

# GROUNDWORK

text series # 4

The matter of the deal. Notes on deals and  
world-forming in *Company Drinks*  
by Miranda Pope

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GROUNDWORK

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**STATENS KUNSTFOND**

# The matter of the deal. Notes on deals and world-forming in *Company Drinks*

By Miranda Pope

**B**ased in Dagenham and Barking, a suburb of east London<sup>1</sup>, *Company Drinks (Company)* began life as *Company: Movements, Deals and Drinks*, a project by artist Kathrin Böhm from Myvillages in 2014, initially funded by the 2014 CREATE Art Award. As the work of the project developed and became embedded within the community, it was renamed *Company Drinks* and in June 2015 registered as a Community Interest Company, gaining a permanent base in Barking Park in September 2017<sup>2</sup>.

Taking as its starting point the collective memory and shared history of east London working class communities going fruit picking and hopping in Kent, it has introduced new cycles of collective community-based drink production activities into this area of London, and has established a new type of enterprise. The initiation of the project's activities and the different ways in it has unfolded and been structured has all happened through the making of deals between the artist, individuals, groups involved, agencies and organisations of many different kinds. They have been both formal and informal, conditional and unconditional but most importantly they have grown out of the needs of the project and through opportunities that might have arisen through the production and development of new flows and circuits of transmission and exchange. In this text I will look at some of the ways that the deals can be understood and explore what their wider implications might be for the project as a whole. Before I do this, it is important to spend a bit of time outlining and describing the project as a whole.

## Connecting histories, altering practices

The project reminds us of historical and contemporary ties between agricultural production and urban conditions and communities and proceeds through a programme of reminiscing, planting, harvesting, production, tasting, skill-learning, discussions, trading and drinking with informal and formalized local groups, organisations and residents of different ages to launch a range of drinks made from fruits and plants picked in local parks and gardens, and the nearby countryside in Essex and Kent.

In the past, economic structures of ‘going picking’ that governed the harvest and subsequent drinks production and distribution processes meant that the urban hop-pickers were only involved at two stages of the process—the picking of the hops in Kent, and once back in London, in the purchase and drinking of the final products<sup>3</sup>. The collective fruit picking, drinks production and trading activities of *Company* explores and addresses these specific cycles, and looks at alternatives.

*Company* starts from the complex social currency and socio-political relations and economical conditions that structure realities of drinks production. Histories and politics are explored to navigate relationships between rural production processes, urban communities and local land use. By remembering local histories and small-scale drink production processes, and allowing for alterations through their revitalisation, the project weaves multiple connections between notions of rurality and the urban, and aims to initiate new social, productive and economic structures within, through and between the communities of Barking and Dagenham, local land, micro-economies and social histories.

Individuals and groups are involved in activities relating to the production of fruit drinks, for example, taste-testing, soda production or drink mixing. They include drink labs with sessions on making everything from slush puppies and cola concentrate to designing labels, developing sales strategies, and brainstorming semi-public business development.

Histories of ‘going picking’ and beverage production in the south east of England are equally addressed in the workshops and through public events. In the 1900s hop-picking and harvesting were marketed to working class families in east London as holidays for pleasure and profit, and the annual mass movement of Londoners to the countryside was enabled by the development of the railway into Kent. Hop-picking was most popular during the 1920s and 1930s, when train companies would often run ‘Hop Picker Specials’ to transport pickers as the season began. This history survives in the memory of many east Londoners today, who would have only been small children at the time, but who are from families who would have had been going hop-picking for several generations, and for whom this collective history is part of their family lore. Furthermore, the shared history of hopping is also important to Dagenham and the Becontree Estate in particular, because many of the people who moved to the estate came from the traditional East End where communities first went hop-picking en masse. This history of mobility and the shared experience of

hopping have been explored through regular events, such as the 'Hopping Afternoons' held at Valence House Local Archive<sup>4</sup>.

Acting from within a network of existing spaces and facilities to run workshops, social events and bars, and more recently a new permanent base, the project's workshops and events are collective and collaborative spaces in which to work, learn, experiment and be together. They offer opportunities to try out activities related to drinks production, and discover things through doing and sharing them in public. Workshop locations have included a country fair, a bench and a bush in a community garden, moving across a park, the under-used visitor centre of Eastbrook End Park, a local library, the college training kitchen, the back garden of a busy youth club, the kitchen and meeting room in an Active Age centre, a local farm and allotments.

