

crypto-knitting-circles

OVERVIEW

Crypto-Knitting-Circles has been a year-long project by visual artist Ailie Rutherford and designer Bettina Nissen exploring potential applications of new and emerging technologies within feminist and community currency. Inspired by a shared interest in feminist economics and the potential for emerging tech to disrupt established power structures, this work centred around the feminist community exchange space *Swap Market* in Govanhill (Glasgow) from January to December 2019. It was supported by Creative Scotland, South East Vibrancy Fund, and Edinburgh College of Art.

If we are inevitably moving towards a cashless society where machines and technology have an ever increasing impact on our lives, we want to know how we can do this in a way that empowers people, enables us to share resources across networks, and meet our needs rather than allowing technology to further disempower people and exasperate inequality. The intention was for Crypto-Knitting-Circles to generate a set of proposals for possible feminist cryptocurrencies through an action research process of workshops, discussions and events. We broadly interpreted the term “cryptocurrency” to mean a decentralised network of exchanges incorporating an agreed set of values or ethics.

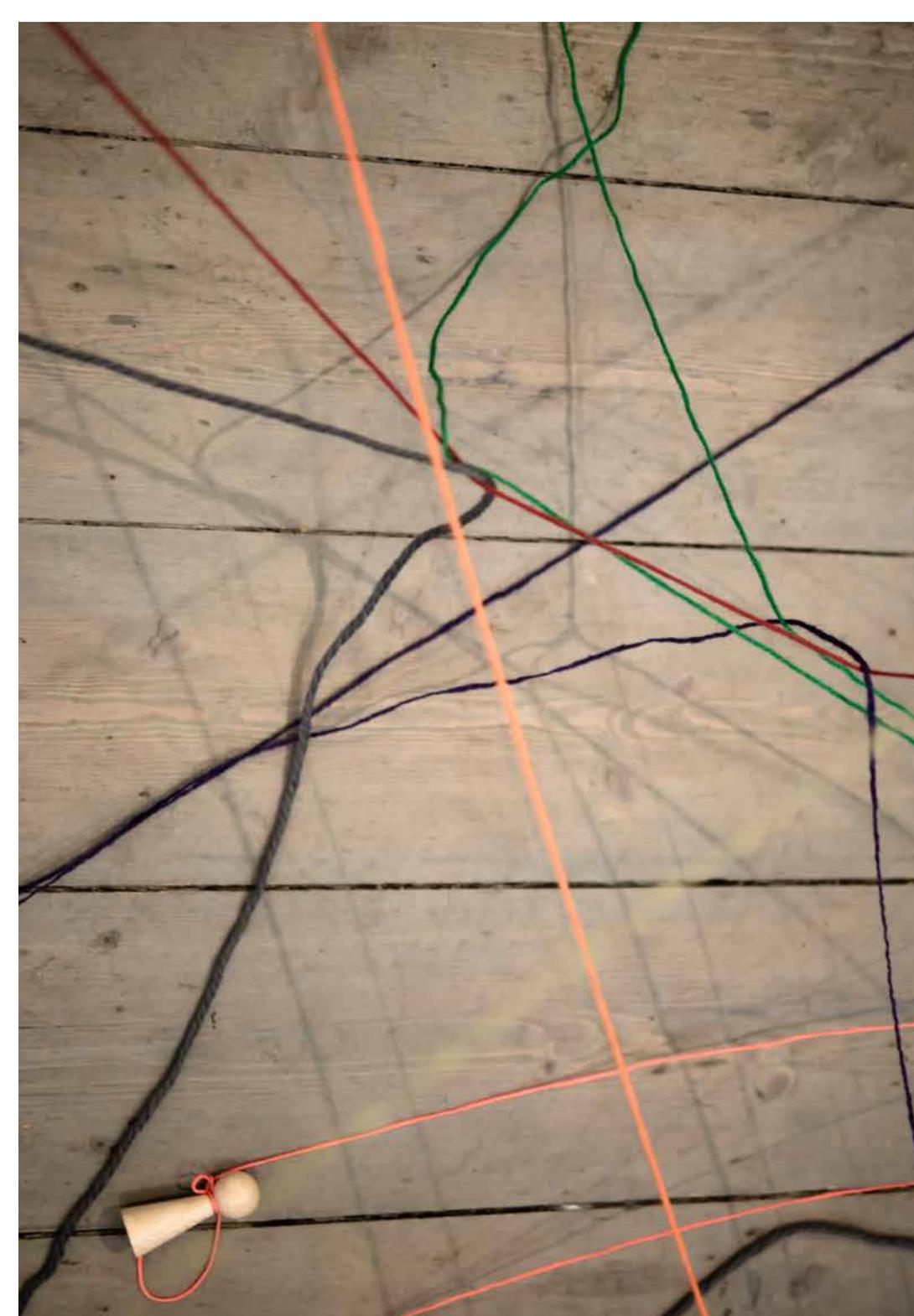
Workshops and discussions were designed to broaden the understanding of and widen debate on the pros and cons of new technologies such as blockchain, to collectively explore what values or ethics might be encoded in a feminist currency network, what might be exchanged and who would be involved. The work brought together Ailie’s work on visualising the invisible and less tangible aspects of the economy such as emotional labour; what feminist economists describe as the “below the waterline” economy, with Bettina’s work visualising the otherwise invisible aspects of technology so that we can discuss, critique and pose alternative questions and solutions.

1. Workshops summary
2. Common Values & Common Aims
3. Chain Re:Action Symposium
4. Swap Market Installation
5. Outcomes and Further Proposals
6. Interview

WORKSHOPS

The initial aim of the project was to introduce concepts of blockchain and cryptocurrency to the members of the Swap Market and the wider Govanhill community, we developed a range of workshops that would make some of the principles of blockchain technology visible and hopefully understandable through the use of craft practices. In these initial workshops, we used practices such as knitting and weaving to convey and understand aspects of blockchain, the concept of a shared ledger and decentralised network, inviting critical thinking and discussion on this technology. This was combined with discussions on feminist economics to introduce the idea to new audiences and expand the conversation with those already familiar with the concept. Through games designed to help define a collective value system for feminist exchange we looked at what might be exchanged on a feminist currency network, where might these new technologies be useful? And what are our concerns?

Participants in early stage workshops were interested individuals, Swap Market members, PBoG followers. Discussions centred around what sorts of things might be exchanged and what shared concerns, values and ethics we have. In later workshops, participants were organisers from local projects and self-organised groups looking at how we could share and support each other across a network and what role technology might play.



Workshop Conversations:

An Ethic of Care is fundamental to any feminist economy. We need to radically re-think our value system in a reversal of capitalist exploitative, extractive economy to one of respect and compassion.

We need to decolonise knowledge and the idea of financial education. Who would we like to learn from? Who is doing interesting work on alternative economies? How can we learn from each other? We need an alternative to the capitalist approach to financial education of imposing the ideas of white men as if that were politically neutral.

We need to retain physical spaces for people to connect in an interpersonal way and support each other

Emerging Questions and Concerns

Introducing blockchain technologies into functioning alternative economies might just be a way of controlling and monitoring exchange that works outside the mainstream economy.

