists' self-understanding.

Participating activist artists discussed their social location, and their experience as members of marginalized communities, as the inspiration for their activist artwork throughout the art-research process:

as someone who identifies with the Black community and someone who identifies with the Jewish community and someone who identifies with, like, the LGBTQ community and, you know, has been perceived as a woman my whole life, so I identify with women community, you know, like, that has made me, like, an activist. Like, it's, it's not really my empathy that's, like, driving me. (Raven; post-workshop interview)

for me it's been a, a journey of understanding how my personal journey and positionality as an artist can kind of create something that interacts with the community and other people who share either a similar positionality or [slight hesitation] are affected in, in

ways that I think maybe my role or place in the world can, like, help them. (Michelle; pre-workshop interview)

So, my, my art practice has definitely always been grounded in my personal identity and how, how those different factors affect me. Because I'm assuming if it affects me it affects other people. So [my performances] are about sexual assault 'cause I've been sexually assaulted and I'm assuming other people have and I wanted to find a way to talk about that in a way that's not just like upsetting and weird and triggering. I wanted to find a way to talk about it that was, like, upsetting and weird and triggering and then healing. [laugh] You know? (Charlotte; post-workshop interview)

A business self, conditioned to be ahistorical and entirely responsible, would attribute successes and failures to one's personal ability and effort, or lack thereof. In contrast, participating artists rarely attributed their continued engagement with art or their artistic successes to personal ability or hard work. Rather they focused on their surrounding environments and positionality. Raven gives credit for zeir early interest and success with music to “really amazing steppingstones of mentors that have been, like, really supportive,” as well as to zeir family:

Raven: [...] it's, like, less of me choosing it and more of the universe, like: [hands motioning forward gently]

Mike: Oh yeah, yeah. [laughter]

Raven: Shuffling me along, you know: Go ahead [with gesture]. (pre-workshop interview)

Socioeconomic status (SES) was brought up numerous times as a reason for one's continued engagement in the arts and, intriguingly, both high and low SES were given credit for the continued pursuit of their art. Raven, Michelle, and Delaine Greè all felt that either their own financial security or their immediate family's, made it easier for them to continue pursuing their arts career. Charlotte, on the other hand, discussed growing up in a low-income household, and felt that, since she paid for her own university education, she was not pressured to take subjects that did not interest her; as a result, she pursued an education in theatre, which she followed to the completion of a PhD. So, even with fundamentally differing SES, all participants partially attributed their ability to pursue their career in activist art to their SES. When a discourse of hard work/laziness was employed by Charlotte ("I've struggled with a few, like, collaborations in the past where I think people are lazy;" pre-workshop interview), she immediately corrected herself ("and, see, even that is a judgment value I should, like, check;" pre-workshop interview). Taken together, these findings suggest that participating activist artists look to their social location for explanations of their circumstances, as opposed to their personal hard work or ability.

Scharff (2016) noted that, among her musician participants, "anger was rarely evoked," and self-critique predominated (p. 116). While some instances of self-critique emerged during the art-research process ("I'm probably a bad collaborator" (Charlotte; focus group)), structural issues were often highlighted, and anger was frequently expressed. For example, during the focus group, Charlotte freely voiced her upset surrounding inequities and unfairness in the granting system for the arts:

the people who get grants are the people who have gotten grants for, for ages. My company, that will stay unnamed, uh, has [a team of people] whose entire job it is to write grants [...] nine to five, Monday to Friday. And so of course we get grants because

we have people whose entire job it is to write grants. So, when you think about that, they're the same people applying for the same grants you're applying for. I mean, like, what the fuck! You know? It's not actually an equal system. It's a hugely hierarchical system based on power, based on money, based on resources. [...] and take a look at who all those CEOs are, are at the top, and take a look at how they got there, because a lot of them are white men who just were in the right place at the right time and all their friends are white men. And actually they all know each other. [...] I'm now just ranting, but everything you're saying, just so you know, it's not actually you, it's the system.

The “ranting” above is aimed at assuring the other participants that the difficulties they encounter in getting funding for their work are structural (racist, sexist, classist), as opposed to individual (“it’s not actually you, it’s the system”). This freely expressed anger and societal critique contrast the inward-focused anxieties described by Scharff (2016).

Michelle was open about her difficulties with ableism in the performing arts. The lack of accommodation for physical disabilities generally, and invisible disabilities specifically, was a source of anger:

performing arts is incredibly ableist, like incredibly ableist. Um... And it's, it's pretty enraging for me, because even now, like, I can't even fathom, you know, trying to audition for a show and being part of a show, you know. COVID, no COVID, like, just in normal today society it wouldn't, it wouldn't be- they wouldn't make accommodations for me. (pre-workshop interview)

### ***Subtheme 2. Embracing historical understandings***

Not only were systemic inequities the topic of much discussion, but historical understandings of the environment for arts workers and the meaning of activist art were invoked



to reveal the roots of engrained societal problems and show a path forward. In so doing, the participants appear to reject a subjectivity that “implicitly assumes the end of history, with the neoliberal form of life being the best possible world, where significant change is unnecessary and impossible” (Teo, 2018, p. 593).

Charlotte had an interest in the roots of creative entrepreneurship, which she discussed in the focus group: “in the 90s, like, funding got removed, patronage is no longer a thing in almost every country, you know. And so, and so then we saw this rise of art entrepreneurship. Like you can mark, like historically, when art and entrepreneur was used side-by-side.” Charlotte used this historical framing to explain how creative entrepreneurship “came out of need, came out of necessity,” and why now, during the COVID-19 pandemic, “everyone is expected to entrepreneur their way out of this little nightmare.”

