

POWER IN PARTNERSHIPS



INTRO

In 2022-2023 Rising Arts Agency collaborated with researcher Andreana Drencheva to explore power dynamics in the cultural sector. Funded through the Centre for Cultural Value's Collaborate Fund our research question was:

How do power imbalances manifest for grassroots organisations and marginalised creatives working with cultural sector institutions and how can the impact of these imbalances be removed to increase cultural value for everyone?

WHAT WE DID

- Analysis of archival data related to Rising's work with marginalised creatives and as a grassroots organisation within the cultural sector
- Recorded podcast episodes of our reflective conversations
- Interviewed members of nine grassroots organisations with zero to ten members of staff, rarely on full-time contracts
- Interviewed members of nine institutions with staff ranging from a dozen to under over 80
- Interviewed members of the Rising Arts Agency universe
- Recorded instances of power struggles in real time as we were experiencing them
- Hosted a lab for Rising's community to share experiences of power dynamics and partnership work as well as to dream of a more equitable sector
- Hosted an event THIS IS THE WORK to share our learnings which was co-created with other grassroots organisations
- Met other organisations doing similar work across the UK

What we didn't do

Facilitated sessions with partners – a model we've used in the past to get to know teams at organisations and understand each other more. Unfortunately, the two partners we were planning to do this with couldn't make it work within the 18-month research period.

Why we did it like this

This research used Rising Arts Agency and its partnerships as a microcosm; where marginalised creatives come for support and cultural partnerships are core to the work.

Through the different methods of data collection, analysis, and collective sensemaking, the personal experiences of power imbalances were placed in the context of the wider sector, raising questions about power and how its current distribution impacts on grassroots organisations, marginalised creatives, and institutions.

SO, WHAT IS POWER? AND ITS COST?

Power is the capacity to influence a course of action. In cultural sector partnerships this power is often deeply rooted and systemic. When not explicitly acknowledged and addressed, power imbalances can be a source of harm for individuals, projects, and organisations.

Power struggles in partnerships can reflect relationships of dominance and subordination rather than equitable collaboration. They capture how systemic power shapes who makes decisions, who controls resources, and ultimately who benefits more.

Systemic power includes the taken-for-granted norms, language, structures, practices, identities, roles, and ways of working that impact how individuals and groups view their work and act.

We found that in the cultural sector, systemic power manifests in partnerships through several mechanisms. This includes exclusionary decision-making; imposed expectations, assumptions, and ways of working; uncompensated labour, work overload and undervaluing expertise; resource control; inequitable credit-taking or sharing credit only upon success; and patronising language and rhetoric.

It's important to note that power does not always flow downwards, in one direction. It's agile and constantly shifting. Cultural institutions are often assumed to hold the 'keys to the kingdom', as more established and secure organisations, with the lion's share of resources behind them. While it is often the case that cultural institutions wield most of the power, grassroots organisations are less burdened by the same level of bureaucracy and historical baggage and can act with dexterity, flexibility, and concentrated agency.

The cost of power imbalances

In our research, there were numerous instances of power imbalances directly leading to health issues, such as burnout, stress, and overload. While these were significant and frequent amongst members of grassroots organisations and marginalised creatives, health issues were also evident in cultural institutions. For instance, individuals and small teams working in engagement, accessibility, and learning departments operated as grassroots organisations inside institutions, and thus faced the same power imbalances.

We also uncovered instances of power imbalances which jeopardise project missions, outcomes, financial sustainability, and reputation.

THEMES

From this research we identified eight themes that we believe are the main ways power imbalances manifest and how they can be removed to create equitable relationships. They are:

- 1. The difference in Definition and Practice**
- 2. Gatekeeping of opportunities**
- 3. The costs of saying 'No'**
- 4. Perceptions of capacity**
- 5. Developing empathy**
- 6. Acknowledging harm**
- 7. Endings and legacy**
- 8. Utopian futures**

I. THE DIFFERENCE IN DEFINITION & PRACTICE

In all aspects of the research, there was a consensus about what a partnership is: a long-term relationship toward shared goals in which every aspect of the work is recognised, valued, and resourced appropriately and in which every party involved benefits. Equitable partnerships are based on trusting relationships, shared goals, transparency, shared decision making, and appropriate resourcing for everyone.

