

Giving What You Don't Have
Cornelia Sollfrank in Conversation

Sean Dockray
Expanded Appropriation

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Public School

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We decided to give up doing a gallery because... Well, for one, the material conditions weren't so great for it. But I think people who open up galleries do it in really challenging conditions, so there is no reason why we couldn't have done a gallery in that basement. [00:37] I think we were actually disinterested in exhibition as a format. After a few years – I mean, we did something like 35 things that could easily be called exhibitions, in a span of 5 years leading up to that. [00:55] I think we just wanted to try something else. And so we already had started a project called The Public School a year prior, so we decided that we would use our space primarily as a school. [01:10] At that time those two things happened. We eliminated the gallery and then ended up with two new galleries and a school instead!

[01:20] What The Public School is... it's been going now for five years. It began just as a structure or even a diagram, or an idea or something. [01:43] And the idea is that people would propose things that they wanted to learn about, or to teach to other people. And then there would be a kind of process where we use our space or the Internet to allow people to sign up to say they are also interested in this idea. And then the School's job would be to turn those ideas into real meetings of people, real classes where people got together. [02:15] So in that sense the curriculum would be developed in public. It wouldn't be public just simply in the sense that anyone could go to it, but it'd be public in the sense that anyone could produce the form of it. [02:32] And again, I need a lot more time, I think, to talk about all the dimensions to it, but in broad strokes that's kind of what it is. [02:43] Although we started in Los Angeles, in the basement of our original gallery five years ago, it's now been in around a dozen cities around the world, where people are operating according to the same process, and then sometimes in conversation with one another. And there've been 500-600 classes, and 2000 or so proposals made in that time.

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Motivation

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It was in the air at the time already, so I don't think it'd be an entirely independent impulse – number one. But I had actually tried to start a couple of things that had failed. [03:41] Like Aaaaarg – I tried to set up some physical reading groups that would complement the online archive. So, in Los Angeles the idea would be that we'd meet and talk about things that were being posted to the website. So, yes, reading groups. But they never really went anywhere. They were always really small, and they kind of run out of steam quite quickly because no one was interested. [04:10] So in a way The Public

School was a later iteration of something that I'd already been trying for a while. But the other thing was that by doing these reading groups, intuitively, I knew what was wrong. [04:31] Although I like to read, that is not all of what education is to me. To me learning and education is something that is more inclusive of a lot more of what we experience in life, than simply theoretical discussions. The structures didn't really allow that in a way. [04:56] The Public School came out of just trying to imagine what kind of structure would be inclusive to overcome some of those self-imposed limitations. [05:14] I'm very interested in technology in a hands-on way. I like to code and electronics – hacking around with electronics. And at the same time, I like to read and I like to write. And then once you go down that line then you think, well, I like music a lot and I like to play chess as well. [05:46] I think about all these things that I like to do, and I just thought about how a lot of these gestures towards education that I tried to do previously, in no way embraced me as a whole person. So in that sense, it was based in personal interest. [06:22] But the other personal interest had to do with personal motivation, it had to do with running an art space for, at that point, four years. And actually seeing the way that that happened, because I'm not a curator. [06:38] And so the act of putting on exhibitions for me was less about making value judgments, and more about trying to contribute to the cultural life of my city, and also provide opportunities that didn't exist in Los Angeles. [06:57] For example, no one really knew how to show work with technology, and we were able to, because, for instance I knew how to set up projectors, fix electronics or get things to start and stop, and that kind of stuff. [07:13] But over the course of running it, because it is an exhibition space, I found myself put into the role of being a curator – Fiona and I both did. And it was kind of an uncomfortable role to be deciding what became visible and what wouldn't be. [07:32] And one thing that was never visible was the sort of mechanisms by which an institution made certain things visible. [07:40] So the public in The Public School actually in a way is trying to eliminate that whole apparatus, or at least, put that apparatus as something that we didn't want to be solely the ones interacting with. We wanted that apparatus to be... that our entire community, the community of people who is participating in the programme – that they were the ones responsible for it. [08:14] So that would shift programming, but also accountability and all these things, to the people who are actually participating in the life of the space.

