How to Throw Your Own Party: Peer mentoring as infrastructure

Art practice is sustained by the support that artists provide for each other - long before recognition and institutions come into view. In everyday exchanges, artists develop their practice through shared language and collective inquiry. This article explores peer mentoring as one of the ways artists create these conditions for each other, and how those forms of peer support are fundamental to wider questions of success, autonomy and self-organisation.

The question comes up over again: “How do I make it in the art world?” Often behind it are the myths and expectations of being ‘discovered’. The desire for recognition is like waiting for an invitation to your own life. But why crash someone else’s party when you can throw your own? You’re late to that party anyway. You get to decide how to throw your own party as a protagonist in your story, rather than a guest in someone else’s.

And what is a party without mates? Creating your own conditions, together with others, can begin with a crit group, a zine, a reading group, or a festival - something that arises directly from the work and its needs. Collaboration produces relationships that generate new ideas, opportunities, and ways of thinking. Over time, these conversations and shared projects form the fabric of a more resilient practice: one sustained by dialogue and solidarity, rather than validation and competition.

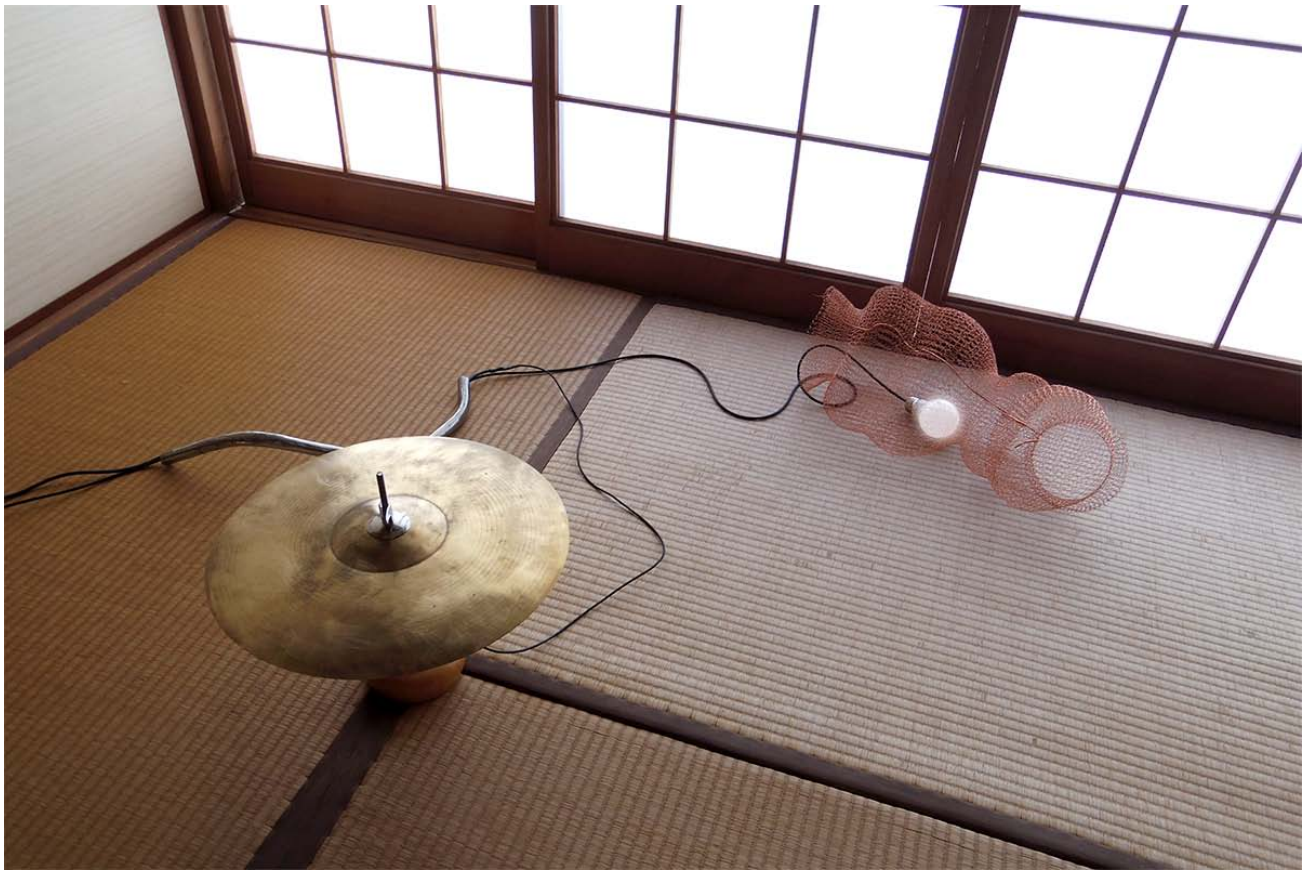
Peer mentoring as practice

From group crits to one-to-ones, peer review doesn’t offer neat answers or well-intentioned praise. Peer mentoring is about responsiveness rather than authority; it involves co-construction, listening, responding and articulating.

Delivering a one-to-one session and providing feedback is not unlike interpreting a work of art: you don’t need to understand it completely to begin responding. In fact, the act of response is part of the work’s completion:

> ...the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act. —Marcel Duchamp, The Creative Act

Duchamp reminds us that interpretation doesn't simply ascribe meaning or context to a work; it completes the work by bringing it into being. Meaning isn't contained in the artwork; it emerges through shifting encounters with audiences, exhibitions and conversations. Artworks don't have fixed meanings or stable identities; their personhood is relational. For the same reason, interpretation is not the work of decoding what the artist meant. Each work of art bears a personality and an idiolect - a voice that situates itself in the world. This personhood is not just aesthetic but political: a negotiation between the world that receives the work and the structures that attempt to contain, stabilise or regulate it.