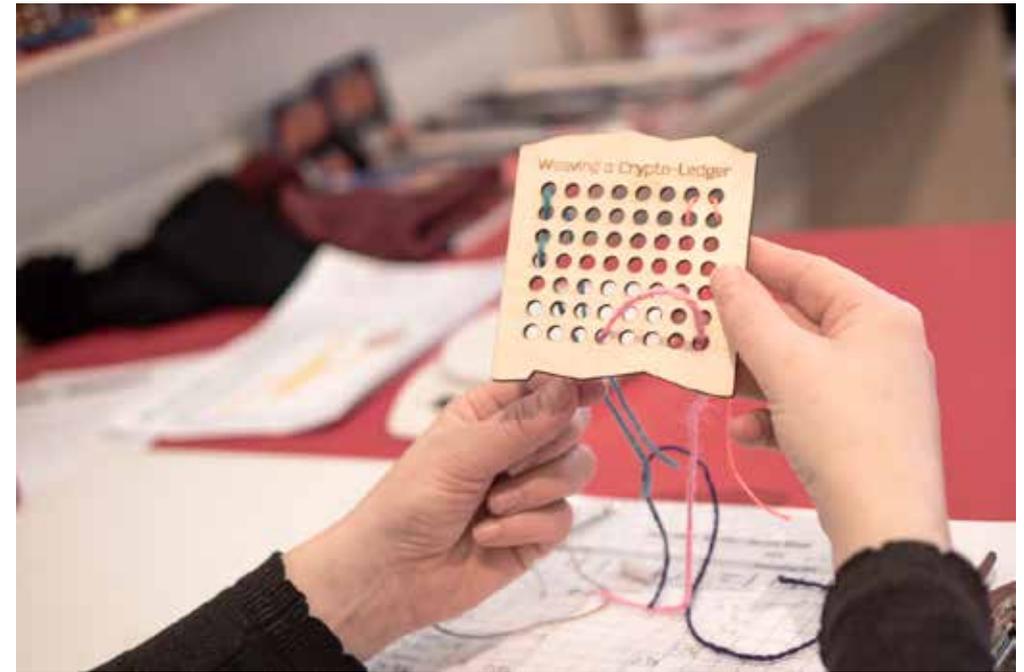
How do we reach consensus? Consensus reached in a system that is unequal to begin with such as racial or class bias may well mean that consensus does not mean fairness.

Who would own this system – all of us? But who has the power to change it – programmers? In this scenario hacking the system might be a good thing.

Can we invent a system with fluctuating value rather than fixed? How do we prevent hoarding and accumulation of wealth/resources – negative interest or “rotting currency”? How do we deal with surplus? In a caring economy can we have a surplus of care?

What might be exchanged on a feminist network: childcare, storytelling, plastering and sanding walls, food, recipes, DIY and repair skills, gardening, befriending, carework, tech skills, haircuts, massages.

Do we want to invent a system that is scalable? Is a bigger network always less democratic? Could we have a small network that still allows global connections – what aspects of “globalisation” do we want to keep? This would not be about homogenous global culture but about how we can learn from other interesting work happening in other parts of the globe – ideally without adding to our carbon footprint – is this where the technology may



Weaving ledgers of transactions and comparing patterns to find consensus



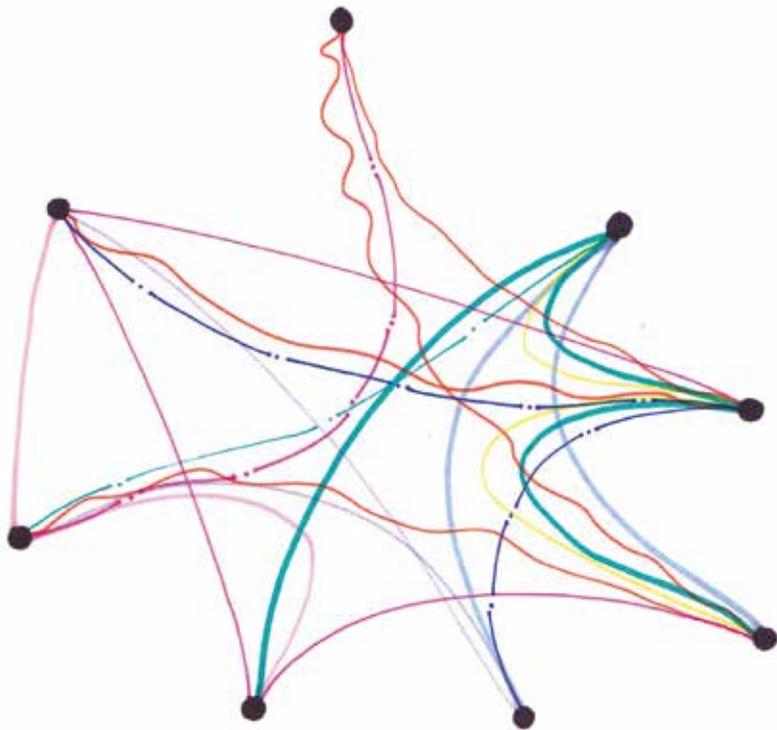
be useful? Can we “activate the urban commons” and create an alternative trade network of care and knowledge? How can we support each other when the going gets tough? Can/Should this be quantified or tokenised?

“Before designing a new process, look at what is already functioning in our community”

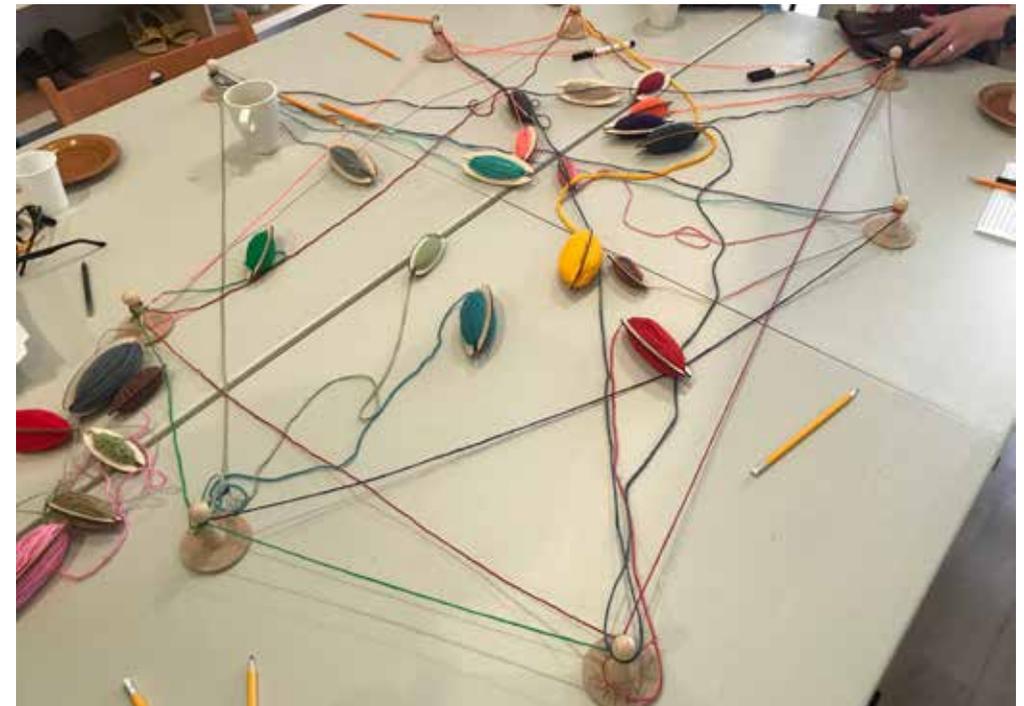
Remember to think about what we need as well as what we can offer. Could we develop an “open source knowledge share”, to share our collective (extensive) experiential knowledge? Can a ledger be used to log something other than an exchange – such as information about interactions such as stories, qualitative anecdotal info? Is there potential to use blockchain to develop a collective fundraising tool across groups?