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Technical Infrastructure

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The technical infrastructure is incredibly important because at the moment that's people's primary experience of the project. They make proposals on the website, and then the classes are actually organised by people through the website. So the website, the entire technical infrastructure becomes the engine for getting events to happen. [09:01] It's not an essential part. At the very beginning we did it on paper, and we had the website and the paper kind of simultaneously. And we'd print things out onto paper that would be accessible by coming into the space, and vice versa, we'd enter things from the paper back into the website. [09:26] But at the moment it's mostly orchestrated through the website. And it's been three versions of it, like three separate pieces of software, and the last two it's been Kayla Waldorf and myself who have been programming it. And we have... [09:45] Number one, we've organised lots of classes, so we're very involved in the life of the school. And in a way we try to programme the site

according to (A) what would make things work, but (B), like you say, in a way that expresses the politics, as we see them, of the site. [10:14] And so almost at every level, at every design decision that Kayla might be making, or every kind of code or database decision, you know, interactive decision that I might be making – those conversations and those ideas are finding their way into that. [10:45] And vice versa, that you see code, in a certain way, as not determining politics, but certainly influencing what people see as possible and also choices that they see available to them, and things like that. [11:09] I guess as users of the site, as organisers of The Public School and as programmers, this kind of relationship between the project and the software is quite intertwined. [11:28] And I don't think that... I think that typically art institutions use a website as a kind of publicity vehicle, as a kind of postcard or something that fits into their broadcasting of a programme, as something as a glue between their space and their audience. [11:49] And I think for us the website is actually integral to the space and to the audience. There is more of a continuum between the space, programme, website and audience.

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Aaaaarg.org

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It started out small. In a way, it was an extension of what I think as a practice that all of us are familiar with, which is sharing books that we've read, or sharing articles that we've read, especially if your work is somehow in relationship to things that you might be reading. [12:41] In my architecture school, for instance, we would read lots and lots, and then we'd be making work in parallel. It wouldn't be that either would determine the other, but in the end, there is a strong relationship between the ideas that you have and what you see as possible, and the things that you are reading. [13:07] So as part of the student culture, especially among my friends, the people that I identified with in school, we'd be discovering different parts of the library independently. And then when we found something that was quite moving in whatever way then we would photocopy it to keep it for ourselves later. [13:34] And we'd also give it to each other as a kind of secret tool, or something like that, you know, like you have the sense that when you found something that is really good – and specially if other people aren't even interested – then you feel really empowered by having access to that, by being able to read it and reread it. [14:02] And then you feel more empowered when there is a community of other people. It may be a small one, but who have read that thing as well, because then you start building a kind of shared frame of reference, a shared vocabulary and a shared way of seeing the world, and seeing what you're working on. [14:22] And I think out of that comes projects, like you actually work on projects together, you collaborate, you correspond with other people or you actually share the work. And that's what happened. [14:41] I started Aaaaarg.org after I moved from New York to Los Angeles, so I was quite far away from some of the people that I was working with – and just continuing with that very basic activity of sharing reading material in order to have that shared vocabulary to be able to work together.

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Content

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It turned out to be architecture at the very beginning. But we all had really broad understandings of what architecture meant and what it included, so there was a lot of media theory, art history and philosophy, and occasionally some architecture too. [15:38] And so that became the initial kind of seed. And I think everything has, as the site expanded from there, to be not just me and some collaborators, or then collaborators of collaborators, and then friends of those people, and so on. [16:03] It's kind of a ripple effect outwards. What happened was something that is quite common to almost any platform, which is this kind of feedback. Even in an open structure, it's never truly open. There're always rules in place, there's always a past history, and those two things go a long way to influence what happens in the future. [16:33] I'm sure a lot of people will come to the site who are interested in one thing, and then find nothing in the site that speaks to them, and then disappear. Whereas other people, the site really spoke to them, and so what they would contribute can also fit according to that sense, to that inclination.

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Dynamics of growth and community-building

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Especially when I'm involved in this kind of projects, I don't like being alone. Obviously it contributes a lot to the work, not only because there's more people, but actually the kind of relationships and negotiations that happen in that work are interesting in themselves. [17:29] So anyway, it was never all that interesting for it to be a private library. I mean, we all have private libraries, but there is this potential as well, which I think wasn't part of the project at the beginning, it really was a tool for sharing in a particular kind of context. [17:56] But I think, obviously, you know, once people saw it then they saw a sort of potential in it, because you see what happens on the Internet and you know that in certain cases you can read from it and you can write to it. [18:18] And you also know that, although there still [are] various forms of digital exclusion, that it's quite accessible relative to other forms, other libraries, like university libraries, for instance.