Ayane Tominaga [2025] Personhood, version 2. Copper wire, LED light bulb, piezo microphone, metal tube, cymbal, Arduino, single channel sound, dimensions variable

This is something I learned as an undergraduate in the studio of George Lappas. In crits, he began by interpreting the work, no matter how provisional it was. A blurry photo on a chunk of wood became a totem; a found object became a conduit. My PhD supervisor, Dr Janet

Hand, articulated what I was struggling to say, situating and reflecting my ideas back to me. Michael Norton's *Conscious Listening Practice* reinforced this as a practical discipline. This spirit of interpretive generosity is at the core of a good one-to-one.

All the questions that artists ask when seeking feedback can be boiled down to: "Am I on the right track?" A good one-to-one will provide that reassurance indirectly, but it will be grounded in the specificity of the work and the issues at stake.

A checklist for peer support

Below is a checklist you can use to build your own peer mentoring group or mutual support network:

- Listen first. Reflect what you hear in your own words.
- Avoid interruption. Allow space for thinking aloud. Allow uncomfortable pauses and silences. Silence is also a form of communication.
- Name the strengths and potentials of the work before offering critique.
- Explore and brainstorm the work.
- Focus on the work, not the artist.
- Ask questions rather than providing answers.

Questions to ask in a peer feedback session

- What do you see, hear, feel in this work? Describe the work as you perceive it. This is very valuable and informative feedback for an artist. The terms you use in your description may resonate with the artist, or bring a whole new dimension to the work.
- What resonates with you? Liz Lerman calls this step 'Statements of Meaning': what does the work mean to you? What associations and emotions does it conjure? There is nothing more intimidating than articulating our subjective perceptions. One reason for this is the difficulty of translating sensations into language, but that is what engaging in artistic discourse involves.
- What questions is the work asking? What aesthetic or formal concerns does the work engage with? What themes does it grapple with? What influences can you identify?
- What feels unresolved?
- How does the work relate to the artist's stated intentions?