This definition sets the bar rightfully high, yet in many instances, what was presented as a partnership wasn't one in practice. We came across multiple instances where grassroots organisations and marginalised creatives were offered 'partnership' with agency, shared goals, and mutual benefits. Yet, they found themselves amidst shifting timelines and ever-expanding scope of work with no opportunities to make decisions, insufficient resources, little trust in their expertise, and limited

(or non-existent) compensation for their visible and invisible labour.

In practice, the promise of partnership fell short due to lack of care and empathy at best, and negligent and exploitative ways of working that are embedded and normalised in the sector at worst.

Key insight: Call it what it is. Not every project needs to be a partnership. Some work, projects, and initiatives can just be a one-off transaction to exchange resources. When this is transparent, the exchange is fair and all parties have the option to say “No”.

Key question for reflection: Who will benefit more from this ‘partnership’? Who will take the bigger risk?

2. GATEKEEPING OF OPPORTUNITIES

It is not news that grassroots organisations and marginalised creatives rarely find opportunities to work with institutions on the 'open market' through a fair tendering process or a stated application. Often opportunities are gained through relationships, existing reputation, and networking which rely on existing resources, capacity, and proximity to sources of power. This approach excludes many grassroots organisations and marginalised creatives.

When these scarce opportunities do arise, grassroots organisations and marginalised creatives often feel immense pressure to accept them, even when they doubt it is a good choice. This creates an emotional paradox - gratitude for the chance, but also frustration, fatigue, anger, and disappointment from trying to fit their work after critical decisions have been made, from being put into a position to act as a sector-support organisation, from

protecting boundaries and preventing harm to their communities. So grassroots organisations and marginalised creatives find themselves in a bind - desperate for chances to do their work, yet confined to a marginal role with little agency once those chances arrive.

Even when attempts are made toward open, transparent, and accessible applications to start working together, what happens after the application may not be accessible or equitable. We found multiple instances of accessible funding and partnership application processes, yet once successful, ways of working and reporting were not adjusted to meet the needs of the applicants.

Key insight: Make the start count. Create transparent routes for opportunities with low ask, clear criteria for self-exclusion, and multiple modalities to apply. Create space for all parties to set clear expectations from the beginning about what the opportunity (for partnership) is and is not. Live up to these expectations.

Key question for reflection: What are your measures for 'vibe checking' new partnerships?

3. THE COSTS OF SAYING NO

Power is the capacity to say 'No' and pull the plug on partnerships that are not equitable. However, trickle-down funding that results in inequitable access to resources and is advantageous to institutions means that grassroots organisations and marginalised creatives often are not in a position to decline projects. For grassroots organisations and marginalised creatives, opportunities are scarce and thus rejecting or withdrawing from a partnership, however lopsided, is risky. Financial sustainability often depends on weathering the tensions and imbalance. And there is fear that saying 'No', even for ethical reasons, would brand them as difficult troublemakers, jeopardising future chances.

Yet persisting in inequitable partnerships can also jeopardise credibility. Continued participation might be seen as complicity or 'selling out' by the very communities that grassroots organisations work

with and are their source of power. The tensions between purpose and financial sustainability are razor sharp when power is asymmetrical and difficult to communicate.

Of course, the decision to say 'No' is not easy for institutional partners either. Cultural institutions also rely on completed projects for their financial health, public image and indeed have higher financial needs. Failed collaborations must still be accounted for to funders and boards.

But the choice of whether or not to persist is rarely made from positions of equal precarity. Large institutions boast more breathing room, alternate options, and second or third chances. Their leaders are bound by fiduciary duty but not existential urgency. For grassroots organisations and marginalised creatives, continuity means life support and hope that in the future they can live up to their purpose for the communities they serve.

Key insight: Reduce trickle-down funding. Diversify funding streams that enhance the direct access to resources for grassroots organisations and marginalised creatives so that they can reclaim and maintain autonomy and integrity.

Key question for reflection: How can we increase our capacity to decline and withdraw from inequitable projects?