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Cornelia Sollfrank: It's not just about having access to certain material, but what is related to it, and what's really important, is the dynamics of building a community and the context, and even smaller discourses around certain issues, which you don't have necessarily if you just download a text. Then you have the text but you don't have somebody to talk to, or you don't write your opinion about it to someone. So that's, I think, what comes with the project, which makes it very valuable to a lot of people.

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Yes. That's going back to what I was saying about some of the failures before The Public School, which was... As the site was growing, as Aaaaarg was growing, all of a sudden there would be things in there that I didn't know about before, that someone felt it was important to share. [19:37] And because someone felt that it was important to share it, I felt it was important to read it. And I did, but then I wanted to read it with other people. [19:51] So, some of those reading groups were always attempts to produce some social context for the theory.

[20:06] Having a library as if the archive itself is the library – but having that isn't really that interesting to me. What's interesting is having some social context that I can feel involved in (not that I 'have' to be involved in it), but having some social context to make

use of that reading material.

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Copyright

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At the beginning it was never a component of the project, because of that sort of natural extension between what I see as a perfectly... something that I think that we all do already. And especially in architecture and art, if you are involved in reading you give books to people. Like you gave me your book... And I've passed on a number of books. [21:34] If I print out something to read and I'm done with it, then I'm more likely to pass it on than I'm to shred it – I have to keep it in my closet forever, what do I do with it? If I think I'm truly done with it, even for a moment, then I'm more likely to pass it on. [22:00] So at the beginning it had nothing to do with piracy, it had everything to do with wanting to share things with other people. And a lot of times it's not just in this abstract "I kind of like to share," but it was project-based, and I think it became a little bit more abstract. [22:24] But I think actually over time, when people were sharing things, sometimes they did it with this sort of abstract recipient of that sharing, and that they would think, "I have access to this and I know that other people want access to it, and so that's going to be why I share it." [22:46] In other cases, I know that people were trying to organise a reading group, and this is quite common, which is that people would be organising something and then how are they going to distribute the reading material. Yes, they could give everyone a link to Amazon so they all order their own book, maybe that would be better for Amazon. [23:13] But there are another ways that they would organise the reading material there. A lot of times the stuff they wanted to read was already on Aaaaarg. Sometimes they had to upload a few new things. [23:26] And so that's how a lot of it grew and that's why people are involved. And I think sharing was what drove the project. And then it really wasn't for 3 years that even there was anything even relating to copyright issues. No one complained for all that time. [23:53] And then when complains came in then, you know, we responded by taking it down. It was quite simple. [24:05] But then later in the life of the project, the copyright problems sort of, in a way, retroactively made the project more about piracy than about sharing.

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Attempts to control file-sharing

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Either through making activity which used to be legal, illegal, or which used to be in a kind of grey area because there wasn't a framework in place for it, that sort of draw hard lines to say that something is now illegal. [24:46] And then there is the technological forms of negation, I think, which is to actually make it impossible for people to do something that they used to be able to do – signing copies of a file and not allowing it to open if it's not opening in the right place, or through the cloud, through this kind of new marketing opportunities of centralising a lot of files in one place, and then sort of governing the access through sites like Spotify. [25:29] Amazon does the same thing, you know, also with their e-books, where they own the device, the distribution network and the servers. And so by controlling the entire pipeline, there's a lot more control over what people do. [25:51] For instance, you have to jailbreak the Kindle in order to share a book. Again, something that we used to be able to do, now we actually have to

break the law or break our devices. [26:05] So these two things, I think, are how it gets dealt with. And of course, there's always responses to those things. [26:12] I think the technological one is a big [one] ... to me that's the more challenging one, especially now, because what's been produced is much more miniaturised and a lot more difficult to...

C.S.: Hack?

[26:30] Yes. And also you can't hack the server farm that's located in, you know, this really remote part of some country that you've never been to. Shouldn't say never. In fact, I'll say never, just to see if someone can.