Looking more closely at what shared values would be “encoded” in a feminist exchange and who would be part of this network?

By what rules do we share? How do we decide who gets to join this network? Does the list of values, core ethics and code of conduct automatically decide?



Using wool and string to visualise the exchange of resources and knowledge in a decentralised system



COMMON VALUES & COMMON AIMS

Reflecting on the workshop process, we realised that earlier workshops conflated the technical understanding of blockchain principles (how it works?) with a broader understanding of the concepts and applications of the technology (how it could be used in a community context) while introducing some participants to ideas of feminist economic for the first time. This begged questions, if the technical aspects of blockchain technology need to be understood in order to understand its implications? However, without the technical understanding it's often easy to fall back on hyped or simplistic understanding of a technology when critically discussing its applications. So, part of the process has been to find the right level of abstraction and detail to think critically and imagine the potential applications of emerging technology.

Subsequent workshops continued to develop a set of guiding principles that would help us establish common ground, collectively define what we might want from a digital community currency and how this would relate to feminist economic theory.

This is not about creating a community network solely for women, but devising an exchange network that prioritises care and all the forms of working, living and being that have been de-valued under capitalism.

While the workshop model has been useful in introducing the ideas and initiating dialogue it was recognised that this model of participation does not work for everyone. Who is able to attend a two hour workshop and give their focus to an intensive process in this way?

Alongside the workshops, the project then developed through one-to-one conversations and online exchange.

Common Values and Common Aims were created, amended and edited through the workshops and group email exchange:

- ★ **Openness, collaboration, empathy and mutual respect are central to our work.**
- ★ **We aim to build a network to serve our communities, whether geographical or communities of interest**
- ★ **We gain strength from diversity, and actively seek participation from those who enhance it**
- ★ **We will encourage cross-cultural connections and actively counteracting negative stereotypes**
- ★ **We will hold power to account**
- ★ **We aim to redistribute resources**
- ★ **We will work for environmental and social justice**
- ★ **We aim to use non-exploitative technologies: non-exploitative in its use (for users), in how data is stored or shared and non-exploitative in how devices/technologies are manufactured**
- ★ **We will work in co-operation with honesty and fairness**
- ★ **We will promote feminist economic values to give value to all types of labour and exchange and challenge the dominant capitalist value system**
- ★ **We understand feminist economic values to be trans and non-binary inclusive.**
- ★ **We will build the systems and networks of a new inclusive future - both technical and social**
- ★ **We expect proportional sharing of resources based on member's wealth, e.g. in terms of physical resources, property, time, staff**
- ★ **Active contribution means allowing others to make use of the resources you offer to share and ensure that you offer things that are of value to others**

CHAIN RE:ACTION

Platform Easterhouse, June 2019



The knowledge exchange day brought together academics working in blockchain applications and technology for social good with community based projects, feminist groups and local activists. The day included demos, talks and presentations on Feminist Economies (Swap Market, Ubuntu women's shelter, Wellbeing Economy Alliance) and Technology for Social Good (Common Good Awareness Project, GeoPact, FoodBlock, PizzaBlock). Alongside these talks we had art and filmwork by El Cambalache El Valor De Inter-Cambia, Padmini Ray Murray (Darshan Diversion feminist use of gaming tech), Vishwanath Pasumarthi (interactive digital work looking at ideas of decentralisation), Libby Odai and Chrissy Ardill (Performance of Tyranny of Default) and Timebank Tombola from Ailie Rutherford's work on The People's Bank of Govanhill.

Chain Re:Action aimed to open up conversation, asking: Do new digital technologies offer the potential to create fairer grassroots exchange networks? If a cashless society is inevitable how do we create one that works for us?

The discussions arising during the Chain Re:Action event were highly valuable to further the critical debate. Many members of the community and local organisations often had critical views on how such systems would be implemented and by whom. The power imbalances that blockchain technology could potentially address to build grassroots global exchange systems, just shifts this power imbalance to those with programming or cryptography skills – a highly skilled labour. From an academic perspective, there is often a perception that academia is critical but in the wider context of socially engaged art practice and community organisations, academic researchers often need to more fully grasp the power imbalances and the privileged positions this research is coming from which was one of two key discussion points during this symposium – what is the role of the universities in socially engaged work or research, who owns it, how is written about, who designs or develops the systems? And the second key point in relation to this, was a question from a local organisation regarding the technology focused narrative – where are the women's voices or stories in this work, how can technology be used to amplify women's issues and perspectives?

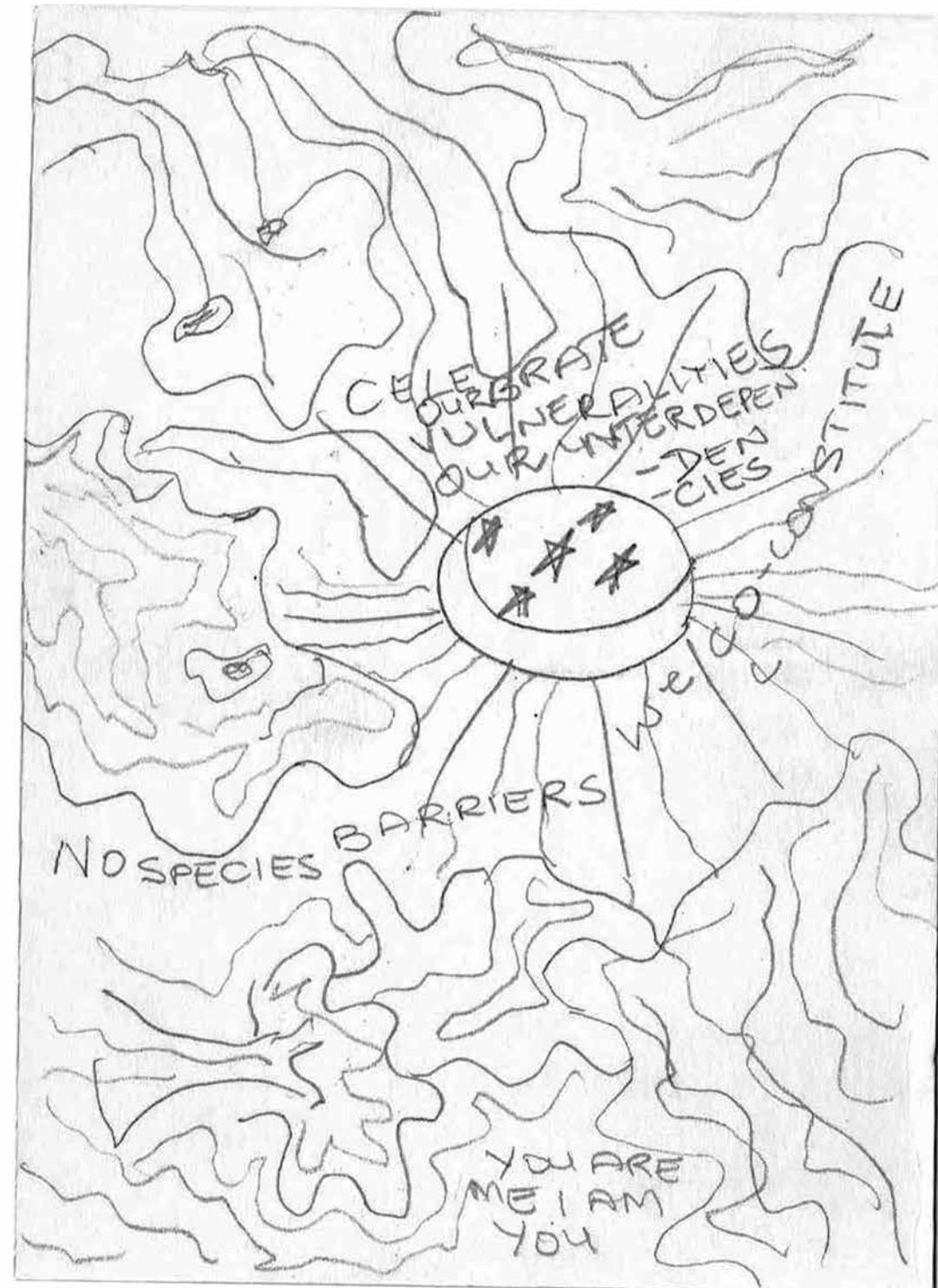
Concerns were raised over ideas of “Blockchain for social good” when this is universities and research projects using “third world” as a testing ground – is this soft colonialism? Poverty exists in Glasgow, so many communities especially women in asylum systems with no recourse to public funds living in poverty - why is research often focussed on other countries? Other points: Critique of the neo-liberal idea of “self care”, we should be looking at collective care.

