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UNLOCKING PROPRIETORIAL SYSTEMS FOR ARTISTIC PRACTICE

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Introduction

The cultural, political and economic systems in place do not work for most people. They support a privileged, international class that grows richer while imposing increasing uncertainty on others, producing endless wars, and enhancing the conditions of inequality, austerity, debt, and climate change, to own everything under the rule of neoliberalism. David Harvey argues that the permeation of neoliberalism exists within every aspect of our lives, and it has been masked by a repeated rhetoric around "individual freedom, liberty, personal responsibility and the virtues of privatization, the free market and free trade". (Harvey 11) Thus; legitimizing the continuation of and repeating of policies that consolidate capitalistic powers. Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval in Manufacturing the Neoliberal Subject, say we have not yet emerged from "the 'iron cage' of the capitalist economy [...] everyone is enjoined to construct their own individual little 'iron cage'." (Dardot and Laval 263)

If we are, as Dardot & Laval put it codesigning our own iron cages, how do we find ways to be less dominated by these overpowering infrastructures and systems? How do we build fresh, independent places, spaces and identities, in relation to our P2P, artistic and cultural practices, individually and or collectively – when, our narratives are dominated by elite groups typically biased towards isolating and crushing alternatives? Does this mean that critical thought, aligned with artistic and experimental cultural ventures, along with creatively led technological practices, are all doomed to perpetuate a state of submission within a proprietorial absolute?

To unpack the above questions we look at different types of proprietorial systems, some locked and unlocked, and consider their influence on creative forms of production across the fields of the traditional art world, and media art culture. We look at how artists are dealing with these issues through their artistic agency: individually, collaboratively, or as part of a group or collective. This includes looking at the intentions behind the works: their production and cultural and societal contexts, where different sets of values and new possibilities are emerging, across the practice of art, academia, and technology, and thus, the world.

The meanings of the words proprietorial and proprietary are closely linked. Proprietary is defined as meaning that one possesses, owns, or holds the exclusive right to something, specifically an object. For instance, it can be described, as something owned by a specific company or individual. In the computing world, proprietary is often used to describe software that is not open source or freely licensed. Examples include operating systems, software programs, and file formats.("Proprietary Software") Many involved in the Free and Open Source Software movement, share a set of values built around its beliefs against proprietary control over our use of technology. Olga Goriunova argues that, software is not only bound to objects but also includes social relations and it's about breaking away from the fetishism of proprietary software structures, and "commodification of social processes layered into software production and operation." (Goriunova 92)

If we consider the definition of proprietorial, in the Cambridge Dictionary it is especially poignant when it says "like an owner: He put a proprietorial arm around her." This brings us directly to a biopolitical distinction. The term biopolitics was first coined by Rudolf Kjellén, (who also coined the term geopolitics) (Markus 35) and then; later expanded upon by Michel Foucault, arguing that certain styles of government regulated

their populations through Biopower. Hardt and Negri developed Foucault's ideas saying "Biopower is a form of power that regulates life from its interior, following it, interpreting it, absorbing it, and rearticulating it." (Hardt and Negri 23-24) But, as we will discover further into this text the term also reinforces a deep a psychological bias that asserts the right of the patriarch to own our social contexts.

Locked and unlocked proprietorial systems



Fig1. Hazel O'Connor, in the *Movie Breaking Glass*. Paramount Pictures. September 1980.

A powerful image I will always remember from the 1980 Post-Punk movie Breaking Glass. Is when Kate (Hazel O'Connor) the talented and angry, singer and songwriter, gradually loses her agency. Whilst manipulated by the record company managers, she is grabbed, and they hold her close to them. They're not necessarily aware of how suffocating they are, but there is an obvious portrayal of ownership at play. It is through the social and managed infrastructures, and the belief systems, in which we all grow up, that proprietorial behaviours enact psychological and concrete forms of violence, from birth to the grave. Slavery and domination by the patriarch are both proprietorial systems. Murray Bookchin proposes that, even before social class emerged that "the priesthood

established quasi-political temple despotisms over society, the patriarch embodied in a social form the very system of authority that the State later embodied in political form." (Bookchin 120)