4. PERCEPTIONS OF CAPACITY

Cultural institutions and grassroots groups often perceive capacity differently. Capacity is material and procedural. It's the tangible (and sometimes intangible) resources that individuals and organisations have access to for a given period of time. This includes budgets, policies and procedures, number of projects that require time and attention, size of the team, and the energy and expertise that team possesses.

Capacity contains both objective and subjective dimensions. Objectively, the cultural sector is underfunded and under-resourced at every level with an impact on both institutions and grassroots organisations. Objectively, larger teams can invest more in partnerships due to bandwidth. For example, if a team in one organisation is larger than its counterparts in a partner organisation, it can be expected to complete work faster and achieve more. However, members of large teams may also

perceive their own capacity to be limited because of the volume of projects and initiatives they are delivering on, internal processes and procedures that require more time, hierarchical structures that shape approval processes and time horizons, or comparisons to organisations with much larger teams and budgets. Such subjective aspects of capacity can explain why institutions with a dozen full-time members of staff can refer to themselves as a 'small team', while a grassroots organisation with an entire team of one or two part-time employees may never use this label.

Power imbalances in partnerships are intrinsically linked to (perceptions of) capacity. Perceptions of limited capacity can be a reason for late payments, last-minute cancellations, shifting timelines and demands, and one-sided decisions that diminish the shared goals and values supposedly embedded in a partnership.

Key insight: Be reflective about and transparent with capacity. Move at a pace that is appropriate for the work and everyone involved. It is not about being fast or slow, it is not a binary. Instead, it means giving everyone the time they need to prepare, to make decisions, to review documents, to do the work, and to reflect.

Key question for reflection: What resources do you have that you could share with your partners? What could you put in place to allow you to speed up or slow down to meet the needs of your partners?

5. DEVELOPING EMPATHY

In this section we have used vignettes to represent different perspectives. These are based on our research but not direct quotes or real people.

"I stand in the stately foyer of a historic theatre, surrounded by ornate plasterwork and grand oil paintings in gilded frames.

I've been waiting 15 minutes for someone to appear and usher me in. The meeting was hard enough to schedule, requiring dozens of emails to the director's assistant, despite the director inviting me to meet and discuss a new 'partnership'. But will it be a partnership that aligns with our vision as theatre-makers that centre marginalised and new voices or will they request outreach workshops in their education department? Or will we be asked to clean up their latest diversity scandal with anti-racism training?

Increasingly, this is what we do – anti-racism training, governance support, coaching, and fewer and fewer performances, which is why I started this organisation in the first place. Or will we just be used to polish their progressive credentials and secure funding on the bases of ‘diversifying audiences’, then discarded after the photo-op? Will we be cast in the role of the puppet, the cleaner, the supporter, or the peer?

I tell myself that all the consultancy and training work is a necessary evil - that if we're patient and reliable, one day they'll fund our real work. But some days I feel more like a consultant than an artistic director. Yet, what's the alternative? Not paying our bills and closing? Who will support our community if we're gone?

I take a deep breath as the assistant appears. This is a test and an opportunity on both sides.”

- Ava, Grassroots Director

"I wait for Mia to arrive so we can go down and meet Ava. I don't want to have to do the buffering and it means more coming from the Director anyway.

I'm excited but nervous of what this could lead to. Hopefully something good for us and Ava's community, but realistically our track record of working with grassroots organisations in equitable and respectful ways is spotty at best.

We have so much historical baggage and the makeup of the team doesn't help. Even when they mean well we're a group of mostly well-educated, white, middle-class people with no lived experience of systemic oppression. Plus working with these outdated processes that just slow everything down. I've been pleading for a year just to get the board to review the anti-racism policy I developed. A year without any feedback, let alone approval.

And who can forget the time when we claimed the title of "most accessible theatre" despite ignoring the feedback of the disabled people we invited to give us feedback. I had to push for the former director to meet them and apologise and he insisted it should be me because I invited them.

I'm caught in the middle between communities and the institution. 'Head of ' in title only, with little power to make decisions. Often, I feel like a grassroots organisation inside the theatre, but with less autonomy, network and credibility than them.

With the new director, there are signs of change. Last month she came with me to a grassroots partner's event . She showed up and got involved. That meant a lot to them. And to me.

Now, I need to ensure we listen to Ava. And make it clear that this is an exchange, that we don't think we're in a position to give them help they don't need."