Repurposing of discarded tech for common use, common ownership of common resources; link of physical resources such as land to open source computing.

Algorithmic social justice; bias fed into machine learning, algorithms often represent the interests of white, cis males... Internet and social media – 1000s of robots making decisions that replicate the divisions and social dynamics of the real world – need to do the offline work in real space to make the difference.

Chain Re:Action culminated in a visioning exercise, inviting participants to imagine a feminist economy of the future where information is freely accessible and publicly owned and where everyone has access to and understands technology in a democratised vision. Collection of visions: *Education: tech and economic literacy allow us all to build, influence and benefit from fair, socially and environmentally just systems; All of us our talents collectively rather than working to survive; Low Tech solutions and only using tech when we need it; No Barriers; Co-constitute; Forming of collectives beyond our immediate location; Properly intersectional feminist economy; People in poverty gain control over decisions that affect their lives so are no longer in poverty; We no longer have to consume to create – quoting visioning exercise; Network of interconnected grassroots alternative economies; An internet of feminists; The internet of women – what will this space be? Technology used as a means to strengthen and unite feminism; Intersectional economy with inherent value of all persons; Blind to difference but rewards difference; Universal basic income takes the stress away from surviving; Childcare as standard at all events; Art funding is available for great ideas and all people are encouraged to dream and think big; Dissemination of information and ideas to have effective democracy; Wellbeing is important and this is normal so no-one has to hide illness.*

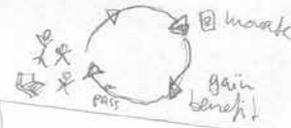
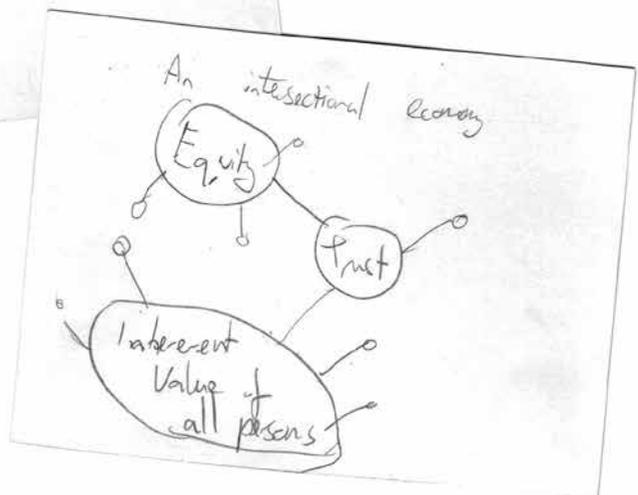
Further video documentation of Chain Re:Action can be found online. Short edit: <http://ailierutherford.com/work/filmsdoc/chain-re-action/> Longer version: <https://vimeo.com/344394707>



Freedom, Peace
 Non-Striving - It's OK
 Improved well-being
well-being is important, not normal
 Not having to hide illness
 I can do what I need to do

This future economy should
 be blind to differences
 yet reward them at the
 same time (equally?)

Education starting from digital
 perspectives, not an add on but
 a basic right for all to learn
 and be able to build, influence
 and benefit from fair, socially &
 environmentally
 just systems
 by people for
 people

Tyranny of Default by Libby Odai and Chrissie Ardill

At the dawn of mass media in the 20th century it was hoped that technology would create a utopian "global village". The theory was that with greater ease of communication between different groups, closeness and interconnectedness would result. Instead, online communities can often entrench offline social stratification and marginalisation. On the Internet instead of connecting with those different to oneself, users segregate digitally along the same demographic lines drawn in their neighbourhoods and workplaces. Additionally, with tech companies being predominantly male, white and middle class, experiences which don't fit this rhetoric are often marginalised on the web. Sites that focus on minority experiences are "downlisted" by search engines, which assume the tech company makeup as default, which means they can rarely have parity with the dominant discourse. A physical analogy of this is rollerskating community. In the USA and elsewhere, rollerskating rinks have a long history of being racially segregated spaces. Stemming from Jim Crow era segregation laws, blacks and whites skated separately with roller skating rinks in America and elsewhere being divided by racial lines. This is still the case today and is reflected in different art forms within rollerskating. Styles such as jam skating are still predominantly black and others such as artistic being predominantly white. Like the marginalised sites on the web, minority rinks and nights are often under threat from the risk of excessive policing and gentrification. With this project, we aim to form our own "global village" by forming connections between different rollerskating groups through the medium of dance. We will invite participants to dance to a set pattern, whilst also adding their own flair. We aim to showcase this diversity in Rollerdance through the use of shared hashtags, bringing marginalised participants to the fore and breaking the hidden tyranny of the default. "Tyranny of the Default" is a participatory skate dance lecture. The basis of the artwork is a simple sequence of rollerdance steps, with beats where the dancers are invited to freestyle. Before the exhibition we called for submissions across the world on social media. These were then collated into a video shown during the exhibition. Participants could then additionally invite others to join in, growing the community further. Submissions were specifically requested from different communities and cultures within rollerskating, aiming to show both diversity and similarities. We also aim to initiate further links by initiating online conversations between groups, with particular focus on highlighting works from marginalised participants. We then brought this work to Easterhouse, inviting the audience (in shoes!) to try the steps themselves.

