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Cynthia Hopkins: A Living Documentary

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The samples from the script of the performance in italics are published with the permission of Cynthia Hopkins.

ON BEING FED UP WITH WORKING FOR FREE

Dear marginal artist. Do you ever feel tired with your poor income? Have you dreamt of a situation where your wages were not the first item to be dropped from the budget when money is short? Or are you pissed off that everyone from the renovators of a theater to its cleaners and guards get paid for their work but not you? So was **Cynthia Hopkins**.

(my own song)

I don't want to do this anymore

I don't want to run a non-profit theater company

I don't know if I ever did

Or if that was someone else's dream I was fulfilling for them

Like my collaborators, whom I always paid handsomely

Even when I couldn't pay my own bills

I lived off credit, I lived off credit instead

And I know I have no one else to blame except myself,

for self-producing elaborate productions without sufficient funding

But I never meant to become what I am, drowning in debts I can't afford to pay!

All I know is: I don't want to do this anymore,

I don't want to do this anymore, I don't want to do this anymore [...]

A Living Documentary is an autobiographical solo musical. On stage there is a clothes rack, a table, a couple of chairs, two cassette players. Hopkins changes costumes and characters, singing, playing, and speaking her monologues against played back sound from the cassettes, amplified through a

microphone. She tells the story of how she got a 200,000 dollar inheritance and used it to make performances. She founded a non-profit theatre company and directed successful pieces in New York. When the money ran out, she was tired, poor and frustrated. She never really got paid for her work, regardless of her success. She realized that the artist is always paid last, and she could get by only by letting go of the company and its high production expenses. By severely limiting the production scale of *A Living Documentary*, she at least secured a personal income. The result was a bare but rich and hilarious solo about the unsustainability of the financial situation of an artist and therefore about the values and problems of our economic system.

(song of a disgruntled teenage artist)

*what if I simply said I'm not gonna take it
I'm just gonna up and quit this game, this bullshit
and these fools can kiss my ass, cause their minds ain't fast enough
to catch up with me, and I'm sick of playing
like I give a shit about what they're saying
when they're talking NONSENSE and worse
cause they're just name-dropping ass-licking penny-pinching mother-fuckers
pretending like they're some HOT SHIT
because they're so-called art directors - art?
my ASSHOLE'S better looking than the best of their ideas
and in the end they're nothing more than cheap mother-fuckers
cause if you can scrape the change to pay the d.p. tech-y
light guy, the sound guy, and the crew to build it all
and rent the cameras and the fancy lights
then I don't see why you can't pay the actors
cause they make you look as if you know what the fuck you're doing
and if you can pay to ship a big-ass set over to some far corner of the globe then I don't see why you
can't pay the goddamn performers
for giving you a good name
or is it simply that the actors are just lily-livered ass-kissers,
big star wannabes who'll lick your asshole clean
and then bare their butts
for you to wipe your thousand-dollar shoes upon*

*when you come through the door
because they're dedicated to your work - as if it's worth sweating for
and I'll tell you something else:
I've had about enough of your pretty pictures
that aren't worth one hair off the head
of the waitress that you frown upon because you had to wait for your coffee
well guess what? I have a premonition that she might spit in it cause
I am her, I am her! I am her, I am her! I am her, I am her! I am her, I am her!*

In Finland, a discussion about the problems raised by Hopkins's performance was fueled by Tarja Cronberg's report *Creative Growth and the Livelihood of the Artist*, commissioned by the Ministry of Education in 2010. Cronberg stated that our society does not recognize the work of its artists. Performing artists repeat a story of how they are asked to perform for free in different celebrations and occasions organized by friends and relatives. However the plumber of the family is not asked to check the bathrooms of the place of celebration, nor is the taxi driver of the family requested to pick up people from their homes as they attend the party.

I received my first wages that reached the amount approved by the union after eight years of working professionally in the field of experimental performing arts. During that time I had done performances at prominent Finnish venues and promoted Finnish culture by working at festivals abroad. I listen to one of Hopkins' characters lecturing about how millions are invested into the lobbies of theaters, and how the construction workers involved would never work without a decent paycheck. Yet the artists performing on the stages of those theaters get almost nothing in return. I can identify with that perfectly. As I work, for example, in an art museum, all the employees that I encounter during a day's work get paid a living wage for their work. Meanwhile the artist creating the work that fills the museum gets either no money, or an amount too small to even compare to a normal income. Resources are small everywhere, but how is it possible that the wages of one line of work can be left unpaid, though the work still gets done? Is it ethical to keep up an art organization, let alone an entire industry that follows the principles of the grey economy? I can't think of a good reason for it.