The periphery doesn't exist just to feed the centre

> One of the enduring hallmarks of modern art, one of the defining characteristics of the avant-garde, has been the organisation of artists into independent, self-sustaining groups. —David Batchelor, Under The Canary

Long before today's rhetoric of opportunity and access, artists were already throwing their own parties and building autonomous infrastructures that institutions later absorbed or claimed retroactively.

Artists have always transformed constraints into methods: bricolage, repurposing, improvisation, and assembling provisional infrastructures. Working this way draws on a skill set that artists already possess: resourcefulness. The ability to assemble, borrow, adapt, hack together what is needed, whether it's a space, a tool, or a context, is part of the intelligence of artistic practice.

When Damien Hirst organised the exhibition *Freeze* (1988), London's contemporary art scene had almost no infrastructure for emerging artists. Apart from launching the YBAs, *Freeze* is also widely credited with initiating the shift toward artist-led exhibitions in empty spaces. Warehouse shows subsequently created visibility for artists, transforming disused spaces into an exhibition network that quickly attracted critical and commercial attention, effectively transforming London into an art world centre. With only a handful of contemporary galleries, the momentum came from artists: warehouse shows filled the vacuum left by the absence of infrastructure for contemporary art.

In his article *Under The Canary* (1992), David Batchelor recognised this shift and diagnosed the institutional ideology that shaped it. Writing at the height of the Docklands redevelopment and the reshaping of London under Thatcher, he described artists in these warehouse shows as "colonising space in an attempt to capture the uninterested, the dismissive or the myopic inside the very structures that are rejecting their work", using derelict sites as a "springboard from which to jump back into the gallery".

Batchelor describes these artists not as rebels fleeing the institution but as children shut out of the grown-ups' dinner party: disruptive, not fully understood, training their attention on a closed door. What looked like a break from the establishment was, in his view, a rite of passage: artists demonstrating their seriousness before being allowed a seat at the institutional table.

On the one hand, Batchelor recognises the long history of artists organising their own spaces when the academy, the Salon, or the market had nothing to offer. On the other, he describes the institution's gaze on these initiatives through the metaphor of the kids' table. The periphery is framed not as an independent sphere but as a waiting room, a probationary

space where artists demonstrate their usefulness to the very structures that exclude them. And certainly, Freeze was conceived to address institutions directly. But the warehouse exhibitions did not simply persuade the institution to open the door; they built an alternative infrastructure at a moment when London's institutions were neither equipped nor interested in supporting emerging work. London's contemporary art ecology wasn't 'discovered' by institutions - artists built it themselves.

Artist-led shows created an alternative exhibition infrastructure that repositioned London as an international, self-starting contemporary art centre. If Freeze showed how artists could manufacture the conditions for institutional recognition, groups like *BANK* (1991) demonstrated how artist-led infrastructures could operate more critically: self-organised, irreverent, operating in disused spaces and peripheral venues. Artists built their own infrastructures out of necessity, only to find those infrastructures folded back into the circuits of validation. This tension between autonomy and institutionalisation still shapes how artists navigate institutions and construct self-organised modes of practice.

Batchelor's account inadvertently shows that the periphery is not a rite of passage to institutional recognition. It is a site where artists build their own institutions, and invite others into their world instead of waiting to be invited into someone else's. The YBA moment is significant not because the gatekeepers finally paid attention, but because it showed the centre only shifts when artists organise on their own terms.

Remiiya Badru [2024] Rhumblines. Making Space, Poplar

Remiiya Badru [2022] Thamesriverscape series (background). Colour photographs from film negatives; Timehri (foreround). Model Ship, mixed media. Rhumblines. Making Space, Poplar

Remiiya Badru [2024] Creative Research Fellowship Map so far... Collaged prints, post it notes, embroidery thread, split pins. Rhumblines. Making Space, Poplar

Rethinking success & recognition

Success in the art world is a contested field, often mistaken for institutional validation. Artists are encouraged to internalise an image of success that is defined by awards, gallery shows, reviews, follower counts. These markers are unevenly distributed and usually arrive late, if at all. Waiting for success produces anxiety, self-doubt, and competition - not because artists lack confidence, but because the criteria for success are opaque and externally controlled.