Rather than setting itself up as a catalyst for action within the community, *Company* invites people to do something together—in a different manner to many other offers—on the basis of shared interest. In bringing groups together, the aim is to investigate what can be shared and co-produced, and explore ideas for the potential of local beverage production using common resources taken from civic land. Within this space, activities that might have been long forgotten are revisited. They are processes with ends in themselves, and in a wider sense processes that involve the laying of foundations for the collective beverage enterprise.

### **Transactions and agreements**

Making deals are central to how the project takes place – informal and formal deals both knit *Company* together and are at the same time the way in which it unfolds. Only one of the meanings of the term deal is embedded in *Company*: that of a deal as a transaction or agreement between two or more parties for their mutual benefit. In this capacity, the deals in *Company* take on a variety of forms and social arrangements, many of them not mediated by money. They are formed through a myriad of interactions such as agreements, pacts, contracts, arrangements, gifts, negotiations and exchanges.

What does it mean to make a deal? As a form of social contract, a deal is always a point where relationships between those involved re-organise themselves, where changes take place in their social constitution, and where new systems might be established. All social groups and the modes of their relations can to a certain extent be thought of as being organised through various deals and what is included or excluded through them.

Deals form, to a degree, the fabric of everyday living, in both informal and formal ways, on macro and micro scales - from local deals made daily with friends, relatives, colleagues and family, to international deals between corporations, governments, anti-government organisations and NGOs. Deals can therefore also be thought of as constituting what I call a world-forming process. World-forming here is taken to mean that each participant in a deal has a specific socio-political relationship with every other aspect of the deal and hence occupies a place within a definable 'assemblage' that is created as a result.

In the context of *Company*, the deals that take place are firstly transactions that enable the structures of the project to happen, framing the contexts within which the project's activities take place. They can be understood as 'productive transactions', which is to say that they set up situations in which activities and processes are able to happen, rather than because they produce anything in themselves (although this might also be the case).

The deals happen between a number of parties and for different reasons: there are deals for participation, deals for space and resources, and deals for funding. There are deals with collaborators, with the people who get involved in the making and doing and who are exchanging resources or knowledge as part of the project, for example local residents or non-residents with specialist knowledge to share. There are deals with organisations and co-funders such as the local civic authority (the London borough of Barking and Dagenham) or Frieze Art Fair London and Kernel Brewery in London, who provide access to spaces where aspects of the project can be explored and realised. Then there are deals with the Wellcome Trust, the Heritage Lottery fund, Bank of America Merrill Lynch and CREATE for financial resources, who in return gain what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinction* calls 'cultural capital' – greater cultural authority through their connection with the project.

Within these broad frameworks, each deal that takes place is a specific form of economic, cultural or social exchange. Classification is difficult as every deal that happens is its own discrete transaction directed by a precise combination of factors that pertain to the particular requirements of a situation within the project. Despite – or because of – this, each transaction marks out a set of distinct boundaries. These are the points where the involved parties and networks intersect and where the forms of the project emerge.

### **Deals as structure**

As the way in which the structures of the project emerge, the deals assemble the project and are integral to its architecture and framework. The project happens through the deals; each deal sets out specific courses of action, an intention towards a fulfillment of the activity put in place by the deal, with deals being continually negotiated in order for the project to move forward. In this sense, the deals can be seen as agents for change; they allow for situations to emerge where communities intersect or are re-organised, where activities (educational, recreational or experimental) are merged or deconstructed, and where new possibilities for co-operation between and within communities are fostered.

The deals largely take the form of social interactions between individuals and groups of individuals. This is to say that they are neither formal economic transactions, nor are they mediated through another agency. Instead they are negotiated through the formation of heterogeneous relationships that take place in the social. There is no one dominant model of interaction, all the interactions respond specifically to situations and its needs.

The deals are also involved in the setting up of the spatial organisation of the project. This means that the places where *Company* happens are the result of deals that the project makes with organisations that control access to the spaces – whether they are on public or private land. These spaces therefore become dependent on a number of negotiated injunctions, where an agreement has been made, for example, with the farmer not to disturb other crops, or the local authority to leave enough flowers for the birds after foraging, gleaning and picking.