In an email to me, Michelle expressed that she was interested in “generational healing and effects of trauma.” A short poem she wrote during the second workshop contributes much to the present theme:

Nina como niña quien llora (like a child that cries)

Motherless in our cries

Desperate for respite

For reprise

Of the days of freedom

Were we ever truly free?

Yes

When we soaked in the moonlight

Unafraid of sunshine

The waves washed us clean

We were in full unity

And now

We cry

Ay mama, donde estas? (oh Mother, where are you?)

Why did you leave...

Will you come back?

I don't want to be left here alone

A child crying

As I interpret through the lens of our current discussion, the poem appears to be lamenting the loss of history itself, represented by the lost mother and the “days of freedom” she represents.

Activist artists are here conceived as abandoned children, and their cries might be interpreted to be the art they create, “desperate” to bring back the “unity” they know existed in the past.

Written in response to the song *Nina Cried Power* (Hozier, 2018), Michelle described that through the poem she was, in part, responding to “the ache of generational pain” she heard in the music. Both “pain” and “freedom” appear to be conceived of historically by Michelle, in stark contrast to the ahistorical self-as-business.

Delaine Greè drew on historical examples to explain how art and activism have long worked together:

if we see the history of arts, even court jesters in, in King's palaces [...] would bring up political issues. That's what their jests were about. Even at, at sometimes the cost of their own lives, they would jest about the King and, and his rulership and all that kind of stuff. So, uh... For me, somehow in my head, arts has never been devoid of activism. (pre-workshop interview)

Delaine Greè invoked this historical understanding of her work early in our initial interview, indicating that she readily contextualizes herself in the history of art activism.

Importantly, the decontextualized aspect of the business self, and the belief that one is at the “end of history” (Teo, 2018, p. 593) is, perhaps, made possible by dint of intersecting dimensions of privilege, as politicized bodies do not have the liberal luxury of existing apolitically. The participants’ self-understandings as political and historical, likely informed by their positioning at the intersection of multiple dimensions of marginalization, represents a distinct rejection of the decontextualized aspect of the self-as-business and an internalization of an alternative and resistant element of the self.

Notably, in the previous data excerpt, not only does Delaine Greè engage with the historical tradition of her artwork, but she argues that activism is in some way intrinsic to performing art (“arts has never been devoid of activism”). Charlotte, too, made a similar suggestion when she said, “any kind of representation reflects representational politics [...] So, I mean to me, activism is part of the work” (pre-workshop interview). The participants’ understanding of the relationship between activism and authenticity, which is itself closely tied to their understanding of art (Theme 6), is discussed in the following theme.

## **Theme 8. Authenticity and activism**

### ***Subtheme 1. Authenticity through activism***

Intriguingly, while all participants began as artists and transitioned to applying their work to activism, some explained that doing so allowed them to express themselves more authentically, or to take control of their lives. In this way, activist-artistic engagement allowed them to better satisfy the value of authentic self-expression, articulated in Theme 6.

When asked to identify a moment of pride in *zeir* artistic career, Raven replied:

Raven: [...] so many of my drag king shows, um, specifically. Um, being in that community and just being able- Like, that was very my authentic- Like, I could be very political and I knew that everyone in the audience would agree with me.

Mike: Right.

Raven: As opposed to just being, like, in a normal, or, like, average, or, like, everyday musician,

Mike: Yeah.

Raven: where, like, I might have Trump supporters and Biden supporters in my audience and, like, I don't want to piss off either of them. Like, if I'm not being my authentic self, I don't want to piss off either of them. (pre-workshop interview)

To Raven, authentic self-expression appears to be deeply intertwined with *zeir* public alignment with a political cause, and being able to fully engage politically in *zeir* art provides *zem* with moments of great pride. Charlotte, too, appears to connect activism to her authentic self: “to me, activism is part of the work. It's part of my way of life” (pre-workshop interview).

After being diagnosed with a chronic illness, Michelle went through a difficult time, as she finished her high school education over many isolated years at home. Nearing the end of this

period, she wrote and directed a play surrounding youth-experienced disability, which she described as “my first time doing something that was the activist artist kind of route.”

So, I just constantly was always looking to avoid, avoid, avoid, all this stuff and then I took a moment and I was like: you know what? I need to take more control of, like, what it is that I want, what do I care about. And creating that show, it opened up a lot of wounds for me as, you know, as a person. It really made me relive a lot of stuff I didn't want to relive. But it was also very liberating and it put me on a path where I was able to learn from my pain and learn from the trauma. (pre-workshop interview)

Through the “liberating” process of engagement in political theatre, Michelle felt like she was taking “control” of her situation. This appears, in part, to be a result of a more authentic self-expression: “when I work for myself [...] my positionality is able to just kind of, like, lead the way and it's great and I feel completely free and, like, not stifled and it's beautiful” (post-workshop interview). The fact that Michelle feels that she expresses herself more freely, and thus more authentically, when creating activist work led by her positionality indicates that she holds a political understanding of the self; her engagement in a relevant political cause allows for a more authentic self-expression.

### ***Subtheme 2: Activism through authenticity***

While engagement in the political allowed for more authentic self-expression, this is quite different from suggesting that, because the self of a racialized or otherwise marginalized person has been politicized, any form of self-expression is in some way activist. While some participants put forward this possibility, others were skeptical.

Michelle appeared to hint that any art created from a marginalized perspective is activist: “the act in activism of just giving people that stage and being like: say your truth, do what you

want to do, just leave it all out there, and that is you being you. And by being authentic, you're then being- creating an activist act" (focus group). The authentic self-expression of a politicised person, then, could be seen as an activist act. Proceeding from a resistant understanding of the self as political likely explains part of the value placed on authenticity observed in Theme 6; authentic self-expression becomes central to the resistant act if the performer's self is representative of resistance. Raven was skeptical of this approach in discussing a fellow artist, though zey raised questions more than provided firm opinions. Zey acknowledge that, for this bisexual artist of colour, "just existing is political" (pre-workshop interview), but challenged her designation as an activist artist: "at the same time, like, I don't know if her music says anything. Right?" (pre-workshop interview).