Pierre Bourdieu reminds us that membership in the art world is not a matter of institutional consecration, but the capacity to produce effects within the field. A practice has agency because of what it does: the conversations it generates and the capacities it opens up for others. Peer mentoring acknowledges and creates space for these effects. It is grounded in

process rather than outcomes: how the work develops, how it is received by others, and whether it can be sustained over time.

Throwing your own party isn't a fallback when recognition feels out of reach. Producing the right conditions for your practice is the very definition of success. Define success for yourself. Be explicit about your values and criteria. What matters most to you: time, space, freedom, collaboration, political impact? Anchor your practice there.

Navigating institutions

Institutions hold archives, expertise and resources; they commission, exhibit, and sustain artistic practice. For many artists they provide the only available infrastructure for visibility and amplification. But this support comes with conditions, constraints and compromises - because institutions are conservative hierarchies that control the legitimate discourses on value and meaning. They provide a container for art, but also set its limits.

As we have seen, artworks do not have an essential ontological status. Their personhood is constituted through the discourses and structures that give them legitimacy. But this openness is also why institutions work so hard to regulate interpretation and decide which voices count and which don't. Critical work can be absorbed and neutralised, its force redirected into the institution's narrative of inclusivity or innovation.

Institutional consecration brings resources and recognition, but also limits artistic autonomy. Exclusion guarantees independence but risks invisibility. Autonomy is negotiated in practice; it creates space for critical work, but it does not guarantee material sustainability. How can artists act critically and sustainably inside systems that were never designed to hold everyone?

Today this paradox is sharper than ever. Public infrastructures that once sustained cultural work have been steadily dismantled: state funding has contracted, cultural infrastructures have been hollowed out, priorities have narrowed. Artists increasingly absorb this labour, intensifying both competition and precarity. As Artquest's data shows, these conditions exacerbate the inequalities that determine Who Gets To Be An Artist. Access is uneven; determined by funding priorities, professional networks and curatorial agendas. Decisions are often subjective or shaped by institutional or market alignment.

The challenge, then, is navigating this terrain without being defined or contained by the structures that sustain artistic work. Understanding how money, labour, visibility and space are distributed helps artists decide what kind of engagement is worth their energy.

Institutions will not reform themselves. Waiting for validation is a kind of paralysis; a deferral of the work that only artists can do. Use institutions as resources, not arbiters. Work

within them when necessary, but don't build your practice around their approval. Push against their limits, and build new structures that outlast them. Working *with* an institution can mean strategic collaboration - borrowing its infrastructure or visibility to extend your reach. Working *around* it can mean creating parallel systems: collectives, networks, informal gatherings, temporary alliances, self-organised spaces that redirect resources and attention elsewhere.

The political meaning of art lies in the social relations and apparatuses that produce it. Institutions are not goals but temporary means. Build what you need to keep going: shared studios, informal networks, reading groups, publications, collectives, co-ops and other infrastructures.

Building independent infrastructures (with others)

> You move to a city. You hang out in bars. You form a gang, turn it into a scene, and turn that into a movement. —Peter Schjeldahl quoted in Dave Hickey, Romancing the Looky-Loos

The myth of the solitary genius is powerful, but artists need each other. Every movement begins when artists talk openly, share doubts, and test ideas together. We are our own audience, interlocutors, and provocateurs. Collaboration is the network of relationships that keeps artistic practice in motion.