Reflections by Camara Taylor

I was invited to attend and reflect upon four events organised around feminist community cryptocurrency; in the end I only made it to two, 3 months apart, March 6th, and June 12th. Now, at the tail end of 2019, the middle of Sagittarius season, on the eve of a full moon in Gemini and, what could be the end of the Tory apocalypse; I'm not sure if what I offer counts as reflection, or is mostly description. I don't think I can comment on the successes or failures of the project, or evaluate it to any extent. All I can do is share what remains in the mind 6 months later.

1. There was something in the conversations at the table that asked some of us to imagine a feminism that's fit for use, that is liberatory and accounts for everyone, without flattening difference. How to build consensus from below? We were asked to think about ways of relating to each other that don't recreate existing hierarchies or obscure our different relationships to vulnerability. To agree to do make-believe. Remember that cooperation and coordination can lead towards self-organisation and collective determination. To think of the capabilities of blockchain beyond currency and monetary value. To question the value we place on work and practices that are not so easily commodified. Then return to the blockchain thinking, how do we build techno-literacy collectively?

VALUE SYSTEM & EXCHANGE RATE

2. The structures are working exactly as they were intended, but Dania Thomas got us to breathe, inhabit our bodies, recognise poetry and, remember that destitution is a strategic part of immigration policy. Somebody said, 'blockchain is difficult to tamper with' and I thought about how hacks can be necessary to survive. The generative power of the glitch, or system error, and the potentials of glitch feminism as coined by Legacy Russell. Someone asked us to think about the possibilities of empowerment through data and I thought of its misuse. Of surveillance, of Black people in particular. Of PREVENT and rising always rampant islamophobia. Of all the isms that are, have been and could be embedded in algorithms. Manuel Arturo Abreu used the term 'algorithmic necropower', a term which points to the fact that Big Data now has the power to decide who lives and dies. Did you hear that the government sold NHS data to Amazon? Did you read about the met police using face recognition software that they know is unreliable when it comes to darker-skinned people? Did you also hope that it stays unreliable, that we stay unreadable? Plausible deniability. Pointing to the glitch.

3. What on earth does roller dance have to do with the digital sphere?!? Libby Odai and Chrissie Ardill showed us. They taught us some moves and shared their project which used roller dance as an entry point to track the ways in which digital communities replicate the hierarchies present in non-digital life. Generatively making fun out of complex systems and difficult times, some relief from the reality of things, and another suggestion that centring playfulness is an instructive way to learn and envision together. They reminded me of the project project CBT (Coding: Braiding: Transmissions) by artist Isaac Kariuki and writer Tamar Clarke-Brown; "CBT explores the potential dynamic between braiding hair and coding as a tool for sending encrypted messages and resistive political action." Developing alternatives does not always have to be a grind, you can begin to understand blockchain through basic weaves and knitting.

4. Somebody said, 'a wellbeing economy is as much about how we get there as the end point.' Is a 'wellbeing economy' like reform, instead of abolition? I don't know, I need to research more. Share, exchange, justice, trust. They say we can learn from each other and talk about just transition frameworks. Indigenous communities have been working on just transition frameworks for years/generations. It's time to listen. There's a podcast I listen to called, 'How to Survive The End of the World'. "The word economy has the root 'eco', which just in Greek comes from the word echo or oikos, which just means home, and so you could think of economy as just management of home, that's actually what the word means..." - Michelle Mascarenhas-Swan, Movement Generation Justice and Ecology Project. We must take better care of our home. Or break down the walls and build something better. Now corny truths: Apocalypses happen all the time, they are the end of one world and the beginning of another. Our worlds have been destroyed over and over. It's been a long time since a new world was a better one, but that doesn't make it impossible.

5. Bad participants. They are late, cancel, turn up at the wrong place, on the wrong day. They don't turn up at all, they send apologies and excuses; they say nothing, hide from emails, texts and phone calls. They say "yes!" when they should say "no" because at the time they think they can, even when they know they can't-or rather they can't afford not to. Bad as in unreliable, a sometimes shut-in, sometimes shut-out. Bad as in tired. anxious. sick. disabled. Black. poor. queer. refugee. religious. woman. migrant. person of colour. spiritual. trans. Bad as in beyond any label, category or list that never gets it right. Always excludes. Bad as in otherwise occupied with the stresses of day to day life, which is feeling the actually bad structures that govern our lives. Bad as in sometimes forgetting that they sometimes get it so much easier than many. Bad as in forgetting to dream alternatives. Bad as in forgetting how to. As in finding it very difficult. Bad as in not present, too present or otherwise disappeared. Bad as in too loud, too quiet, too much or not enough. Bad as in extremely negative, but increasingly hopeful. So bad as in anyone, as in everyone who might have use for a feminist cryptocurrency. Any/body who might want to imagine another world. How do we develop a feminist community cryptocurrency, or feminist anything, that accounts for bad participants?



During the workshop process participants had asked to see examples of possible technologies in action. This led to working with the Swap Market team on a more applied technical intervention.

In this final installation the technology itself utilised common open source software and hardware such as Arduinos, Raspberry Pi and the visual programming tool NodeRed to build an exchange rate that can be varied by members inputting different values to the system, to challenge and provoke responses by members about the meaning and perception of how an exchange rate is or should be set, who should be in charge of this system and who holds power over it. The exchange rates and how each value would influence the categories of Swap Market exchanges was developed by us, Ailie, Bettina & Libby, in collaboration with the Swap Market staff members to represent their current practices, encouraging both staff and members

of the Swap Market to interrogate what the feminist economic value system employed by the Swap Market might entail.

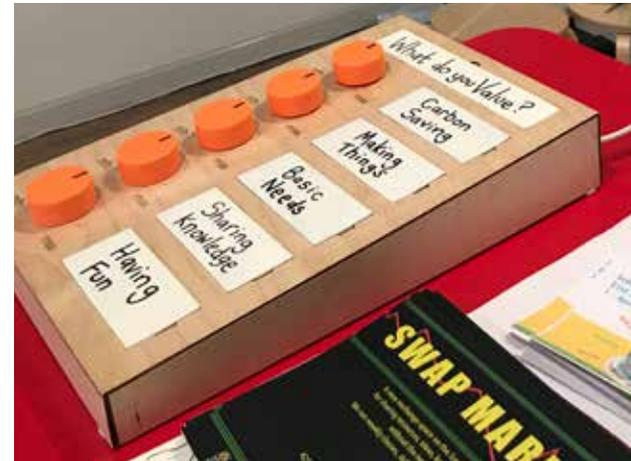
The inner workings of the technology and the translation of values to exchange rate is mostly hidden for the day to day interactions. However, we offered an insight into how the technology of the interactive exchange rate worked in a workshop to introduce the basic software and hardware (before the exchange system was installed) to allow members, staff and other visitors to play with and understand the inner workings of the DIY technology.



While participants of the workshop were interested in the technology and how it could be used in fun and playful ways, the workshop itself didn't lend itself for the co-creation of the visual installation and we separated the technical developments of what needed to be programmed from the conceptual development

of what the Swap Market's values were that influence their exchange rate and how their point category systems currently worked.

Questions remained to what extent the users of a system need or want to co-design the details of such a system. The data mapping was quite complex and technical. While developed in conversation with the current staff working at the Swap Market, the main conceptual question we kept returning to, was when and if the exchange rate for an item/skill should go up or down based on how much we value a certain principle.



The resulting prototype was intended as a temporary installation but has ended up being a more permanent feature of the Swap Market, fostering conversations about alternative economic models at the point of exchange.