While participating artists disagree about what might be called activist art, they appear to generally believe that more authentic self-expression is achieved through open activist engagement with a cause, further indicating a contextual, and political, understanding of the self (Theme 7). I offer that a self who finds authentic expression through activist engagement is a self resistant to the decontextualization of the NLFS and, potentially, to neoliberalism generally.

### **Theme 9. Product, process, and play**

Business is centrally focussed on an end, that of maximal profit, and is concerned with the means only insofar as they lead to the desired result. The participants in the present study do not appear to demonstrate a profit-orientation, but I offer that it is a product-over-process approach that underpins the business self. Utilitarian calculating thinking has been theorized to be central to the NLFS (Teo, 2018) following inevitably from a product-oriented business model. This focus on product, with the process solely designed to meet its ends, characterizes business, and a product-focused mentality did appear to be present in the data.

In describing a gig Raven was to begin the following day, zey spoke to a product-oriented way of approaching art creation:

Raven: [...] so much of art is: what is the final product. And, like, a lot of the times, the process is painstaking, right? So, for tomorrow, I know it's gonna suck. Like, it's gonna, I have to be there, like, by 8:00 AM.

Mike: Right.

Raven: And I'll probably be sitting in the makeup chair for hours and hours. But, you know, I will be, just be thinking in the back of my head, like: the, the product, the final product will be so good. The final product will be so good. It's fine, it's fine, it's fine.

(post-workshop interview)

The unpleasant process described here is justified by a good product. As a business has a responsibility to do whatever is in its power, within the law, to maximize its profits, so does a product-oriented professional artist do what needs to be done to achieve their ends, be it a powerful activist product that they feel can make a difference or a financially successful people-pleaser.

Michelle was the only participant who explicitly spoke to the dangers of product-over-process thinking in her initial interview. Describing her arts high school environment, Michelle calls it “toxic” and regrets knowingly participating in the process that demanded too much:

Michelle: [...] I pushed my body too much,

Mike: Yeah.

Michelle: in order to fulfill the needs of other people, uh, to perform- Like, I performed when I was sick many times. This concept of, like, you know, *the show must go on* and it's more important to, you know, just do it than, like, care about the performer

However, in the same interview, Michelle discussed without regret how she occasionally felt the need to push herself hard, knowing she would suffer health-related consequences related to her disability, to create the strongest artistic product:

[...] as an artist, I want to just do the best work. Like, I want to give you the best result, I want to, like, have the best thing, and I know I can do it. I know I'm going to suffer from it a bit and struggle a bit, but that's my choice.

So, while she acutely realizes the personal risks of a focus on product-over-process, it is still a value she appears to hold. Michelle's struggle with product-oriented approaches to performing art resonates directly with my personal experience of performing art training environments (Ruderman, In Press). My opinions and experience surrounding this element of professionalizing art environments certainly made me more sensitive to these dynamics in analysis; after much consideration of the data, however, I am confident my construction of this theme is not simply a projection of my own thoughts and feelings.

For Charlotte especially, a product-focused approach seems to be in some way linked to the important belief – held by most participants – that activism is in some ways difficult, rigorous, and overwhelming. This belief has been noted in literature surrounding activist identity (Bobel, 2007; Craddock, 2019) and has been theorized to stem from an exclusionary perfect-standard image of the activist, who is thoroughly devoted, humble, gendered male, and engages in “direct” activism. This belief is damaging to resistance insofar as it dissuades engagement with activism because it appears too challenging or that one might face criticism for not meeting a perfect standard. Both Charlotte and Michelle express difficulty identifying as an activist, though they do feel their work might be described as activist:



I think in a sense if people haven't met, let's say, like, another person with a chronic illness and they're meeting me, somehow somehow I become, like, that authority on a subject, and it's like: I'm, I'm not. Um, and I think sometimes that's maybe what I equate to an activist, is, like, I need to know everything. I need to, like, have all my ducks in a row in case I get questioned [...] And I'm like: ah, that's not me. [laughter] (Michelle; pre-workshop interview)

I'm not afraid of the word activist, I just worry that my, my, like, hardcore activist friends will call me out. [laughter] (Charlotte; pre-workshop interview)

With the product – activist art – understood as intrinsically difficult and rigorous, the process by which to accomplish effective activism becomes more challenging and less enjoyable. Charlotte emphasized that activist work requires a high level of “rigour” and “clout,” and that her high standards for her work often create interpersonal conflict within artistic collaborations. During the workshop, she had a strong reaction when Delaine Greè suggested that something might be activist without sufficiently justifying how, demonstrating in real time how the focus on excellent product might come at the expense of process. Charlotte described this event in the focus group:

I think you said it at some point, [Delaine Greè], where you were like: oh, it's activist just 'cause it is, look how activist it is. And I was like: [yelling] what! [laughter]. Like, guys, like: but don't we need to define it? Don't we need to, like, explain it? Don't we need to, like, make sure that everyone understands how activist it is?

Indeed, Charlotte would go on to describe that the most valuable lesson she would take away from the art-research process was the possibility that activism might be allowed to be easy, though she was not entirely convinced.