If we want to find examples of what Bookchin refers to as despotisms over society. We need not look that far. For instance, the pharmaceutical industry has its own particular brand of 'high' priesthood, and proprietorial lock down; in the form of Martin Shkreli, founder, and head of Turing Pharmaceuticals where he raised the price for Daraprim in September from \$13.50 per pill to \$750. The drug is preferably used for a parasitic condition known as Toxoplasmosis, which can be deadly for unborn babies and patients with compromised immune systems including those with HIV or cancer. His company, Turing Pharmaceuticals AG, bought the drug, moved it into a more closed distribution system than before, and instantly drove the price up. (Smythe, Christie and Geiger, Keri) Soon after, he cut it down to \$375 for some hospitals after a mass public outcry. Even, though many pharmaceutical companies held back at first and refrained from putting their own prices up, in the end they all followed suit. Shkreli's actions reflect a wider issue where the priority is monetary and feeding the markets, and health and life is low down on the list. The establishment of ever more efficient and productive systems of growth are owned by fewer, more centralised agents.

[I]t's the distribution of freedoms and access to sustenance, knowledge, tools, diverse experiences and values, which improve the resilience social and environmental ecologies. (Garrett and Catlow 69-74)

Shkreli's over the top approach is part of larger already accepted condition where extreme scarcity threatens lives. In contrast, Dana Lewis has provided the world with a fresh example to bypass the assumed narrative that only the privileged can control our health and well-being. After being a member of the diabetes community for years and frustrated with commercial companies' closed and expensive approach towards diabetes, she created the "Do-It-Yourself Pancreas System" (DIYPS) and was founder of the open source, artificial pancreas system movement (OpenAPS) (Lewis). Since then, a large online community has developed using DIYPS, and advocating free and open software as the way forward. Another way to deal with proprietorial domination in the pharmaceutical industry, is to make an art project that delivers an element of DIWO and DIY into its very being. One such project is Housewives Making Drugs, 2017, under the name of Mary Maggic. Based on the project by biohacker biologist-artist, Ryan Hammond OPEN SOURCE ESTROGEN, "a collaborative interdisciplinary project seeking to subvert dominant patriarchal institutions of hormonal management." (Maggic) Housewives Making Drugs is a fictional cooking show where the trans-femme stars, Maria and Maria, teach the audience at home how to cook their own hormones, step by step. They perform a simple "urine-hormone extraction recipe." (Maggic) While amusing the audience with their witty back-and-forth banter about body and gender politics, institutional access to hormones, and everything problematic with heteronormativity." (Maggic)

Proprietorial domination is the presumption of ownership not only over our psychic states of existence but also through the material objects we possess and use daily, and this extends into and through our use of digital networks every day. This can mutate into forms of dependency, reliance, and addiction.

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Google etc. have impoverished autonomous relations to such a degree that it is becoming increasingly rare to experience an exchange or online activity outside corporate-controlled "social" zones. The digitized versions of ourselves graze away in these social networking platform pens, like cows in a field, chomping at the bits allocated to us via biased algorithms that dictate what we see and hear. Thus, our Internet experience is restricted as we abide by and exist within imposed filter bubbles. When we use these social media platforms and web browsers, our data is harvested and scraped. In a recent interview on the subject of everyday addiction to digital devices and social networking platforms, artist Katriona Beales says "Addictive behaviour is both normalized and valorised in late capitalism as it is associated with the public performance of productivity. Whilst these actions appear to be the choice of individuals, how much is due to the influence of mechanisms and systems of control?" (Beales)

This addiction is approached face on by the Tactical Technology Collective with funding support from the Mozilla Foundation, in the form of The Data Detox Kit. People are introduced to an 8-day step-by-step guide on how to reduce data traces online. "Each day has a different focus - from cleaning up your apps, to social media, to your phone's connectivity - informing you of the data processes, walking you through some changes you can make, and giving you a small challenge at the end of each day." (Tactical Technology Collective) Beales' critique on addictive digital behaviours, and the Tactical Technology Collectives' activities present a more recent, common distrust towards our use of social media. The current conditions can give an impression that these issues are only occurring now. But, if we look at forms of resistance going back to The Diggers and The New Levellers, what is

revealed is how deeply entwined and established proprietorial domination is, in respect to land ownership. In the British Isles, an enclosure was the act of "buying the ground rights, and all common rights to accomplish exclusive rights of use, which increased the value of the land. The other method was by passing laws causing or forcing enclosure", such as a parliamentary enclosure Act. Peter Linebaugh describes the English enclosure movement of the 1500s, 1600s and up to 1850, as belonging to a series of concrete universals, such as "the slave trade, the witch burnings, the Irish famine, or the genocide of the Native Americans." (Linebaugh 142)