- Noah, Head of Engagement

"I rush down to meet Noah, adjusting my scarf and steadying jittery nerves after a long and difficult meeting with a donor.

This is the first time in my career I should have the power to make change. This is why I accepted the role. And somehow this seems more difficult than I imagined. I want to revamp this place, make it radically inclusive and ecologically sustainable.

Yet, the board scrutinises every penny. The building bleeds money we don't have. Retrofitting centuries-old infrastructure is a logistical and financial minefield. The to-do list grows faster than the budget. Meaningful change takes investment we just don't have so it is constant submission of funding applications, schmoozing with donors, and trying to grow our own generated income to have more autonomy and flexibility. Change takes trust and time, and yet we rarely control the timelines imposed by funders.

And our staff...they mean well but some don't get it. Like the volunteer who walked out of anti-racism training.

I'm overwhelmed by the competing responsibilities - to funders, the board, the staff, the partners, the freelancers, the community, the planet. My title grants only the illusion of power - I'm caught between conflicting interests, trying to balance demands over which I have limited control.

I am hopeful for the meeting with Ava today. But I'm not sure we can financially afford to work in ways that really mean inclusion and radical change or that we have the skills and structures to deliver. But let's start small, build trust gradually. Have open and honest conversations about where we are and what is possible. Starting small with incremental change is still change."

- Mia, Institution Director

Key insight: Create opportunities to nurture empathy in your partnerships through job swaps, volunteering and social time together to get to know those you're partnering with. Spend time together, and seek feedback on how you can work together without perpetuating the burdens they experience.

Key question for reflection: How well do you know your partners' burdens, fears, pressures, demands? How does your work together add to these instead of alleviating them?

6. ACKNOWLEDGING HARM

When power imbalances are ignored, they can result in harm for grassroots organisations and their communities, but also for members of cultural institutions.

In partnerships with institutions, it is rarely acknowledged that communities may have little trust in cultural institutions because they have benefitted from a legacy of exclusion and extraction. This is why institutions work with grassroots organisations – to borrow trust and create a bridge. The work needed to undo this harm is often invisible, unacknowledged, unresourced, and undertaken by grassroots organisations to make partnerships possible.

Yet, harm from current partnerships may reopen historical wounds of exploitation and exclusion, thus creating even more barriers. Critically, individuals in

grassroots organisations often have the same lived experiences as the communities they work with and their relationships are both professional and personal, thus fracturing relationships and limiting opportunities for support.

Often grassroots organisations or marginalised creatives shoulder the invisible labour of educating and supporting institutions on their inclusion journeys; of safeguarding and caring for communities and those involved in the project; of rebuilding trust and mending relationships after partnerships with asymmetrical power cause harm or due to institutions' harmful histories. This labour is rarely compensated and exhausts the capacity of marginalised creatives and grassroots organisations to create art and contribute to culture on their own terms.

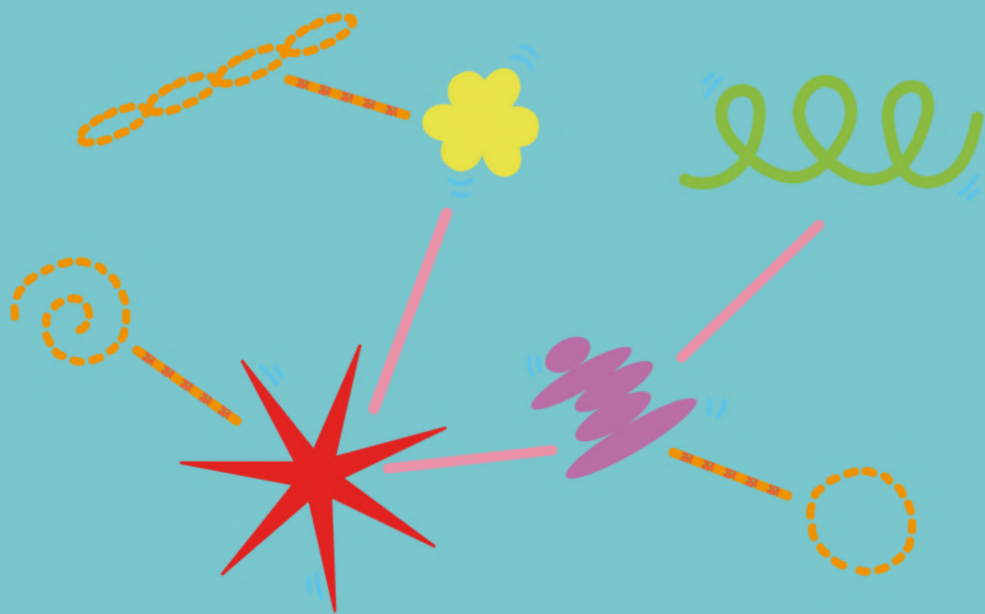
While institutions may be protected from the lived experiences of invisible labour, members of engagement, visitor experience/front of house and learning departments experience distress and burnout when power imbalances cause harm. They may leave the organisation with their fractured relationships with grassroots organisations and