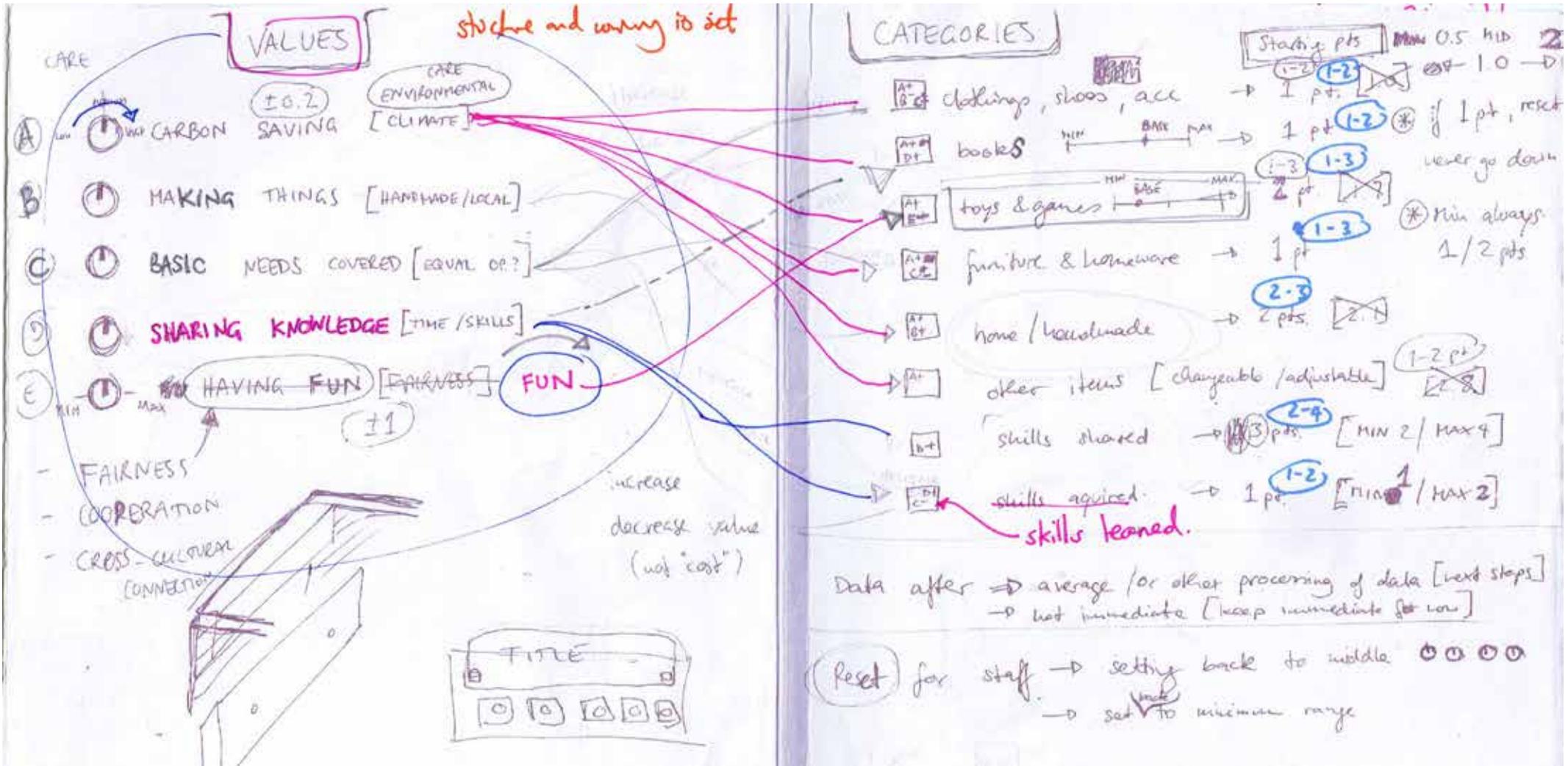


DATA MAPPING

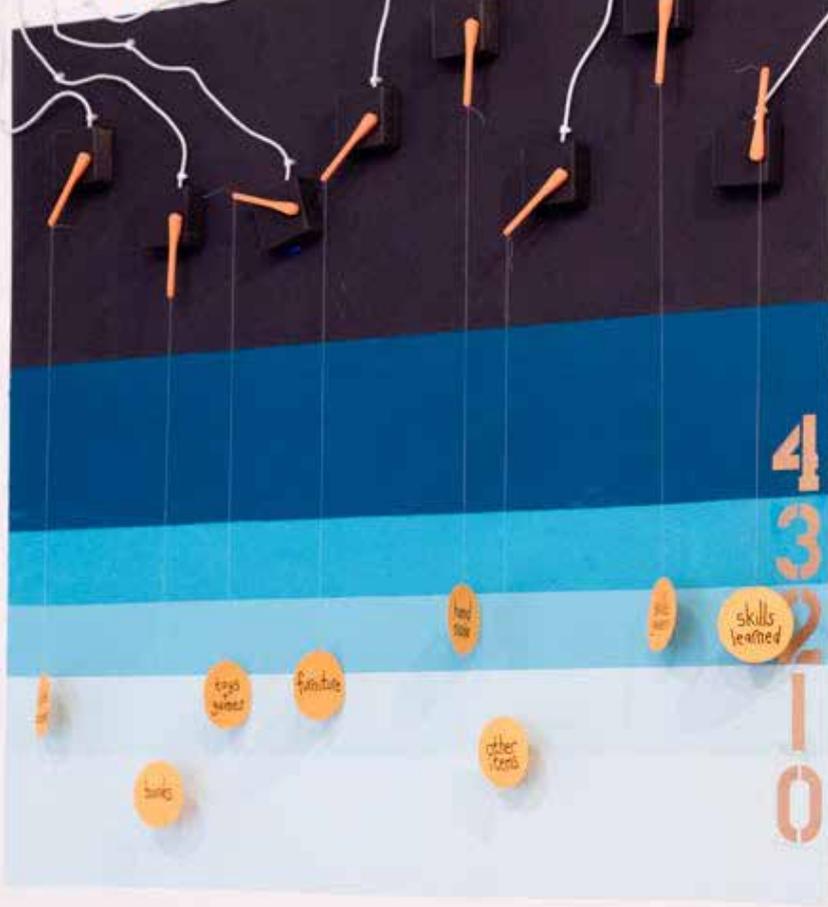
We aimed to translate the discussions with the Swap Market team into a fairly complex system of mapping only 5 values on the counter to 8 exchange rates on the wall. The complexities we discussed were in parts of technical nature (what is possible) as well as conceptual (what makes sense) of how the system should respond to the public's interaction. The value principles themselves are directly based on the Swap Market's ideology with an addition of 'Having Fun' as a family friendly value that could also be easily explained and has a direct influence on the exchange rate for 'Toys'. While 'Having Fun' is the most straightforward mapping, we made a conscious choice to create a value-based system that would turn existing and well

known economic practices on its head so that toys would be more available for people who value fun most. How people use the system varies; some feeling guilty for getting something they value for free, others using it to their advantage.