[26:50] Positive things would be to say, if we take a more expansive view of the economy, look at who is making money, and then make an appeal for that. Because there are people who are making money, like Apple is making a lot of money, and other people who aren't making money. [27:15] And I don't think you can blame the readers, for instance, for the fact that writers and publishers aren't making money, because the readers are going into that too, because of the same forces. [27:28] So you look at who is making the money, and I think that is a political argument that needs to be made, that this money is actually being kind of hoarded by some of these companies, because they are sort of gaming the system and the restructuring of the economy, but also how we consume entertainment, and all this kind of things, and the restructuring of production around the globe.

[27:59] I don't think sites like Aaaaarg do anything more than point out a kind of dynamic that is existing in the world – to think that somehow you can sort of turn that into something positive, you know, in a way that gets capitalism to stop exploiting people – like it seems silly to me, capitalism exploits people...

[28:31]

Publishing landscape

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I think that the role of the publishers [is] already changing, because of the Internet and because of companies like Amazon, who changed not only selling books. They changed not only the bookstore, but also changed the entire distribution model, which then changes the way publishers work – and more and more, even the entire life cycle of a book, you know, from the writing to the sort of organisation and communication, to the distribution to the consumption. [29:09] The entire life cycle of a book is happening through these networks, from the software that we write it on, and where is that stuff stored, you know – is a Google Docs or some other thing? –, and our e-mails that are circulating, and the accounting software. [29:31] A lot of it is changing through the entire pipeline anyway, so to me, it's really difficult to say how publishing is changing because the entire flow, the entire apparatus is changing.

[29:48] At the beginning, Aaaaarg was a way of bringing readers together, and to allow readers to sort of give value to certain things that they were reading. And I think that's always been a form of publishing to me. [30:09] Yes, someone is responsible for having the book edited, having it printed it, distributing it, there's a huge material expense in all of that. [30:21] But then you also have the life of the book after it gets to the store. And it continues to have a life, like sometimes it lives for decades and decades, and it goes between readers, it goes through sidewalk vendors, and used book stores, and sits on people's libraries, and goes to public libraries. [30:44] And I would say that Aaaaarg is sort of in that part of the life cycle.

[30:54] These platforms become sort of new publishers themselves, but I haven't really thought that kind of statement through enough. In a way, if publishing is to make something public and to create publics, then of course, that's something that Aaaaarg has done since the beginning. [31:22] It made things public to people who maybe didn't exist for before, and it also produced communities of people around books – I mean, if that's what a publication and a publisher does, then, of course, it kind of does that within the context of the Internet, and it does that by both using and producing social relations between people.

[31:50]
Reading / books

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I have lots of books, and I buy them from anywhere. I buy them, as much as it pains me to admit it, I buy them from Amazon, I buy them from bookstores, I buy them from used books stores, I buy them on the street, I find them in trash, I've photocopied so many parts of books at the library, because they didn't circulate or something, or because I only had four hours to look at the book; I've gotten things for my friends, I've gotten things from classes that I used to take when I was a student but I still have. [32:37] And then with the Internet, then I'd see it on a screen, sometimes I print that out, you know. I'm not a purist in any way about reading or about books, I'm not particularly sentimental about 'the book.' Even though I love books and I see what's nice about them, I think that every sort of form a book takes has its own kind of... there's something unique about it. [33:11] Honestly, this kind of, let's say, increase in e-Pubs and PDFs hasn't really changed my relationship to books at all. It's the same as it's always been, which is, I'll read it, how I can get it. And maybe there's slightly now forms, and sometimes I read on a little... I bought a touchpad when they had a fire sale a while ago, so I read on that.

[33:44] And maybe I'm making an obvious argument here, but you see, if you've ever scanned a book you know that it takes time, and you know that you screw up quite a lot, and sometimes those screw ups find their way in, and the labour that goes into making a scan finds its way in. [34:02] And it's only through really good scans that you can manage to sort of eliminate a lot of that, a lot of the traces of that labour. But I know that, in the entire history of Aaaaarg, the files will always show the labour of the person who is trying to get something up to share it with other people. It's not a frictionless easy activity, there is work that's involved in it. [34:31] And I find some of the scans were quite beautiful in that way, even when they weren't necessarily so good to read. [34:41] There's actually, if we go to scale... Again, I have way more books that I could possibly read, physical books. And I'm going to continue buying more, acquiring more through my entire life, I'm sure of it. And I think that's just part of loving books and loving to read, you have more than you can possibly deal with. [35:11] And I think, on a level of scale, maybe, with the Internet we find ourselves, in orders of magnitude, [with] more than we could possibly deal with. But in a way, it's the same kind of anxiety, and the limits are more or less the same. [35:29] But then there are maybe even new opportunities for new ways of reading that weren't available before. I could flip through a book in a certain way, but maybe now with the possibility of indexing the whole content of a book, and doing searches, and creating ways of visually displaying books and relationships between books, and between parts of books, and this kind of things, and also making lists, and making lists with other people – all of these maybe provide new ways of reading which weren't available. [36:13] And of course it means that then other