communities to mend them in personal capacity. This accumulation of harm and continuous invisible labour undertaken by some in partnerships further erodes trust in institutions and makes authentic partnership even more difficult in the future.

To break the vicious cycle, acknowledging harm and the care work required afterward should be shared, not performed only by grassroots organisations.

Key insight: Create structures to acknowledge and apologise for harm and allocate resources for the care work required to work toward repair. This can include clear reporting channels, clear governance mechanisms for accountability and apologies, and dedicated funding for repair work, training, and therapy.

Key question for reflection: How is repair work currently resourced in your partnerships? Who performs the repair work?



7. ENDINGS & LEGACY

Most partnerships are not entirely equitable, but thoughtful debriefing processes enable learning, repair work, and new beginnings.

Debriefing processes provide space to acknowledge power imbalances, unsuccessful attempts to shift or redistribute power, and harm. They provide an opportunity to repair relationships, give credit for all the invisible labour, apologise for harm, and learn.

Partnerships are long term, yet are often funded on a project basis. This makes debriefing processes even more powerful. When consistently integrated across projects, debriefing can surface and shift dynamics over time, enhance mutual understanding, and contribute to more equitable distributions of invisible labour. Thus, debriefs can reset power dynamics and provide a ground for new beginnings.

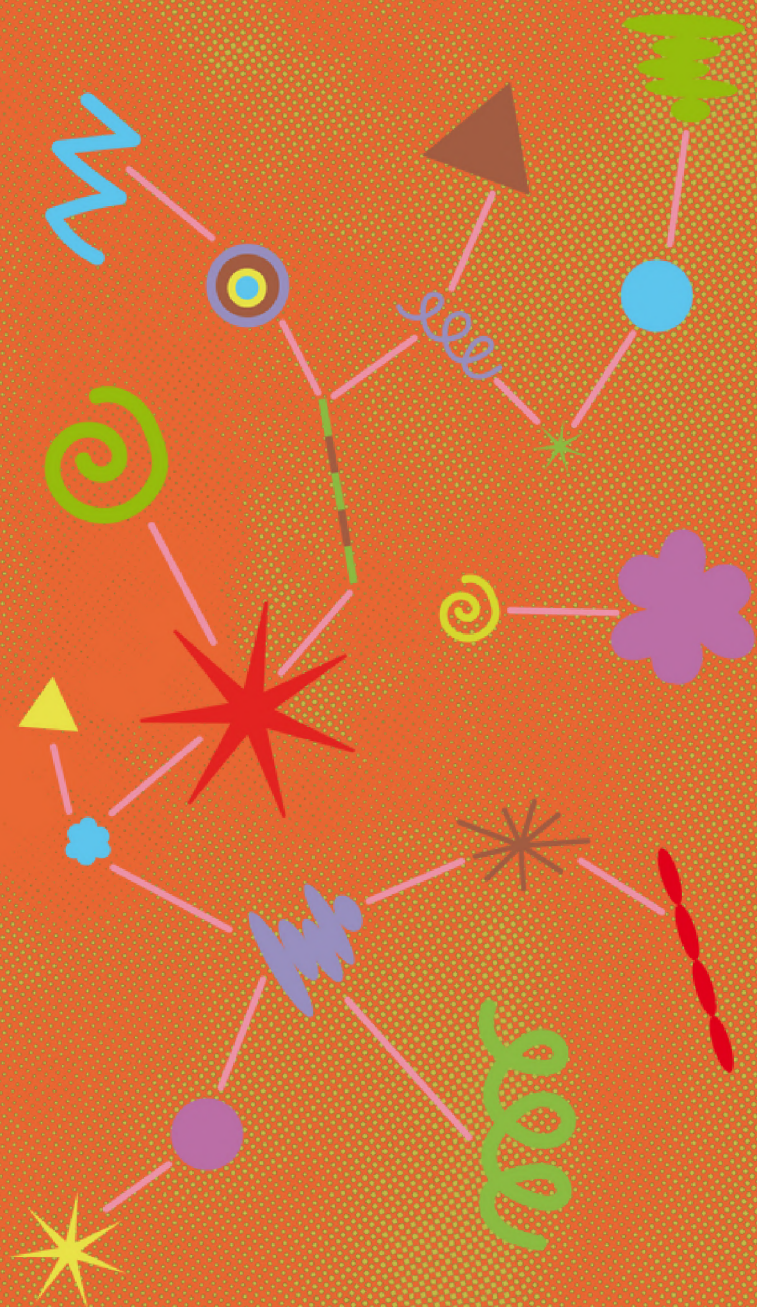
However, a single final debrief conversation can be another site for power imbalances to cause harm. In