Strikingly, the most important discovery for several participants that emerged out of the workshop was the potential for play to be incorporated into their activist artistic practice, allowing activist art to be more enjoyable, less overwhelming, easier to create, and allow for more fruitful collaborations. In structuring the workshops, I emphasized flexibility, to put the direction of the workshop in the hands of the participating artists; while I mapped out the activities for the group, the way these activities were interpreted and the kinds of art that were created was up to the group. In the second workshop, participants paired off into two groups, each of which created an artistic contribution. One group, Charlotte and Raven, decided to use the activity as a way to get to know each other rather than attempt to create a refined product; they recorded themselves engaging in a collaborative drawing activity (Recording H1; *Bird Funeral Drawing (Video 1)*, 2021). Once shared, the playful energy inspired the other participants and play became the focus of the rest of the workshops, captured in Recording H2 (*Playing, Inspired by Bird Funeral Drawing*, 2021). The “final” edited video featured play centrally, as we paired video of the group playing children’s games with the performance piece discussed in Theme 2, to explore how play might also relate to social justice (Recording H3; *“Final” piece*, 2021). See Appendix H for links to the three workshop recordings.

As seen in my notes surrounding what was discussed by the participants in the third workshop, the pressure of perfectionism came up in group discussion, indicating that the emergence of play as a central workshop theme might stem from a reaction against a product-over-process environment in activist art. According to my journal, Delaine Greè mentioned that

she was sometimes “afraid of making a mistake” and Michelle discussed that she was “struggling with perfectionism.” I also noted that Michelle described the play we engaged with in the workshops as “liberating.” After only the first workshop, Charlotte wrote a freeform poem as her weekly reflection, in which she spoke to the perfectionism that characterizes her process and the relief of departing from it:

love the invitation not to be precious,  
 as I hold my work so often  
 as if I don't throw stones  
 as if I don't live in a glasshouses  
 and what a gift to throw something at the wall  
 at a glass house  
 and see what sticks

In a post-workshop interview, Raven remarked:

Oftentimes when I write my own stuff, it's really just helping me process my deep, dark, heavy emotions. [...] But it doesn't always have to be like that. And so, like, this reminded me, you know, you're allowed to play and, like, sometimes you can get inspired from play.

Shepard (2011) argues that the incorporation of play into activist endeavors can challenge the product-oriented systems of neoliberal capitalism: “For a social movement to create a place to play is to challenge core workings of capitalist social arrangements” (p. 3). The participants’ attraction to play during the workshops seems to gesture towards a pre-existing preoccupation with an excellent product at the expense of an enjoyable or healthy process, indicating an internalization of a utility-maximizing thinking characteristic of the NLFS (Teo, 2018), which

follows naturally from an understanding of self-as-business. For these activist artists, this primary focus on the final product may take root in, or be encouraged by, the belief that activism is intrinsically difficult and rigorous. Notably, in the workshops, resistant subjectivity-in-process appeared to take place, in which the collaborative artistic creation of one pair of participants that abutted a product orientation inspired the other pair, whose ensuing work was transformed to resist this internalized aspect of the business self.

## **Discussion**

In the above analysis I searched for evidence of an internalization of the neoliberal business self, while keeping in mind the potential presence of alternative and possibly resistant self-understandings. To do so, I interrogated the data surrounding several key areas related to the business self that have received ample scholarly attention. In the first three themes, I established the participants' personal connection to the professional artist identity and explored the degree to which they understood this identity as fundamentally business-oriented and entrepreneurial. In Theme 4, I focused on professional relationships, centring competition and utilitarian networking in my analysis as characteristically neoliberal. In Theme 5, my attention turned to the internalized need for efficiency and the participants' experience of time. Theme 6 centred around professional branding and branding of the self, while Themes 7 and 8 explored the responsibilized and decontextualized aspects of the neoliberal self. Finally, Theme 9 addressed a utilitarian product orientation. Notably, I did not address irony in the analysis, despite it having been theorized to be a strategy of resistance to neoliberalism (Monje, 2011). It was not a predominant feature of the data, which was better characterized by sincerity, but I am reluctant to draw firm conclusions surrounding this. As I was actively conducting collaborative arts workshops as a part of a Master's thesis, and doing so sincerely, the participants may have felt it disrespectful to me to approach the project or its subject with an ironical cynicism. Therefore, I feel that the construction of the project does not lend itself to a study of irony or cynicism, so this was not included in the analysis.

Across this wide spread of elements of the business self, I argue that there are small areas of internalization. In Theme 2, participants were shown to acknowledge the importance of entrepreneurial skills and knowledge and to have certain positive associations with it. While

these were at times outweighed by the distinct discomforts experienced surrounding applying business models to their art, Charlotte attempted to integrate the entrepreneurial into her self-understanding as an activist artist to resolve this discomfort, and participants indicated a desire to be better entrepreneurs. Also, in Theme 9, a good product was shown to be valued over the experience of its creation, indicating an internalization of a utilitarian product orientation; notably, however, this internalized aspect of the business self was identified by the participants throughout the collaborative arts workshops and became a focus of theirs' to resist through play. Other behaviours were identified which were compatible with neoliberal entrepreneurship, such as professional networking (Theme 4), perpetual work (Theme 5), and branding (Theme 6), but when closely inspected these behaviours did not appear to signal an internalization of the business self.

There are many examples throughout the analysis of participants failing to internalize, or actively resisting, the neoliberal self. A focus on collaboration and caring networking characterized professional relationships (Theme 4), despite a busyness, participants valued slowness, personal health, and creativity over a perpetually efficient use of time (Theme 5), a discomfort with self-branding emerged from a value of authentic self-expression (Theme 6) that emphasized the socio-politico-historical aspects of the self in contrast to the decontextualized and responsabilized self of neoliberalism (Themes 7 and 8), and a desire to fight against an internalized focus on product at the expense of the experience of creation emerged during the collaborative art workshops (Theme 9).