Finally, the deals also have a temporal aspect – they take place in time, they are altered through time, and are dependent on time-critical factors. They are dependent on available plants, on crops, on time lapsed between harvesting and producing. The deals are also simultaneously embedded in historical time, in the remembering of the multiple temporalities of the movements of working class communities in east London and the Barking and Dagenham area and the lasting impact this has on the communities there. Pasts are remembered through the project, and rehearsed through its activities.

### **Deals as a mode of performativity**

The negotiation of possibilities within the project is also a process by which informal economic and social cycles and rhythms of the project

are given form and might be understood as a performative process. Performativity here is not used to suggest that the deals or subsequent activities are performed for an audience by the project's participants. Rather it is to say that the deals are performative actions that create form in and of themselves. What is important about them and the ways in which economic configurations emerge out of them is the fact that the deals that produce economic configurations are social activities, they are not produced through traditionally economic interactions.

So while Judith Butler argues that the economy is produced through iterative performative practices that maintain the flows of global capital and which are carried out through the key economic institutions like banks and corporations, the IMF, the federal reserve etc. which are separated from the social, *Company* reveals, by contrast, that social activities do in fact produce economic outcomes and forms<sup>5</sup>.

This question of alternative economic practices as being produced through the social, and how they relate to mainstream neo-liberal economic structures is central in the work of JK Gibson-Graham, who explores the constitution of economic practices without differentiating between the economic and the social. Gibson-Graham starts from a position of the worldwide economy being 'insufficient for the task at hand', and questions the use of seeing it as the 'centrally organising cultural frame'<sup>6</sup>. For Gibson-Graham, the notion of economy is concerned with rethinking 'economic identity and economic dynamics'<sup>7</sup> with the purpose of looking at how diverse non-mainstream economies can contribute to the construction of a model of a community economy. To do this, Gibson-Graham aims to 'rethink the economy from the ground up' by reorganising economic practices to do with 'material survival' into a single flat topography. There are five types of economic practices: enterprise, labour, property, transaction and finance. They are organised according to their dominance within the 'mainstream economy and unquestionably included in representations of the economy.'<sup>8</sup> Below the dominant practices she places those that lie outside mainstream practices, some of which might not be immediately thought of as economic practices. The social relations that instigate these practices are much wider than in mainstream economic practices, and include things like 'trust, sharing, reciprocity, cooperation collective agreement, thrift, love, community, pressure, social justice...'<sup>9</sup>.

Gibson-Graham's work also goes further than Butler in terms of rethinking the performativity of capitalism, suggesting that these non-mainstream practices are already performing alternatives – what she



calls ‘performative ontologies’, or ‘world-making’ practices<sup>10</sup>. Performative ontologies for Gibson-Graham are the social, ethical and political practices that rearrange and transform existing configurations through collective, negotiated activities. They are ontologies of ‘economic difference’ or ‘diverse economies’<sup>11</sup>.

Gibson-Graham argues that these ontologies of difference are inextricably linked to knowledge, because investigating and understanding alternative economic practices allow for a ‘different imaginary in which economic possibility proliferates’<sup>12</sup>. In order to set up world-changing practices, says Gibson-Graham, the distinction between epistemology and ontology needs to be collapsed, to produce a ‘thinking practice’. Rather than this being practical applications of concepts, a thinking practice means economic, or social or community activities that rethink economy as a site of ‘ethical interdependence’ rather than being ‘capitalocentric’<sup>13</sup>.

Performative ontologies are first and foremost experimental economic activities that are processed as part of an attempt to disrupt the notion of a ‘capitalist’ economy. They become claims for other worlds, for alternative forms of organisation that in their own ways set up heterogeneous spaces of socio-economic possibility.

Practices of ‘world-forming’ embedded in Gibson-Graham’s concept are practices that unfold through collective negotiation and partitioning, and are inherently ethico-political. In this context, the economic structures that are formed through the deals and activities of *Company* could be understood as performative ontologies. In setting up possibilities for a new articulation of community economies, informed simultaneously by historical, conceptual, spatial, geographic and temporal features, the deals both instigate and perform structures of *Company*. They are world-forming, intrinsic to the development of a community economy, and creators of points where the project is acknowledged as both art and social activity. Socio-economic relations and connections between art and the social are rearranged.