one example from our research a scheduled debrief was arranged by the grassroots organisation and the engagement person and the marginalised creatives turned up but no one else from the organisation did. This was meant to be a moment of acknowledging how the deeper partnership had stalled and those with power in the institution were completely absent. The engagement person also left a few months after and the threads of the debrief were lost despite the recording and transcript being shared.

To make debriefs work, they need to be re-framed as debriefing processes along the entire partnership, not a single conversation at the end. Shared reflective templates, opportunities for anonymous feedback, regular check-ins, and reciprocal interviews help surface diverse perspectives and anchor debriefs in key themes salient throughout the journey. The final conversation then becomes a capstone synthesising accumulated insights, appreciations, and ideas for how to do better in the future.

Key insight: Create inclusive structures for reflective and vulnerable debriefing that enables transparency and learning throughout the project. Be mindful of how power dynamics can silence some from participating in debriefing or cast others in specific roles, such as the scapegoat, the troublemaker, the difficult one.

Key question for reflection: Who usually takes more space in debriefing conversations? Who ends up being a scapegoat? Who takes responsibility and acknowledges harm?



8. UTOPIAN FUTURES

Imagination as a tool of liberation is a key tenant in the work of influential thinkers like bell hooks, Octavia Butler, and Tricia Hersey. The cultural sector is built on imagination; imagining and dreaming of better futures through the arts, fuelled by a shared commitment, and drive towards social change. But how can we know what equitable partnerships look like if we do not make time and hold space to dream of a utopian future?

In the lab we ran with Rising's community we talked about what a future equitable sector would look, feel, taste, smell, and sound like. Imagining utopian futures when we've solved all the problems that feel so insurmountable is a step toward picturing and taking on the very tangible actions to get there.

One of the themes that came from the lab was the need for infrastructure to dream, to have the space and resources to imagine different futures. Tangible infrastructure grounds these dreams firmly in reality by highlighting the procedures and policies that could be implemented now to bring us to action.

Key insight: Develop the infrastructure to dream. Embed space and time to dream into the fabric of partnerships. Provide the resources for everyone involved in the partnership to dream and be mindful of who may be excluded because of barriers.

Key question for reflection: What would it look, feel, taste, smell and sound like if we removed all barriers to a truly equitable sector?

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Give up (some) power

The obvious one – more equitable partnerships between cultural institutions and grassroots organisations or marginalised creatives involves cultural institutions ceding power. In practice, this could entail giving up curatorial or artistic agency in commissioning, co-creating initiatives that benefit grassroots organisations or marginalised creatives more instead of using 'co-creation' only to access resources, providing budgets directly to partners to self-determine programming, giving up leadership roles, sharing platforms and resources with no strings attached.