Generally, the themes seem to be informed by a complicated struggle between the demands of a neoliberal work environment and the activist desire to resist the status quo. Artists understand themselves as entrepreneurs, but entrepreneurialism is antithetical to art creation. An

excellent product is essential, but an obsession with efficient productivity will erode creativity. Art is defined as individual self-expression, but collaboration is central to the activist art creation process. Such difficult conflicts are expected, as the participants attempt to create work that both challenges societal norms and allows them to thrive in a hegemonically neoliberal work environment. As I worked through these emerging themes, I had the sense that, in short, the entrepreneurial self was embraced where necessary and resisted where possible.

So, as I explored the data, refined themes, and presented my embryonic work, it became clear that the model around which most sociological research on arts work circles was not sufficient to describe these activist artists. The self-enterprising, self-focused, entrepreneurial artist who seeks out opportunities to engage in paid self-expression was a trope that did not fit, though some elements of it were present; alternative self-understandings seemed to generally predominate. At this point, I encountered another model that resonates more strongly with the data, discussed in Theme 3: the socially engaged artist as care worker. Alacovska (2020) drew from her own qualitative research with socially engaged artists in South-East Europe to challenge the predominant conception of arts work in the social sciences, and to argue that the creation and dissemination of activist art might be fruitfully thought of as “labour of care and compassion” (p. 727). This work centres around the notion that socially engaged art creation might be thought of as creative “acts of repair” (Alacovska, 2020, p. 737) for the larger community. A communitarian ethic is also stressed in such a model, emphasizing the cooperation and collaboration between artists and challenging (neo)liberal competitive individualism (Alacovska & Bissonnette, 2019; Sandoval, 2018).

Care is not implicitly harmless. Just as the association of the entrepreneurial with people from marginalized communities is not received positively in all contexts (Verduijn, & Essers,

2013; Verduijn et al., 2014), a care framework is not certain to be embraced. The concept of care is traditionally gendered female, and its identification in this research may in part be attributed to the participants' genders: Delaine Greè, Michelle, and Charlotte identify as female and Raven has been "perceived as a woman [zeir] whole life." The imposition of a care framework may reasonably be rejected by others who experience it as a confining gender role or feel it is otherwise incompatible with their self-concept; for example, an understanding of activist artist as warrior may be preferred by some, though this was explicitly rejected by Michelle: "the more I just make art about what I have gone through and art that helps me heal, I'm then helping other people heal. And it's less about, I think it's less about the warrior part of activist" (pre-workshop interview). Furthermore, self-consciously imposing care frameworks on critical work can minimize difference and insufficiently address the traumatic to better foster positive feelings (Murphy, 2015). While shifting the focus towards positive feelings may be an incentive to employ care frameworks in certain contexts, I feel this is a problem of implementation as opposed to theoretical strength. Care requires one to go deep into the root of traumatic issues. If one is diagnosed with cancer, genuine care may involve invasive surgical removal. It is in this sense of the word that I understand care, on an audience or societal level, when referring to the artists' creation of provocative, activist work. Such an understanding does not necessarily consider care and healing to be "warm and fuzzy," and it can encompass behaviours and attitudes that may be traditionally gendered male; however, the focus remains on repairing society and supporting others.

In the Results section, I highlighted how this alternative self-understanding sheds light on the caring collaboration observed (Theme 4); additionally, an internalized understanding of the self as care worker may also help to explain some of the other observed themes. The perceived



importance of activist art for societal healing (Theme 3) may contribute to a prioritization of product over all else (Theme 9); indeed, a product orientation could be reasoned to be compatible with both the business self and the care worker self, though the tension it can create with collaborative caring may in part explain the playful resistance observed in the arts workshops. The understanding of the value of time as personal health and creativity (Theme 5) gestures towards a self-care that improves the artist's ability to enact effective artistic acts of repair. When authentic self expression (Theme 6) is achieved through activism (Theme 8) it suggests that one is not truly themselves unless they are engaged in the process of societal healing. Participants' self-understanding then, appears to come together in a picture that much better resembles a care worker than a self-interested entrepreneur.

An interesting dynamic emerged from the analysis whereby entrepreneurial behaviours that seem necessary for professional success related to securing work (networking) and creating (product-over-process, busyness) appear to be largely driven not by a business self, but by an alternative care worker self. These behaviours, then, that sit easily within the business self appear to be compatible with an alternate self-understanding. Networking, which might have been a neoliberal utilitarian social relationship, appeared to be rather based in a caring collective. The need to constantly work does not appear to be motivated by an internalized need for perpetual efficiency, but by a practical need to get by; it is balanced with an emphasis on slowness and creativity, in turn allowing for more effective acts of societal repair. This speaks to a kind of product-orientation typical of the business self and yet it is also compatible with a care model, considering the goal of this product is societal repair. In this way, the participating activist artists are able to operate within the context of a neoliberal system, while rejecting the entrepreneurial self it encourages. This dynamic speaks to Page's (2020) description of how academics might

resist neoliberalism in the academy; by engaging in neoliberal structures and behaviours with alternate subjectivities, their meaning may be transformed from the inside. See Figure I1 for an illustration of how the care worker and entrepreneur models intersect and how the analysis has mapped onto these self-understandings.

Importantly, though, a self-understanding as care worker is not implicitly resistant to neoliberalism and neoliberal subjectivity. Care of the self, for example, is a defining feature of neoliberalism, as neoliberal governments offload the responsibility of self-care onto individuals (Sugarman, 2015), and self-improvement and personal emotion management dominate neoliberal discourse (Teo, 2018). The metaphor of care work also conjures to mind individual practitioners working with individual patients. Such an individualized conception of the resistant potential of art is potentially limiting; individual self-expression remains crucial here, posing difficulties with community action, and it could be argued that the focus is directed at symptomatic, not systemic, change. Furthermore, understanding art as care work aligns it with neoliberal values of practical utility to justify its existence. Invoking the biomedical further reinforces a product- (i.e. the achievement of health), as opposed to a process- (e.g. transforming society), orientation.