(song of an ancient, wizened, celebrated American playwright)

*Way back, when I was a little kid
I used to hear these funny voices inside of my head*

*From characters who weren't really there at all in reality
But now that I am all grown up
When imaginary voices begin speaking
I find myself listening for their potential commerciality
I'm a playwright, but I'm also a human being
I need food and the occasional glass of orange juice to survive
I'm alive, I am alive! I'm alive, I am alive! I'm alive, I am alive!*

*And when I was just starting out
A play would spring to mind, fully formed, imaginary
Unfettered by the question of how much it might actually cost to mount
But early on, I had a big success
My plays became productions that turned into paychecks
My writing became working and my belly became soft and round
And sometimes I wish I was a child again
Before creation became enslaved by the desires of my skin
But I'm alive, I am alive! I'm eighty-five, I am alive! I'm alive, I am alive!*

*So now, I'm a professional
Plays are commissioned and they're written by the time they are due
Whether or not I feel the timing is sufficient for me to finely craft and tune
For although my livelihood depends on me dreaming
My life is not a dream, it's full of fucking and screaming
And shitting and eating and masturbating in the afternoon
I'm an artist, but I'm also an animal
I need shelter, and a little pot for pissing and for poop to survive
I'm alive, I am alive! I'm alive, I am alive! I'm alive, I am alive!*

Hopkins deals with a subject that seems inflammable or even shameful. I wouldn't have it in me to expose my problems with money in such a straightforward way and deal with the consequent feelings of self-centeredness and embarrassment. Many artists probably feel the same way. Especially in Finland. Though artists here live with scant resources, the grant system in our country functions so well from a global perspective that complaining feels unreasonable, and the contradictions of our personal lives far too small. Hopkins is great at speaking to the economic woes of an American experimental performance artist; she balances sincere private anxiety and societal problematics with such touching

irony and beauty that I cannot help but admire.

The honesty at the core of the performance is indisputable, and it works as a practical gesture and action to address the very problems raised by the piece. Every festival choosing *A Living Documentary* for their program has to think about the ethics of their productional structure. Just as I am forced to assess whether the fee Esitys-magazine offers to Hopkins (100 dollars = 85 euros) is fair. I get about the same for writing the article, 80 euros. Cheap labour, I have to say. Is paying that much, or even accepting to receive such an amount ethical? Or should I save the articles for the day when some art magazine can pay a fair amount for them? Should we print a magazine only half as thick?

When measured in money, the valuation of art is weak and the whole system is fundamentally unfair. As the name implies, *A Living Documentary* documents this crisis of values, but should we think further? Even though the personal standpoint is immensely valuable and even necessary, the cry of an individual artist (or even of the whole guild of artists) can remain too shallow a critique. In his essay *A Liquid Revolution: For a community without Money, Management, and Political Representation, a we-can-do-it-ourselves economy, a for-free economy*, the Dutch theater director **Jan Ritsema** defines economy as all exchange done between people, and points out that monetary economy is merely a small part of this. We share a vast amount of things with our close ones without receiving or expecting a payment. Ritsema suggests that we could renounce our fear of the other and expand this generosity beyond the small circle of family and friends. In addition he offers a model of a liquid revolution: that we wouldn't even try to develop a new economic system and then try to bring it to practice, but instead start from small actions of generosity, which would eventually build up into a cultural current of practices and structures.

If Hopkins says that artists shouldn't submit to the enslavement of an unjust economic system but should battle the injustices they face by claiming the value of their work, Ritsema insists that the problem reaches further. According to him, the problems of economy can be solved only by a fundamental change of values; instead of fixing details we should create an altogether alternative system.

(advice from an ancient, dignified lady)

When Beethoven was an old man

*After many years of great popularity
He became restless, irritable, discontented
With familiar forms he had mastered
And so he began to turn his attention further inward and further outward
To the far reaches of space and time, in both directions
And allow himself to be guided by supernatural forces.
And so his music became supernatural; unfamiliar; otherworldly
And against the ears of most people, it jangled.
They found it alarming. It frightened them. They didn't like it at all.
And they told Beethoven so.
And so Beethoven was faced with a decision:
To cater to the whims of this world and its benefactors
Or to pay the price of unpopularity for the sake of satisfaction of his soul.
For a working artist like Beethoven, to deliberately choose unpopularity
Is to deliberately choose potential poverty.
Beethoven made a decision.
He wrote a letter to God.
It was a contract of employment, and he signed it.
 *Always remember who you're working for -
Not these people, not this place -
For all its pristine polished floors, it too is susceptible to rain and rust.
And so are you, my dear.*
 *And also: every time you open your mouth to speak about
Fundraising, success, failure, or any other commercial bullshit
You cheapen yourself.
You take a big messy stinking diarrhetic shit all over yourself.
And no one, not even God, is going to clean that up for you.
You have to do it yourself.*
 *It's your choice to make.
Nothing binds you.
You are free.**

Sources

cynthiahopkins.com

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