Alongside their material practices, many artists sustain long-term collaborative or community projects that function as infrastructures in their own right. Theaster Gates's work in Chicago makes this explicit: through Rebuild Foundation (2010) he has transformed disused buildings into archives, studios and gathering places. Caroline Woolard's work with Art.Coop (2020) builds networks and cooperative structures that challenge competitive, extractive models of cultural production. Tania Bruguera's projects, from Immigrant Movement International (2011) in Queens to INSTAR (2015) in Havana, use institutional forms (schools, civic forums, political study groups), as tools for collective agency rather than symbolic critique. The Black Audio Film Collective (1982) shows how shared authorship and analysis can reconfigure an entire cultural landscape. These artists show that producing work and building infrastructure are not separate endeavours: the collaborative forms they build become part of the practice itself, creating conditions, relationships and publics.

Whether in a warehouse, a kitchen, or a cooperative, self-organisation becomes a form of resistance; a way to create work and community beyond the hierarchies of validation that institutions reproduce. Artist-led spaces and peer-led networks function as counter-institutions. They keep interpretation open, redistribute agency and generate collective visibility.

Competition between artists is largely a false frame. Every practice is singular, shaped by different histories, skills and ideas; by definition there can be no competition. Difference is a resource. Learn from the capacities of others, offer your own in return, and build the conditions you need together - whether that takes the form of a sculpture, a reading group, an organisation, a scene, or a movement.

Lindsay Connors [2021] Assemblages. Graphite on plaster, with found tripod, wood and wheels. Left to right: Cathedral, 76 x 25 x 25 cm; Reach, 50 x 15 x 8 cm; Portal, 78 x 20 x 12 cm

DIY models, formats & practical steps

Throwing your own party begins with recognising what your work needs and building those conditions yourself. The form should arise from the work itself: what questions is it asking,

and what kind of encounter does it require? Sometimes the work needs a space of exchange rather than display.

There are as many ways to throw your own party as there are practices. You might organise an exhibition - transforming a studio, living room or warehouse into a temporary public space. You might curate a screening or performance night, borrowing equipment, or collaborate with local venues. A crit group or reading circle can create a rhythm of dialogue and accountability. A zine, newsletter or podcast can extend this conversation beyond your immediate circle, sharing resources and works-in-progress. You might organise a pop-up event or festival, combining visibility with community exchange.

Start where you are. One or two collaborators are enough. Keep it small and responsive; let it evolve with each iteration. Use the resources already around you: skills, time, contacts, spaces and mutual goodwill. Document what you do so that others can learn from it.

Don't be afraid to include yourself. Many artists worry that organising and including themselves will look self-promotional. But excluding yourself can be a way of deferring the risk of showing your work. Exhibiting your work is always a challenge and a disclosure, but including yourself provokes a response and encourages others to do the same.

The examples above show what's possible; the checklist below turns those ideas into an action plan. Start by defining what you want to do, who it's for, and what it needs. The steps that follow are an adaptable framework for putting your idea into practice.

Getting started: practical steps

1. **Clarify the impulse**
   Ask what your work needs right now: feedback, visibility, dialogue, collaboration, space? The format should emerge from that need.
2. **Find allies**
   One or two peers are enough to begin. Collectives grow from conversation, not recruitment drives.
3. **Start small and visible**
   Pilot one event, publication or meeting, using what's already available - your studio, a café, a social centre, or online.
4. **Share the labour**
   Divide tasks openly: organising, documentation, communication, installation, hospitality. Rotate roles to prevent burnout.
5. **Document and reflect**
   Keep notes, photos or documents. Reflection turns experience into shared knowledge and helps others build on what you've done.

6. **Communication tools**
   Communication is the structure that holds everything together: how ideas circulate, decisions are made, and relationships are sustained over time. The tools you choose shape access, participation, and visibility. Choose tools that fit your scale and the rhythms of your collaboration - informal channels for small groups, shared documents for ongoing work, and public platforms to document the process and extend the conversation.
7. **Invite others in**
   Once momentum builds, open the circle. Publicise through word of mouth, social media or newsletters.
8. **Build continuity**
   Set the next date before the first event ends, or on a regular day every month. Consistency, however modest, transforms an occasion into a structure.
9. **Stay responsive**
   Let the project evolve with the people and circumstances around it. Don't institutionalise too early.