Conversely, its conception as an ameliorative force that aims to unite communities in digging into the roots of messy cultural issues and, thus, change our world for the better holds potential for resistance. The other-focused subjectivity that exists alongside a care of others (i.e. a focus on caring collaboration in opposition to (neo)liberal competitive individualism) and care of community (i.e. activist art as acts of societal repair and community healing) is in direct contrast to (neo)liberal individualism and competition. While care of the self is traditionally conceived as neoliberal, the reason it is valued by the participating activist artists is crucial; care of self fosters creativity, which, in turn, may be valued for its application to societal healing. In

my opinion, much like the participants' engagement with networking (Theme 4), this would reflect a resistant subjectivity: "The difference is the locus of meaning, the exploitation of existing frameworks and practices for their own means" (Page, 2020, p. 597). Also, incorporating agentive ferocious activism into a larger framework of care works to challenge a common understanding of activism as fundamentally male-gendered, which has been shown to disincline identification and engagement with activism (Craddock, 2019). So, notwithstanding its limitations, I believe that an embrace of care worker understandings of the self among activist artists can provide an avenue of resistance to hegemonic neoliberalism.

### **Online environment**

The collaborative arts workshops appeared to be an effective research tool in generating nuanced data and participant involvement; however, the limitations of an online context should be noted. Issues related to the virtual space recurred time and again throughout the process, first emerging during pre-workshop interviews. Charlotte warned me that her partner shares her living space, which was not so large that total privacy could be achieved. She offered to wear headphones throughout the process and would later inform the other participants, but, of course, Charlotte's responses could be overheard by her partner. It is impossible to say just how much this affected the data collected. It also made me wonder at the time what was on the other side of all the participants' computer screens and whether they might be tailoring their responses knowing that a roommate, romantic partner, or family member might be listening.

During the collaborative art workshops, the online environment was responsible for some awkwardness. On Zoom, it is difficult to know who will speak next, so there are lengthy pauses until the unfortunate moment when more than one person speaks at the same time. The group labeled this *mute chicken* or *Zoom chicken*, and it was a constant annoyance. The stilted element

of this technology made its way into the “final” video (*"Final" piece*, 2021), which I edited to attempt to capture the sense of the virtual space. More substantially, I feel that the lack of embodiment did hinder collaboration, an opinion that was voiced by multiple participants over the course of the project. In my experience, the ineffable quality of physical presence simply keeps one more positive and energized; tiredness was a constant struggle throughout the workshops. In part, this was related to the evening timing of the workshops, but the draining online environment, and the physical setting of one’s own bedroom, doubtlessly contributed to a general lack of energy. Despite these difficulties, it allowed Charlotte to participate, who was out of Ontario at the time of the workshops. Ultimately, the online environment, imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, did not get in the way as much as it might have, with the participating artists creatively exploring how to use the computer to make interesting art; however, it is hard to see many distinct benefits to the workshops taking place online.

Finally, the focus group ended somewhat awkwardly. Delaine Greè was feeling unwell, so left the Zoom meeting early. Charlotte, too, had an obligation elsewhere, so also left before the final question. While this was not a problem in the data collection as we had post-workshop meetings in which we could discuss any missed questions, it does highlight another difficulty with the online environment: it is very easy to simply close one’s laptop. This could be seen as a positive, in that there are fewer external pressures informing participation. In my case, luckily, participants did not generally have an easy-come-easy-go attitude, but this moment made it clear to me that for other projects with other participants there may be legitimate concern of increased withdrawal in an online format.

## **Conclusion**

Activist artists provide an important point of potential resistance to cultural disimagination and so are worthy of study in and of themselves. One might also consider, however, that all work is increasingly becoming like arts work in the gig economy: fragmented, precarious, and anxiety-inducing (Petriglieri et al., 2019). Activist artists show us both how we must mold our self-understandings to comply with this environment, but also, crucially, where one might challenge dominant ways of being and how to approach resistance. I hope future research will continue to explore what can be learned from artists about the psychological effects of neoliberalism and the contours of resistant subjectivity-in-process.

In this thesis project, I implemented a plurality of qualitative methods, some conventional and some novel, to inquire about how, and to what degree, a neoliberal business self is internalized among activist performing artists in neoliberal Ontario. Proceeding from a cultural-historical ontology of subjectivity (Rey, 2017; 2019), I have also asked about what alternative and potentially resistant understandings of the self are observed, as resistant subjectivity-in-process. I was joined by a thoroughly engaged group of participants, as we rhymed, wrote, danced, and discussed our way into understandings of how the Ontario work environment can shape subjectivity, and how we can shape it back. Our work in this art research process, especially the collaborative art workshops, feels larger than what could be captured in my analysis and this report. I intend to converse with the data further beyond this thesis, posing other research questions and employing other analytic methods. Data related limitations of this project centre around the online environment, some data redundancy, insufficient data collection during the workshops, and the lack of a fully developed analytic method suited to Rey's (2017; 2019) definition of subjectivity.

I am struck now by the responsibility of the qualitative researcher to participants who offer so much and by feelings of analytic inadequacy. It is humbling to realize that all the work of data collection and all the generosity of participants, supervisors, committee members, and ethics reviewers is ultimately refracted through my idiosyncratic, fundamentally limited, analytic lens. My hope is, having demonstrated transparency at all stages of the work and engaged in persistent self-reflexivity, that I have been able to detect some pitfalls that I could avoid, and that the reader will be able to observe the ones that I did not.