Reduce reliance on trickle-down funding

Trickle-down funding reinforces existing hierarchies and power dynamics. Diversifying funding schemes toward more equitable distribution of resources directly to grassroots organisations and communities through decentralised and democratised processes will shift the dynamics in partnerships and make partnerships meaningful, instead of a necessary evil. In practice this can mean more funding schemes at different levels of support, including support for core operating costs, as well as more participatory grantmaking.

Acknowledge harm

Partnerships between cultural institutions and grassroots organisations or marginalised creatives often emerge because of historical and current harms to marginalised communities, both from the sector overall and institutions' own past actions. Acknowledging harm is essential for rebuilding trust and enabling partnerships to thrive. Practically, this involves taking responsibility for the harm caused, non-performative listening, resourcing repair work, and centring marginalised voices in determining appropriate remedies and reparations.

Resource all aspects of partnership work

Partnership work between cultural institutions and grassroots organisations or marginalised individuals involves a lot of invisible work – work to build trust, to care for and safeguard others, to repair relationships after harm. All this invisible work requires resources to make partnerships impactful and should be appropriately compensated to shift power dynamics.

Confront taken-for-granted assumptions

Systemic power operates by reproducing the taken-for-granted norms, language, structures, practices, identities, roles, and ways of working that impact how individuals see their work and act. Confronting such assumptions is a big step toward acknowledging and removing power imbalances. Starting partnerships with explicit and transparent conversations about expectations, capacity, scope, funding, and ways of working can reduce when power imbalances manifest. However, these conversations need to be revisited throughout the partnership to acknowledge changing circumstances.



Share leadership

Inviting members of grassroots organisations and marginalised creatives into spaces of leadership, governance and strategy is a way to develop empathy, recognise power imbalances, and shift power. This can include co-leadership with young people, wider lived experience on boards or swapping leadership roles for a period of time between an institutional and a grassroots organisation.

Be transparent

Transparency between institutional and grassroots organisations or marginalised creatives is vital from start to finish, to surface assumptions, prevent misalignments, and give partners the opportunity to participate on their own terms. This requires practices like sharing budgets openly, co-creating project frameworks, mutually determining evaluation processes, regular and candid check-ins and debriefs, vulnerable conversations about power inside institutions and changing circumstances.

Respect reflection

Ensuring regular moments for reciprocal listening and reflecting on the direction of work allows for course correcting before harm occurs and accumulates. Including diverse internal and external perspectives provides invaluable frames of reference. Interrogating the collaboration at every stage — considering who benefits more, who takes on bigger risks, who is exposed to harm, who controls decisions, resources and credit — anchors the work in equity. This requires building in reflective pauses and reciprocal perspective-taking into workflow rhythms.

Seek feedback

Approaching feedback exchanges with openness and humility confronts assumptions, surfaces differing realities, and progressively aligns partnerships. However, feedback is not always easily shared. Building regular reciprocal feedback practices into the collaboration rhythm in psychologically safe ways, such as with mutual interviewing, anonymous surveys, guided reflection questions, and progressive idea scaling, can provide valuable insights on where power imbalance manifest and how to address them.

Develop spaces to dream

How do we know what equitable partnerships may look like if we have never experienced them? By collaboratively imagining ideal scenarios for addressing power imbalances, before focusing on logistics, partners can develop new frameworks for how to work together. Practices like visioning workshops, utopian thinking, and reciprocal interviewing about wishes can help envision creative possibilities for equity in partnership. Making time and space for unconstrained re-envisioning of roles, resources, communication, and decision-making can result in new models for radical power sharing.

UNTIL NEXT TIME

CREDITS

This zine was written and compiled by Jess Bunyan and Euella Jackson from Rising Arts Agency alongside Dr. Andreana Drencheva from King's College London and Hayley Reid from the University of Sheffield (2023).

The illustrations are by Indiana Lawrence.

www.rising.org.uk

www.kcl.ac.uk/people/andreana-drencheva


www.sheffield.ac.uk/management/phd/doctoral-researchers/hayley-reid

www.culturalvalue.org.uk/

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**RISING
ARTS
AGENCY**

The logo icon for the Rising Arts Agency is a stylized, bold black shape. It consists of a square-like form with a thick border, where the bottom-right corner is cut off and replaced by a diagonal line that extends downwards and to the right, ending in a small hook-like shape.