"I do think though that there is this initial thing that people when they turn the dial like having fun are expecting it to go up and the fact that it doesn't it's an immediate... making cogs turn in their brain and there is an immediate like okay a completely different way of doing things, its turning things on its head and it's essentially saying that the things that we value most should cost less and it's a pretty full-on thing to say and it [the system] manages to say that." (Swap Market staff)



RATE OF EXCHANGE



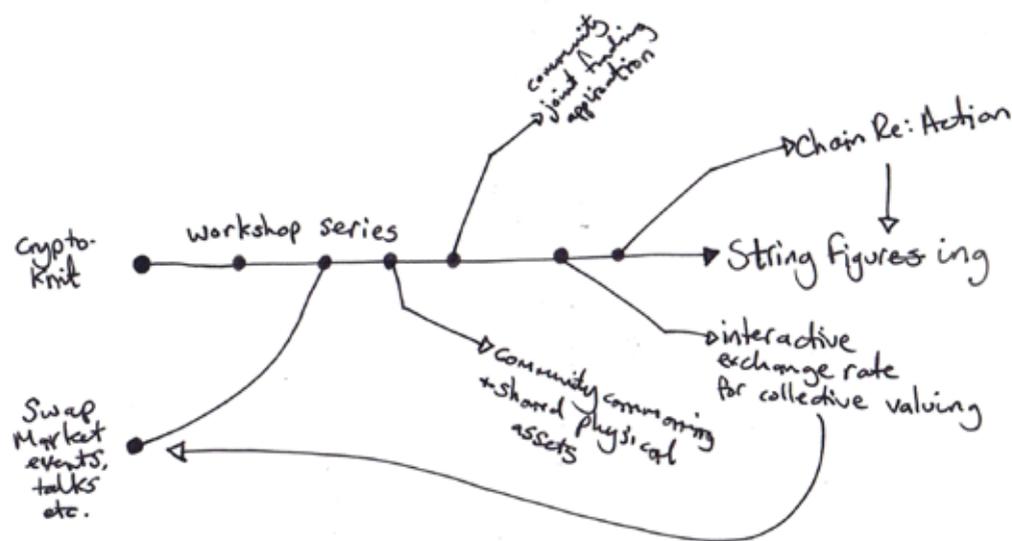
“What if the things people needed most like a house or whatever cost less because they’re so important?”

Speaking to the Swap Market staff, the interactive system has been received as a very playful and helpful aid to involve members in discussions and decision making about the value of items and time. It has changed the Swap Market points-based system from a set, static exchange rate set by the Swap Market team towards a more dynamic, participatory system of community control. The interactive system has offered the staff and members an opportunity for conversation about existing economic practices and allows members to be more involved giving them control and agency within the Swap Market ‘economy’. The aim of the system as a provocation has been working well (according to staff) due to the unusual mapping and how values do or should affect ‘prices’ in an economic system. It has allowed the diverse membership in the Swap Market of different ages and cultural backgrounds to be involved in the decisions of what items should cost; some members have experimented with gaming the system to their advantage while others feel guilty for getting something for free if they value it highly. By reversing the common economic or pricing practices of supply and demand towards a value-based system, we have made alternative value practices visible in a playful way offering staff and members together a permanent system to consider that maybe “things that we value most should cost less” (interviewee).



FURTHER PROPOSALS

Overall, during this project we moved from the principles of blockchain technology and the idea of a feminist cryptocurrency for Govanhill and the sharing of resources in a distributed system to arrive at the importance of a system that supports and values sharing, caring and experiential knowledge adopting feminist economic principles. The value of blockchain technologies and smart contracts for physical resource sharing is clear but the more challenging issue that became apparent throughout this project, is the intangible and emotional labour inherent in community work and what an exchange system for intangibles may look like.



Further proposals have grown from the Crypto-Knitting-Circles research period, see next pages.

String Figures proposal

Ailie Rutherford with Bettina Nissen, Libby Odai and Bob Moyler

String Figures takes its title from techno-feminist Donna Haraway's metaphor for the inextricable threads that connect us all. The need to collectively share experiential knowledge across local grassroots groups became a key theme recurring throughout the Crypto-Knitting-Circles workshops, alongside a need for redistribution of power through an exchange system that values and rewards community activism and care work. The key aim of String Figures is to design and build a decentralised system of trans-actions working closely with six local groups as participants, taking an iterative approach by mocking-up and simulating the characteristics of a distributed exchange network. String Figures will bring in artists working with digital technologies, Libby Odai and Bob Moyler, to work with Ailie Rutherford and Bettina Nissen and local groups to collectively design a system for shared experiential learning across feminist and social justice groups to build a reciprocal network of care. The six groups are: Milk social enterprise, Category 1s Books, The Well Multicultural Centre, Arc Independent, Outwith Co-writing space and The Peoples Bank of Govanhill; a diverse and politically motivated collective of groups and organisations working for social and economic justice in the Govanhill area.

String Figures will begin by mapping out and representing the sharing process across this local network, allowing participants to influence and change the system as we co-develop it addressing important questions raised through Crypto-knitting-circles: Do we want to tokenise forms of exchange? Who defines the ethics of a collective? Should the ethics be fixed or evolving? Do we need a hack-proof system or to explicitly allow hacks to change the project as it moves forward?

Following on from initial provocations, a digital prototype will be developed, to create a "feminist mockchain" - a system of exchange that mimics the characteristics of a blockchain and gives value to acts of care and sharing inherent in our work and central to feminist economics. Focusing on the participants' multiple and entangled experiences, carefully considering group power dynamics as well as bias in the programming of technologies. While starting small, we are interested in the potential scalability of the work to connect with other feminist projects and self-organised groups from further afield.

Commoning Resources

Throughout initial workshops and building on the Creative Communities residency and Shared Assets work within the Swap Market earlier in the year, discussions were raised around a novel system for the sharing of physical assets across local groups and projects. This could potentially connect back to the String Figures work but would be predominantly focused on sharing physical resources through digital databases or systems among local community groups engaged in social justice, feminist economics and care work.

Decentralised Funding

Another novel idea emerged around local communities' as well as artists' constant struggle and competition to apply and receive funding for projects and the day to day running of organisations. A more general concept for a proposal emerged that would look at blockchain technologies for writing, tracking, sharing community funding applications together. Rather than applying for similar funding sources, could such a system allow local organisations to work together and apply for resources as a collective? While nothing would stop community organisations to do this on an application basis, it is often difficult to negotiate how much time different organisations or artists spend on writing and how the funding may be divided up. A blockchain based system for collective fundraising could offer a transparent and fair system across multiple stakeholders, such as artists, community organisations, writers, funders, universities and local governments. A technically functioning blockchain system could be developed but further investigation is necessary to determine what should or shouldn't be included in such a system, how is information tracked and controlled, who has access to what aspects of a funding bid and what are the (power) relations between different stakeholders in such a system?

The Feminist Chairperson

Jessica Ramm interviewing Ailie Rutherford

Ailie asked me to observe and participate in her Crypto-Knitting-Circles project throughout its yearlong lifespan and it quickly became clear that the projects she instigates are like a set of Russian-doll containers: each one hosting and acting as a petri dish for another. The diagram she showed me by way of explanation was a sprawling web of interconnected arrows and people's names and overlapping locations and vigorous, coloured scribbles. The terrain she's mapping is an overlapping topography of social relationships and places that exist both in real life and as counterpart reflections in her imagination. By way of mirroring this approach I am re-writing our recent conversation to include observations I've made while participating in the project. Our conversation searches for indicators that suggest where value might be placed within an artwork that aspires to effect social change. In this work we are guided by the methods Jan Cohen-Cruz proposes in her text 'The Imagination and Beyond: Towards a Method of Evaluating Socially Engaged Art.'