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## **Appendix A. Project Outline**

1. Pre-workshop interviews
2. Four weekly collaborative arts workshops with weekly reflections
3. Video viewing and focus group
4. Online “exhibition”
5. Post-workshop interviews
6. Analysis and write-up with member-checking

## **Appendix B. Workshop outlines**

### **Week 1**

The facilitator introduces the project, and the participants introduce themselves to each other. The kernelling process is described and the facilitator shares images to inspire artistic creation around the topic of interest. Participants are given a short time to create something inspired by the images. Artistic creations are shared and group feedback is provided. Participants are asked to bring in their own contributions for the group for the following week. Participants are reminded to complete their weekly reflection.

### **Week 2**

Contributions are shared, then distributed to other group members. Participants are given time to develop an artistic creation based off of their new contribution, then given more time to work with a partner on it. Creations are shared, and group feedback is given. Participants are reminded to complete their weekly reflection.

### **Week 3**

Pairs established in previous session swap their artistic creations and are given time in their pairs to develop or respond to their newly received artistic contribution. These artistic responses are then shared, and group feedback is given. A communal discussion is held on how to unite the artwork created thus far. The group plans for the recording of the artwork, to take place in the final workshop. Participants are reminded to complete their weekly reflection.

### **Week 4**

Necessary preparation is carried out, and recordings of performances are made. The group discusses how best to edit together the recordings into a single video file. Participants are asked to indicate whether or not they would feel comfortable having a private link sent to the

group, which the participants could feel free to share. If one participant does not consent to this online “exhibition,” the link will not be distributed. Participants are reminded to complete their weekly reflection.



### **Appendix C. Pre-Workshop Interview Questions**

1. Can you tell me about what the term “activist artist” means to you? (Probe: Do you identify with the term? How would/do you think or feel about being described as an activist artist? What terms do you use to describe your vocation? Do you identify with a particular artist community?)
2. Can you tell me about what drew you to your art to begin with? (Probe: How did you feel when you first engaged in your art form? Any specific memories or moments?)
3. Can you talk about to what degree your artwork is collaborative as opposed to individual? (Probe: Have you thought about and/or ever wanted to do collaborative/individual work? How often?)
4. Can you talk about the role art plays in supporting yourself financially? (Probe: Do you receive money for your art, or “make a living” from your art? Is it a goal of yours to do so? If so, can you discuss your experience of pursuing this goal? If not, can you discuss how art fits into your life? Has the need for money altered the artwork you create?)
5. Can you tell me about the non-artistic side of being an artist? (Probe: What activities does the vocation ask of you, aside from creating art? Can you tell me about your experience of these activities? In what ways does the job market shape your work? How has the market evolved over the course of your career? What do think or feel about the entrepreneurial side of your profession? Do you feel pressure to conform to the entrepreneurial side of being an artist?)
6. Can you tell me about any specific moments that you regret, or wish had gone differently, in your artistic career? (Probe: Can you tell me about possible reasons for these moments you regret?)

7. Can you tell me about what you feel have been some moments of pride for you in your artistic career? (Probe: What led to these?)
8. Can you tell me about the effect, if any, that COVID-19 has had on your experience of being an artist? (Probe: Do you think about the work differently now? Does it make collaboration easier, or more difficult?)

### **Appendix D. Post-Workshop Interview Questions**

1. Can you tell me about your personal reflections submitted throughout the process?

(Probe: How did they develop?)

2. Can you tell me about the workshop experience? (Probe: Was it what you expected? Did you find it difficult, easy, or in between? Was there anything you would have changed?)

3. Did you learn anything notable from this communal art-research workshop? (Probe: Did it change how you think about the artist's work environment? If so, how? Did it change how you think about resistant artwork? If so, how?)

*Fourth question added in consultation with participants:*

4. Can you tell me about how your positionality has informed your drive to create activist art, and your experience working professionally?

### **Appendix E. Focus Group Questions**

1. Having watched the piece we created, what jumps out to us? (Probe: Are there any memorable or powerful moments? Any notable common threads or contradictions within the work?)
2. After this project, how do we think or feel about being activist performing artists? (Probe: What is the purpose of activist art? What are the difficulties of doing such work? What are the benefits? Is entrepreneurialism important in such work? Do you feel part of a larger art community? If so, what sort of a community is it?)
3. How do activist artists negotiate activist aims with the need to make money? (Probe: Can one have both goals of creating activist work and making a living in the arts? What is it to be a “professional” artist? Can an activist artist be a “professional” artist?)
4. If we could improve the professional environment for artists like yourselves, how would we change things? (Probe: Is there any role the government might play? Any role the community might play? Any role businesses might play? Any role individual artists might play?)
5. Is there anything you would like to add to our discussion that has not come up today?

## **Appendix F. Recruitment Messages**

### **First email for recruitment through my network**

Hello!

As many of you know, I'm currently working towards a Master's in Psychology (Historical, Theoretical, Critical) at York University. My thesis is an arts-research project, and I am now looking for 3-5 artists who are interested in participating.

The project is called "Subjectivity of Activist Performing Artists". It will explore how activist performing artists in modern Canada understand their vocation, and how they and their art are shaped by its professional demands. Participants will be performing artists (actors, dancers, singers, circus artists, street performers, musicians, comedians, magicians, etc.) who identify as activist, counter-cultural, or resistant in either their work or artist lifestyle. The project will take place entirely online (Zoom) and consists of an initial (private) interview, a short series of weekly group art workshops, a focus group discussion, and a final short interview about the process (with an optional online "exhibition" for invited family and friends at the end).

If you or anyone you know might be interested in participating, please let me know and I will contact you/them individually. If you are not sure whether you/they meet the criteria, please do contact me anyway just to check.