The similarities between land grabbing by past elites and how the Internet has lost its potential for openness via top-down orientated, centralised platforms, is a continuation of what is a timeless battle. In an interview with Ruth Catlow on Furtherfield, Tim Waterman says, it's the "exploitation of people and resources that marks the practices of contemporary capitalism as very much a continuation of the project of the enclosures, whether it is to skim value off creative projects, to asset-strip the public sector which is increasingly encroached upon by the private sector, or to exhaust land and oppress workers in the Third World." (Catlow and Waterman) Silvia Federici, says it's no accident that "the witch-hunt occurred simultaneously with the colonization and extermination of the populations of the New World, the English enclosures, [or] the beginning of the slave trade" (Federici 164) In her comprehensive study, Caliban And The Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation, Federici writes that, the emergence of the witch-hunts were "one of the most important events in the development of capitalist society and the formation of the modern proletariat." (165) And, it unleashed "a campaign of terror against women, unmatched by any other persecution, weakened the resistance of the

European peasantry to the assault launched against it by the gentry and the state, at a time when the peasant community was already disintegrating under the combined impact of land privatization, increased taxation, and the extension of state control over every aspect of social life." (165)

Moving on from divine constructions

The mainstream art world of Frieze, the Saatchis, and repeated biennales around the world, have for years, presented us with locked down proprietorial systems. If, we consider how and why these art institutions such as the Tate Gallery exist in the first place. A backdrop emerges, where a combination of: conservatism, colonialism, imperialism (Harvey 11), colonization, conformity, and the patriarch: have built walls around themselves, where those who do not belong to the same class systems, rarely get through, unless they perpetuate similar marketable values. The Tate Gallery's legacy is intertwined with a complex mix of ideals consisting of genius as a product, which assumes the position of presenting what is deemed as the 'best' about the nation. This is all bound in an almost untouchable divine construction, where the values of a secular and enlightened culture co-exist as universal qualities. This imagined civilization is a construct born out of a wide-ranging set of central, changing values that include, colonial wealth, Christian liberalism, social science, and ideals of the enlightenment, all sanctioned and driven from the historical achievements and exploits of the industrial revolution. These attributes convey nationalism, and a self-image with a cultivated sense of authority, where those seen as the great and the good are given pride of place for all to admire. (Garrett)

Gerald Raunig adds another level when he proposes it to be an inherent set of the conditions imposed by state apparatuses instigated through conservative values with a historiography, that promotes processes of marginalization. We're still dealing with the consequences of these reductive "conservatisms, such as rigid canons, fixation on objects and absolute field demarcations, activist practices are not even included in the narratives and archives of political history and art theory, as long as they are not purged of their radical aspects, appropriated and co-opted into the machines of the spectacle." (Raunig 19) Anna Brzyski, argues that "the language of the canon obscures the historic existence of multiple, temporally and geographically situated canonical formations." (Brzyski 7) Raunig and Brzyski both share the position saying that these divides by the powers that be and established gatekeepers in the art world, consciously create these divisions. This process is a systemic trickling down, effectively maintaining the status quo with help by the artists themselves. For instance, it is not unusual for artists who become successful and those hoping to be successful, to edit out the lesser-known galleries, groups and projects, who were inclusive and supported them earlier on in their careers. I have looked at artist CVs as they have changed through the years and it is noticeable that, smaller scale arts organisations gradually vanish, and are replaced with better-known and established art institutions. This seemingly banal act gives even more power to these well-established bodies and promotes a myth that it is only they that supports artists. This blots out the reality of the mix of diversity and grass root ecologies actually existing in the art world. Alongside, exists a rather absolutist narrative that is promoting an art mainly in relation to market driven incentives. There is massive social inequality in the art world, which is accepted as the norm in art circles and art magazines and galleries. They may well even acknowledge to themselves and peers, that something is wrong with this, and it needs to change. But, as Morgan Quaintance so succinctly puts it, "silence, resignation or apathy are fuelled by something far more basic, comfort. Put simply, people are adverse to personal risk and lifestyle change." (Quaintance)