ways of reading that get sort of buried and, you know, lost. And I'm sure that that's true too, that slow deep reading maybe isn't as prevalent as different types of referencing and stuff. [36:32] Not to say that it's totally identical, but certainly an evolution. I don't think that progression is so linear, that it's pure loss, or anything like that.

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Form and content

[36:49] For me what's interesting is to try and examine how structure and form, or structure and content, form and content – I mean, that's kind of another on-going question, how structure is not divorced from content. Structure is not simply a container for the content, any more than the mind and body are distinct entities – but that the structure that something takes influences the shape that content takes, and also the ways that people might approach that context, or use it in this kind of things. And likewise, the content begins to affect the structure as well.

[37:47] Why I'm interested in structures is because they aren't deterministic, they don't determine what's going to happen. And all the projects that you mention are things that I think of, let's say, as platforms or something, in the sense that they have... they involve a lot of people quite often, more than just me, and they also have... the duration is not specified in advance, and what's going to happen in them is not specified in advance.

[38:30] So they're experimental in that way, and they have that in common. And that is what's interesting to me, is the production of situations where we don't know what's going to happen. [38:51] And sometimes when focusing on a work you have vision for what that work is going to be, and then all your work goes into realising that, and, of course, you have surprises along the way, but then you get something that surprisingly ends up like what you kind of imagined at the beginning – that way of working doesn't really interest me. I sort of become bored pretty early on in that process.

[39:23] Whereas the kind of longer term thing where the initial conditions actually produce a situation that's a little unstable, and therefore what happens is also kind of unpredictable and unstable, to me this is about opening up other possibilities for things as small as being together for a short time, but also as big as ways of living.

[40:00] On the one level, these are structural projects, but on another level they are all kind of structural appropriations in a way, or appropriations of structures, like from a gallery, a library, a school, another gallery. [40:23] And I was actually thinking about that I kind of wish that (and I imagine soon, maybe in the next decade or two) an art historian will make this kind of argument for evolving the concept of appropriation, to go beyond objects to... Because in a way appropriation enters into the discourse when reproduction... [40:52] I think appropriation it's been something, let's say, that maybe is a historical concept. So at certain point in history maybe it even has a different name, there's different ways that it happens, there are different cultural responses to it. [41:09] And I think that in the twentieth century, especially with mechanical reproduction, appropriation becomes quite clear what it is, because images or sounds, you know, things became distributed and available for people to actually materially use. [41:30] And the tools that people have available to make work as well allow for this type of reuse of what's being circulated through the world. [41:45] And I guess what I'm sort of saying is, if that's appropriation of objects, then there might even be a time now, especially as the economy sort of shifted from being simply about commodity – the production, and sale and consumption of commodities) – to now, if we try to understand critically the economy now, it's something that's much more complicated – it involves financialization, debt and

derivative trading, and all this kind of things. [42:25] And so, perhaps also if appropriation is a historical idea, then appropriation also needs to be updated, and this would mean – for me this would mean appropriation of systems. [42:46] So rather than the appropriation of what's been distributed, it's the appropriation of the system of distribution. And to me these are also projects that I get excited about at the moment. [43:04] In a way it also makes sense, because if photographs were circulating around the world, and that was, you know, a new thing, to see that sort of imagery circulating in that way, at a certain point in time a century ago; then now I think we are even having a similar reaction to something like Facebook, which to me kind comes out of nowhere, and suddenly it exists in the world as a structure that is organising a certain part of the activity of, you know, hundreds of millions of people. [43:47] And so I think, in a way, that's the level on which maybe we can start thinking of appropriation, at a level of this kind of large scale systems. But then that brings up a whole new set of questions, like what do you call that, number one. Number two, obviously the legal framework that's in place, obviously that will cause problems.