Thanks for reading and considering, and feel free to send along any questions you may have!

Best,

Mike Ruderman

### **Second email for artists who were referred through responses to the first email**

Hello!

My name is Mike Ruderman; I'm an actor/playwright who is currently doing a Master's in Psychology (Historical, Theoretical, Critical) at York University. I was told by our friend that you may be interested in participating in an online (Zoom) arts-research workshop project that I am carrying out for my Master's thesis.

The project is called "Subjectivity of Activist Performing Artists". It will explore how activist performing artists in modern Canada understand their vocation, and how they and their art are shaped by its professional demands. Participants will be performing artists (actors, dancers, singers, circus artists, street performers, musicians, comedians, magicians, etc.) who identify as activist, counter-cultural, or resistant in either their work or artist lifestyle. The project will take place entirely online (Zoom) and consists of an initial (private) interview, a short series of weekly group art workshops, a focus group discussion, and a final short interview about the process.

If you are interested in participating, please let me know! I will be happy to send along further details about the project and answer any questions you may have. If you are not sure whether you meet the criteria, please do send along an email just to check.

Thanks for reading and I hope to hear from you soon!

Warm Regards,

Mike Ruderman

## Appendix G. Workshop Images

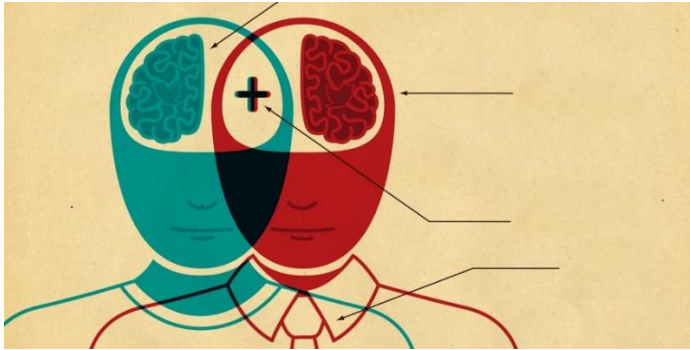


Image G1.

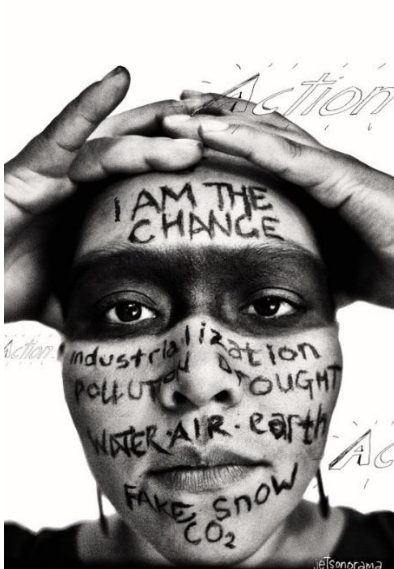


Image G2.



Image G3.

## **Appendix H. Workshop Recordings**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P8v0SUmvvb4>

Recording H1.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NhyEECuGVP4>

Recording H2.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lFrzEjTqcCY>

Recording H3.



### Appendix I. Figures

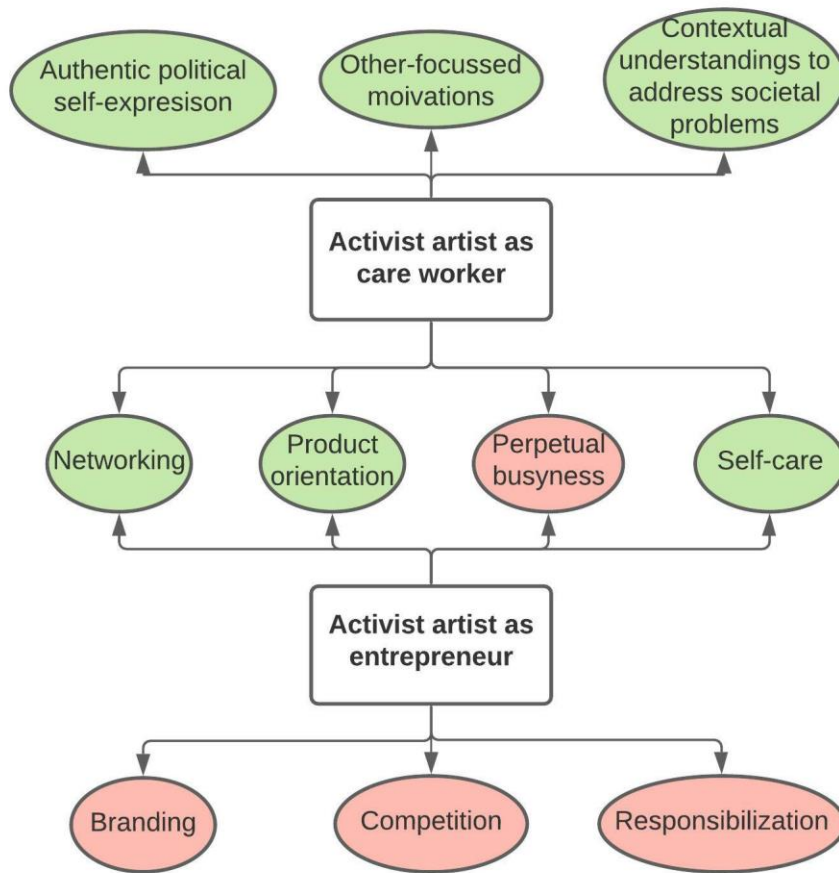


Figure I1. Green shapes indicate behaviours and values observed among the participants; red shapes indicate those experienced uncomfortably or not observed among the participants.