The recent appointment of Elisabeth Murdoch, daughter of Rupert Murdoch, to the Arts Council England's National Council, worryingly reinforces the neoliberal agenda, as it is

directly linked to Sir Nicholas Serota's current leadership of Arts Council England and to his wife, Teresa Gleadowe's own arts projects. [...] During Serota's reign at Tate, he supported artwashing in the form of BP sponsorship, refused to recognise unions, privatised staff positions, introduced the use of zero hour contracts, presided over a culture of widespread bullying, privatised information, and, of course, Tate staff were then asked to kindly chip-in for a new boat for his leaving present! Serota's leadership of Tate lasted 28 years. (Pritchard)

The Panic! Report, written by academics Dr Orian Brook, Dr David O'Brien, and Dr Mark Taylor, draws on survey data from 2015 and several academic papers into social mobility in the arts. "The cultural and creative sector "significantly excludes" those from working class backgrounds, which is in addition to barriers faced by women and people who identify as disabled or Black and minority ethnic (BME), new research finds." (Romer) And, "the report also finds the creative industries are mostly upper middle class

and with very different cultural tastes from the rest of the population." (Romer)

To change the divide there needs to be infrastructural changes, such as what punk and post-punk had in the 1980s, when the working classes were part of the cultural contexts. In media art, there are artists demonstrating through their processes how this can occur, crossing over, between art and everyday life, demonstrating critically engaging ideas that directly open up (literally) how others can hack through and around, platforms, networks, and infrastructures, in their work. For example, artist Jennifer Lyn Morone, turned the tables on data scraping social networking companies, by becoming a public trading body herself, claiming ownership of her data. Morone has claimed corporate ownership of her personal data (self), and has founded herself, as her corporation and intellectual property. Reclaiming agency whilst being immersed within data driven networks, protocols, and algorithms, constitutes a style of Post-Fordist cyborg-activism. Caronia proclaims that today's cyborg is forced into a process of capitalist growth, and sees no difference between work and leisure, "the office and the playground, and between times of public and private life." (Caronia 27) Artist and hacktivist, Heath Bunting has demonstrated since 1996, an insightful understanding in regard to biopolitical nuances involving data and its uses and how it is used to measure our worth, status, and relevance in wider society. One project of his, called The Status Project, is a functioning database with over 10,000 entries by individuals mainly living in the UK. From the data he has created over 50 maps with sub sections. One work to come out this larger project is his identity generating software. which is, he says, recognized under UK law as a person.

The machine is defined in part by
Bunting as the societal mechanisms
that attempt to understand and disrupt
human social systems. This is most
overtly seen in corporate and government surveillance and mapping of individual behaviors on the Internet, but
also evidenced by any social contract
whereby privacy is traded for goods or
services—driver's license, credit card,
store membership."(Klowdenmann)

Although there has been a gradual move to include artists practicing across media arts, and through the intersections of art and technology. This shift is a movement initiated from the ground up, finding small cracks in what is still a closed set of systems that Felix Stalder proposes is, "created by the means of active and unauthorized appropriation [... and] opposes the dominant version and the resulting speech is thus legitimized from another - that is, from one's own position." (Stalder 32) In her book *Undermining:* A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West, Lucy Lippard says, "Writing about conceptual, feminist, and political art as escape attempts, I've concluded that the ultimate escape attempt would be to free ourselves from the limitations of preconceived notions of art, and in doing so, help to save the planet." (Lippard 9)

Lippard's comments are echoed by a younger generation of artists and techies, either taking control of technology and or examining their roles in how to deal with aspects of climate change, whilst also questioning those who build and sell technology. This extends to artists claiming their own cultural identity through their art, on their own cultural terms. This could be as geeky hackers, contemporary indigenous artists, as well as, critically focused arts organizations actively critiquing their own role in society. As a response to underrepresentation of First

Nations cultures in the Australian media landscape and internationally, artists: Gretta Louw, Owen Mundy, and Sneakaway Studio, have collaborated to build a photo editing app called Mirawarri celebrating Indigenous Australian visual culture. It combines traditional Aboriginal Art aesthetics with the vibrant, media-savvy approach of the Warlpiri artists of the Tanami region, working with Warnayaka Art Centre. When, those living in the western world suddenly stop appropriating everything they touch, this action can allow a more nuanced acceptance of other existing ecologies beyond the neurotic act of always wanting to control the context and situation.