There are a few words to set down by way of introduction, so the reader arrives equipped with one or two anchors to fix their position in this liquid landscape of social relations. As Ailie says, the Crypto-Knitting-Circles project doesn't exist in isolation and has at various points crossed with the Swap Market, which has hosted a programme of workshops, skill-shares and visiting specialists who have explored a range of analogous subjects. These discussions provide a broader context for people attending an event on any given day, and it's into this crucible of ethical questioning that Ailie and her collaborator Bettina Nissen introduce the object-visualisation-models they've been making together.

Jess: Right now you're talking about a method of collaborative map-making you've been using for some time, an approach that informed the Swap Market, and I ask, trying to bring our ever wide-ranging discussion back to the subject in hand – Do you have a similar example from the feminist crypto-currency project I'm writing about?

Ailie: The crypto-ledgers would be an example. They inform the longer term process.

Jess: Yes, good example. These are laser cut wooden cards with punch-holes through which workshop participants thread different coloured strands of wool to make an object coded with a particular pattern. Early on in the project Ailie and Bettina introduced simple objects that the group used as models, demonstrating basic principles of economic exchange, or in this case digital encryption. We did our best to follow Bettina's lead, but some of the patterns came out corrupted by accident in spite of our earnest concentration. When we looked up from the work we had been doing together, questions about power dynamics within consensus-based digital systems began to tumble out.

Ailie: Breaking the idea of the technology down into something very simple, in some ways oversimplified, isn't an entirely accurate representation of how a distributed ledger works, it's a way of getting that concept out, talking about it and allowing people access to a conversation where they can ask 'what if we did this with it?' or 'can't we do that?'

Jess: Yes, I remember people asking lots of practical questions about how cryptocurrency works and whether it's possible that there are invisible biases built into the infrastructure that supports it, if not into the technology itself. As an outsider to your work I see the social contributions that people are making as constituting your creative output as an artist and as a feminist chairperson; a chairperson in the sense that you are often holding the space open for other people to step into, bringing their experiences with them. You asked me to look at the objects. So I have this big question: 'what is the role of the objects?' I'm very happy to say that your work constitutes social connection between people, though I recognise that you can't readily document or capture that to record it.

Ailie: They're like props for discussion or props for action. Is it about coming in to observe and understand that in practice?

Jess: Well, Cohen-Cruz talks about palpable aesthetic experience as being quite a heavy art-world term which you can apply to a painting or a piece of film or something that has an emotional connection with the viewer, but I would say that you can also apply that to a situation in which a conversation really takes off. For example when we tried to collectively establish an exchange value for various forms of labour and couldn't work out whether one hour of caring for someone or wiping their bum would be a fair exchange for painting and decorating an entire room. Perhaps we should talk more specifically about how your objects host social relationships. You've talked about diagrams and symbolic mapping processes that you've been making for many years and how they help you to understand systems people operate within and social connections between people, and that you develop appropriate codes or symbols for the context you're working in.

Ailie: Being in a place where often verbal culture is more important than writing or even holding a pen, we needed to find a different way of mark making so a set of symbols have evolved, using cut rubber stamps to print maps. I'd initially suggested three or four

symbols, but then there are other things we need symbols for so we would create a new symbol to denote it.

I think collective action happens in different ways all the time. The objects are important in instigating a shift in thinking that encourages different conversations and relationships to emerge. It's a different sort of conversation to if we'd said 'ok so... here's what I think feminist economics is, tell me about your lived experience of that.'

Jess: Perhaps another way to frame it is that the objects you develop allow people to forget themselves slightly. They remove the pressure of performance from the situation, or helps people feel comfortable.

Ailie: Yeah sure. When you put on a costume for Halloween you're more able to go and knock on doors.

Jess: That sounds more like a form of play that allows freedom.

Ailie: Yes there is an element of trying to instigate playfulness. Most of the time if you say to somebody 'I want to talk to you about the economy' they don't think you're going to have much fun. There's something about play that's a bit like fucking it up as well. There's something quite subversive about adults allowing themselves to play.

Jess: That reminds me of another question from Cohen-Cruz's text. She writes this section in a rapturous tone very different to the rest of the text saying: 'the constant in socially engaged art is a palpable aesthetic experience - the joy, bursts of self knowledge, insight beyond surfaces....' she's talking about a connected spirit. Is a connected spirit one of the outcomes you're working towards?

Ailie: Trying to come up with different and better ways of collectively being and working together is probably at the crux of most socially engaged art. It's definitely what drives me to work the way I do. There's a fairly urgent need to rethink a system that doesn't work for most of us; to try and work through these ideas of collectivism. It can be hard work and can be quite painful, when she describes it as joyous- perhaps she's editing out the difficult bits there. Of course there can be bits where it is really joyous and playful but there are also points where its really difficult, particularly when you work in an area that has very diverse multiple communities with different ideas.

Jess: So joy is an important part of the process but it sounds as though it can be really difficult as well - probably because you're overlapping with issues that are so personal and so incendiary.

Ailie: The idea that I could go into that as a cis, able-bodied white woman and just be full of boundless joy all the time would be naive and ridiculous. (I've gone off on a bit of a tangent here.)

Jess: I don't know if it is a tangent. I think it's something worth addressing and possibly central to an evaluation of social practice.

Ailie: In social practice you've got a hell of a lot of other things that you need to consider and often you're working at the intersection of some difficult things. It would be inappropriate to just let my imagination run riot. You do have to think about a process carefully. Sometimes it's about slowing a process right down so that you can really think about the impact of the things you're doing. I don't know if you can evaluate the process of socially engaged art based on the outcome. Maybe the outcome in the long term is a culture-shift or to find a more beneficial way of working together.

Jess: You can only achieve a certain amount of change on your own.

Ailie: That's why it's collective and collaborative because we can't do it alone. It's not an individual thing.

Jess: Could you talk more about the creative possibilities for instigating social change?

Cohen-Cruz has a paragraph in which she proposes that 'an active relationship with those who would otherwise be strictly an audience contributes to social purpose.' It's not easy to work out what she's getting at. If she's striving to overcome a barrier she perceives as separating the audience and the artwork, then an active relationship would be an indicator of success.

Ailie: It might be a measure of success but if it's an active relationship just for the sake of having an active relationship, I don't know if it's an end in itself.

Jess: I'm just adding the word empowerment because I think that may be what you're talking about in relation to the idea of active participation.

Ailie: I think it's about empowering all of us to effect change.

Jess: I'm not going to say break down hierarchy because I don't think that's necessarily what you're saying, perhaps its more about allowing people to move from spaces where they don't have the power to effect change into spaces where they do.

Ailie: Yes or trying to find more collective ways of working. With the Crypto-Knitting-Circles project there are a number of offshoots and not all of them we'll follow up. Some of them might be offshoot proposals that somebody else could pick up and run with. But there are other things that come out of this. If we become active citizens together we are hopefully thinking more and more about power and privilege and a reassessment of that. Hopefully that allows lots of other things to happen besides what you think the project is about.

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