### **Converging trajectories, unfolding possibilities**

However, simply thinking of the deals as performative ontologies does not perhaps give sufficient space for a wider political reading of the project, and the implications contained within the arrangement and rearrangement of economic and social structures through the deals. Because of the ways in which new socio-economic configurations emerge out of the deals and its activities, it is helpful here to explore this through Felix Guattari’s notion of transversality. Proposed by Guattari in *Chaosmosis*, and central to his

thought and psychoanalytic practice, the idea of transversality explores ways in which alternative radical subjectivities can be produced by confronting existing social and political separations and limitations, at an existential level. The transversal can be thought of as the production of new conjunctures that aim to produce models of subjectivity that are, as he says, 'more operative within modified assemblages, more open, more processual, more deterritorialised'<sup>14</sup>. In *The Three Ecologies*, Guattari reiterates the importance of transversality in helping to address problems relating to the environmental crisis, which for him is endemic to capitalism and inextricably linked to other social and political affects of capitalism.

Transversality can be understood as a breaking-through of the boundaries of existing social and political separations and limitations to identities, in an attempt to undermine the structures that maintain current limitations, inclusions and exclusions. It can be imagined as a mode of being in a state of continuous rupture and breakdown of the boundaries defining the hierarchies and logics of society. In *Company*, these shifts might be seen as a result of the multiple community activities instigated through the deals. They take place outside normative structures, bringing participants together within spaces on the project's terms, which may shift as the activity changes. The result of this process for Guattari is a constant state of production of new alliances and modes of being, meaning that '[s]ocial ecosophy will consist in developing specific practices that will modify and reinvent the ways in which we live as couples or in the family, in an urban context... it will be a question of literally reconstructing the modalities of 'group being'...through existential mutations driven by the motor of subjectivity'<sup>15</sup>.

Because it is continuous, the transversal mode of being does not offer any closure. In this sense *Company's* activities might by-pass traditional institutional structures (in education, or in terms of the presentation of art), or ask new things of an institution or the subject as collaborator or participant, and the artwork becomes dispersed across new areas of possibility with alliances and actions being continually negotiated through the practices of drinks production itself.

*Company* proceeds by using the deals as ways of critically navigating its circumstances in order to develop its various strands of activity. The deals are instigators of actions to generate what is possible for the project. The forms that emerge out of these deals are rooted in sets of politics defined by direct, collective investment in the assemblages themselves at the level of the existential. The generative capacity of *Company* is not

determined by external pre-determined cultural and economic terms, but through multiple, co-produced 'lived experience' that happens through the deals, and which produces configurations that bring the project into relief. The deals help to articulate an existential territory that both interrogates their forms and proposes alternatives as opposed to being used as a way of illustrating practices relating to the production of new knowledge or knowledge objects. Forms produced are enunciations that begin at a specific point and the project's practices are unfold from there, criss-crossing the art world along with many other worlds.

### **Producing boundaries, forming worlds**

What the deals also do is help to set up the practice of producing *Company* as a project that engages with the boundaries of social practice within the social itself. In terms of *Company* the deals are points where what constitutes the artwork is always being questioned by the possibilities offered by the framework of the project as a drinks enterprise.

Therefore, within the wider social context that the project occupies, its limits are continually being shifted as new deals are made. The deals do not represent closed points of interaction as such, they are open and porous in terms of the possibilities of the project's constituent activities - and also because of the contingencies of its materialities, because of things like the weather, crops, harvest, participants. The boundaries mark out a materiality in the resources used, and ultimately drinks produced into which the deals are inscribed. As Gregory Sholette says in his essay, *After OWS: Social Practice Art Abstraction and the Limits of the Social*<sup>6</sup>, we need to recognise not only the role of extra-human technologies and abstract concepts like democracy, but also the corporeal presence of "nature," not in some sugary, universal form, but as a negation that radically confronts human culture with alterity<sup>17</sup>. In *Company*, this radical confrontation might be understood in terms of ways in which the deals negotiate the continuous and essential relationships that the project has with elements of 'nature'. As the deals produce, reproduce and reset multiple configurations of entities and socialities, they become a kind of on-going archive of transactions demonstrating that such radical alterity constitutes a constantly shifting set of possibilities bound by the contexts they inhabit at points in time.