What am I made of?

If, we remind ourselves of land ownership and the enclosures from 1500s - 1850, and how now, people's data is trawled and scraped, and then owned by clandestine groups tracing every digital interaction. Both are non-consensus directives impacting others without their own informed choice. The point here is, it is a deliberate act of exclusion, and usually implemented before anyone has a say on the matter. This panopticon (or netopticon) of networked dominance has integrated humans into real-time, states of existences under constant surveillance. A strategy inspired by the production and distribution of Free and Open Source Software is that the opening up of these black box of objects; is to share information, and to understand more what was previously hidden. As we move into the age of the Internet of Things, it is expected that our homes will be all linked up through smart devices and smartphones, in our homes, ranging from: "temperature control, light automation, sprinkler scheduling, smart refrigerators, home security" (Chan). Although this may seem like a great concept to some, Dyne. org are not so convinced, expressing serious concerns around the vulnerability of home privacy and personal data. As an alternative, they propose a project called *The Privacy* Dowse. Its aim is to perceive and affect all devices in the local, networked sphere. As these ubiquitous devices accelerate and communicate to each other even more, having control over these multiple connections becomes even more essential. They say that more people need to understand how to interact beyond GUI interfaces, so to see who has access to private, common and public information. Dowse was conceived in 2014 as a proof of concept white paper by Denis Rojo aka Jaromil. The project abides with the principles set out in The Critical Engineering Manifesto, conceived in Berlin, in 2011, by The Critical Engineering Working Group, consisting of Julian Oliver, Gordan Savičić, and Danja Vasiliev.

The Critical Engineer observes the space between the production and consumption of technology. Acting rapidly to changes in this space, the Critical Engineer serves to expose moments of imbalance and deception. (Oliver et al)

Another project exploring infrastructural contexts beyond face value, is MOCC (The Museum of Contemporary Commodities). As, part of *The Human Face of Cryptoeconomies* exhibition at Furtherfield, on July 2015, they invited people to "imagine the things they value today as the heritage of tomorrow" (Furtherfield, *The Human Face*) to reflect on the ethics of production, data, and trade embedded in the things they buy, by imagining themselves as future attendees at a museum of 21st century commodities. They were invited to join a team of volunteered researchers

and art makers to get involved in a series of walk shops, workshops, and digital art social events that ran at Furtherfield Commons and Gallery, and local other spaces in and around Finsbury Park and online. From a 9-month residency emerged the prototype, and repurposed MoCC Guide, Mikayla, an Internet connected 'smart' doll. It was designed to appeal to young children with its long yellow hair, pink outfit and cheery voice, and respond to children's questions by consulting the web. Paula Crutchlow worked with technologist Gareth Foote to reconfigure the doll's original script to make her self aware. They made the doll talk "about who made her, what she was made from, and how she felt about the condition of almost ubiquitous digital connectivity we increasingly live in. A year after the exhibition in December 2016, in Germany, a complaint "turned the media focus from lack of personal security inherent in the object, to alleged breach of privacy by the object and its software," (Crutchlow) due to the doll constantly "listening, collecting data without consent from children under 13, and accessing phone data, services and hardware without clear explanation why" (Crutchlow).

Unlocking blockchain expectations

When new and powerful technologies are developed they tend to reflect the interests and values of those who develop them, whilst impacting many people's everyday lives. To counter this tendency, Furtherfield has sought to cultivate a critically informed diversity in the conversations and practices surrounding the blockchain development space, since 2015. The blockchain, the underpinning protocol of Bitcoin, cryptocurrencies and smart

contracts, is 10 years old and is surrounded with a hype hardly seen since the arrival of the Web. Just as it has been necessary for artists to move into all forms of technology to disrupt the top-down narrative imposed, today's thinkers, hackers, and artists need to engage critically with the blockchain in order to translate, speculate and intervene in the impacts of its global roll-out.

Through a film, exhibitions, commissions, and publications, artists and researchers introduce circumspection, hazard warnings and a search for new solidarities into the narrative of the blockchain, otherwise, characterized by an accelerated logic of capital unleashed. The World Economic Forum predicts that these developments will be accompanied by a significant increase in global inequality. This vision of the future disenfranchises and demotes the role played by an ever-increasing number of humans (and no doubt other life forms too) in the business of determining what makes a good life. It has been shown that 'strategies for economic, technical and social innovation that fixate on establishing ever more efficient and productive systems of control and growth, deployed by fewer, more centralized agents [are] both unjust and environmentally unsustainable.

Rachel O'Dwyer, a researcher into the environmental and artistic impacts of blockchains points to the importance of an interdisciplinary engagement in the evolution of new techno-social systems.

> We need to find ways to embrace not only technical solutions, but also people who have experience in community organizing and methods that foster trust, negotiate hierarchies, and embrace difference. Because there is no magic app for platform cooperativism. And there never will be. (O'Dwyer)

Some promising examples in this area include Resonate.is is a blockchain based stream to own music cooperative that allows creators, labels and music lovers alike a share in the profits generated, as opposed to the current model, which consolidates control in the hands of a very small number of corporations. Tactical blockchain artwork Bail Bloc piggy-backs on the liberatory rhetoric associated with decentralisation in the blockchain scene in order to amplify a political message. Launched in 1999 the SETI project at the University of California, Berkeley crowdsources computing power to analyze radio frequencies emanating from space in the search for extraterrestrial life. (SETI) Bail Bloc by Dark Inquiry takes the form of a downloadable cryptocurrency mining application, that uses latent computing power to generate funding for bail. They enlist "a critical mass of users to challenge the role that bail plays in incarcerating low income black and brown people." (Bail Bloc) Dark Inquiry describe themselves as "an alliance of technologists, artists, writers, and investigative journalists convened to deploy a series of situated, confrontational, rhetorically-deliberate experiments that expose the anti-human logic of dominant technological power, and demonstrate the possibilities beyond it." (Bail Bloc) Harvest by Julian Oliver, uses renewable energy to mine cryptocurrency to fund climate change research, using a cryptocurrency called Zcash, donating "the proceeds of his installation's mining efforts to a group of nonprofits focused on researching and raising awareness about climate change." He is now scaling up and designing "a small mining farm fed by a 10kW turbine that will reliably earn between 12X and 30X more" than the initial single-turbine installation. He estimated that this expanded setup could sustainably fund a small NGO on its own. (Schneider)

On reading "Blockchain Geometries", by Rob Myers, written for Furtherfield, we identify a challenge for those attempting to engage with ethical questions and to compare the ethical standing of one blockchain against another. It becomes necessary to engage closely with the technicity of the protocol. Here he compares the Decred cryptocurrency with an unnamed alternative that we might assume to be FairCoin.

Deciding how to scale is a matter of governance. The Decred cryptocurrency has put governance front and centre. As well as moving to a hybrid Proof of Work / Proof of Stake system it has implemented an "on-chaingovernance" system. Decred contains the forum for its own critique and transformation, implemented as an extension of the staking and voting system used by its Proof of Stake system. On-chain governance is controversial but addresses calls to improve the governance of cryptocurrency projects without falling prey to the off-chain voluntarism that can result from a failure to understand how the technomic and social forms of cryptocurrencies relate in finely-tuned balance. (Myers)

Myers points to the dangers of coming quickly to judgements about the potential social and political impacts of different projects without an understanding of the nature of the technical systems at work. You can't confront capitalism and forces of neoliberalism without grappling with it (Massumi). If we are to survive and not fall into ill-informed states of perpetual denial, we need to collectively build new ways of developing peer to peer knowledge and then areas and interventions that occupy these territories for each of us

and ourselves, and not be left outside of these structures where we cannot change them.

Conclusion

This study proves the existence of a dynamic, thriving, grounded culture, finding new and different ways of existing and creating, in contrast to the dominant neoliberal narrative. Yet, the power to create our alternative contexts is constantly under threat, by those who would lock down: territories, systems, places, spaces, histories, and consciousness, for their own less egalitarian interests. Humanity and arts across the board, needs new strategies for social and material renewal to develop more diverse and lively ecologies of ideas, occupations, and values.

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