What this means is that as well as their moment of completion, the deals also need to be considered in terms of being the *material* of the project. The materiality of the deals might include the conversations

and activities that arise through the deals, but equally it might also take in the materials of the project, the plants, flowers and herbs, the land and by extension its other uses and users, and the ways in which are implicitly intertwined in the project through each deal. Such materials continue to exist outside the project and they constantly bear down on the forms of the project as they are put into place through the activities activated by the deals.

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## FOOTNOTES

1. Dagenham and Barking is officially known as the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham and it is located on outskirts of east London. Once part of the county of Essex, it was incorporated as a borough of London in 1965. Before urbanization and industrialization, the area was countryside and market gardens for London and Essex.  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dagenham> [Accessed 06/09/17]
2. For more information about the project and its activities and history see: <http://companydrinks.info>. Also: <http://www.myvillages.org> And: <http://createlondon.org>
3. In the 19th century, hops were widely grown across Kent, and at its height between the 1920s and 1950s the annual hop pickers from London would total around 200,000, transported on 'hopping special' trains from London Bridge Station. Cheaper, imported crops led to its decline and today hop gardens take up less than 3,000 acres. All but one hop harvest has been mechanised and the manual harvest is carried out by workers from Eastern Europe.
4. Valence House in Dagenham is the only surviving manor house of five manor houses in the area. It has been used as a manor house, family home, town hall and today is a local history museum. More information can be found at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valence\\_House\\_Museum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valence_House_Museum) and <https://www.lbdd.gov.uk/residents/leisure-libraries-and-museums/valence-house/visitor-information-and-opening-times/history-of-valence-house/> [accessed 06/09/17]
5. The deployment of this definition of performativity is well known in the work of Judith Butler who has used it to a discourse that questions ways in which gender is produced through an iterative performativity of norms and codes. The breadth of her focus has recently expanded to include economic concerns and her essay *Performative Agency* she looks at how notions of performativity might operate to create and maintain divisions between economic and political forces. See: BUTLER, J. (2010) Performative agency. In *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 3:2, p.148, Available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2010.494117> [Accessed 18/06/2015]
6. GIBSON-GRAHAM, J.K. (2014) Rethinking the Economy with Thick Description and Weak Theory. In *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 55, No. S9, Crisis, Value, and Hope: Rethinking the Economy (August 2014), p. S147. Available online at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/676646> [Accessed: 18/06/2015]
7. Ibid, p.S147
8. Ibid, p.S149
9. Ibid, p.S151
10. Ibid p.S149
11. GIBSON-GRAHAM, J.K. (2008) Diverse economies: performative practices for 'other worlds' In *Progress in Human Geography* 32 (October 2008) Available online at: [law.uvic.ca/demcon/victoria\\_colloquium/documents/gibson\\_2008\\_progress\\_paper.pdf](http://law.uvic.ca/demcon/victoria_colloquium/documents/gibson_2008_progress_paper.pdf) p.2 [Accessed 18/06/2015]
12. GIBSON-GRAHAM, J.K. (2014) Rethinking the Economy with Thick Description and Weak Theory. In *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 55, No. S9, Crisis, Value, and Hope: *Rethinking the Economy* (August 2014), p.S149. Available online at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/676646> [Accessed: 18/06/2015]
13. Ibid. p. S152

14. Guattari, F., 1995: *Chaosmosis*. Sydney: Power Publications, p.61.
15. Guattari, F., 2000: *The Three Ecologies*. London: The Althone Press p.34).).
16. SHOLETTE, G. (2012) After OWS: Social practice art, abstraction and the limits of the social. In *e-flux* 31 (Jan 2012) Available at: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/after-ows-social-practice-art-abstraction-and-the-limits-of-the-social/> [Accessed 18/06/16]
17. Ibid p.6

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## **GROUNDWORK text series**

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# 4 The matter of the deal. Notes on deals and  
world-forming in Company Drinks  
by Miranda Pope

### **Miranda Pope:**

Miranda Pope is a writer, researcher and editor exploring ways in which curatorial and artistic practices might critically structure, restructure, undermine and overlap with forms of everyday living, and in what terms these can be understood. She has a PhD from Goldsmiths, University of London and has worked with, CREATE London, Arts Catalyst, Camden Arts Centre, Goethe-Institut London, Hollybush Gardens, and Platform Garanti, Istanbul.