Organising together: power, structure, ownership

Joining groups & networks

Joining an existing group or network is one way to learn how a scene actually functions. Sometimes that means volunteering, contributing to a shared project, or just showing up consistently. These are not peripheral activities; they are how relationships, trust, and shared reference points are formed over time.

The art world is structured through cliques - informal groups that shape access, visibility, and opportunity. Affinity groups are rarely deliberate or closed by design; they form through repeated interaction, shared projects, and accumulated trust. Access tends to follow proximity and familiarity rather than meritocracy. What looks opaque from the outside becomes legible once you see how participation over time produces belonging, influence, and responsibility.

Every network, from artist-led collectives to major institutions, develops its own ecosystem. Labour is distributed unevenly, recognition concentrates, care and maintenance often go uncredited. Look for groups with values that align with your own, pay attention to how they operate: How is labour shared? Who gains visibility or credit? How are decisions made? These mechanisms shape how power and influence circulate within a scene. The closer you are to decision-making, the more agency you have to shape outcomes - and the more responsibility you carry for how those outcomes affect others.

Self-organisation

Once you find the right partners, the next question is what kind of organisation you want to build: a one-off project with a few trusted collaborators, or a structure that can grow and include others? Working with friends can accelerate momentum, but it can also reproduce unspoken hierarchies. An equitable structure takes longer because it requires shared infrastructures for communication, accountability and care.

Self-organisation involves building structures with intentionality. In her influential article *The Tyranny of Structurelessness* (1970), Jo Freeman argued that 'structurelessness' conceals informal power and makes it harder to address. Agency and leadership can be distributed, decisions can be made collectively, and responsibilities can be shared without dissolving accountability. This requires time, communication, and patience.

Artist coops

Cooperation is a set of practical tools to carve out spaces of freedom and self-determination. Shared ownership empowers new forms of social and artistic organisation, risk and decision-making, redistributing labour and power. Co-ops sit within a broader solidarity economy that includes worker collectives, social centres and mutual-aid networks.

In *Together* (2012), Richard Sennett argues that co-operation is a craft that must be learned and practised, not an instinct we can take for granted. Cooperation involves listening, sharing responsibility, and allowing space for disagreement.

> ...modern society is 'de- skilling' people in practising cooperation… people are losing the skills to deal with intractable differences as material inequality isolates them, short- term labour makes their social contacts more superficial and activates anxiety about the Other. We are losing the skills of cooperation needed to make a complex society work. —Richard Sennett, Together

Weakened by competition, inequality and individualism, cooperation can be relearned through shared practice. Building a co-operative or collective is one way to reclaim that craft. The work of the Social Science Centre (2011-19) in Lincoln, Feral Art School (2018) in Hull, and the Ceramics Studio Co-op (2014) in Deptford, demonstrates that we don't need to reproduce the university to learn together, just as we don't need a museum to make art public. The co-operative model is not just an institutional format, but a pedagogy in democratic decision-making and shared authorship.

Stay till the end and help clear up

Every self-organised project reaches a point where the question shifts from *how to start* to *how to keep going*. Sustainability requires flexibility: knowing when to pause, adapt, or change direction. Trust underpins everything here: relationships, continuity, and momentum.

- **Keep the network active**
  Stay in touch: with updates, invitations, or check-ins.
- **Share resources**
  Pool what you have: equipment, skills, contacts, mailing lists, funding applications. Mutual aid keeps everyone's practice going longer than individual effort.
- **Rotate roles and responsibilities**
  Shared projects survive when leadership moves around. Rotate tasks, budgets and credit. Everyone learns more, and no one burns out.
- **Build care into the structure**
  Decisions, deadlines and expectations should leave room for life. Sustainability comes from reciprocity, not endurance.
- **Review and renew**
  Take time to reflect on what's working and what isn't. Projects that last often shift - from an exhibition series to a collective, from a collective to a co-op. Let things evolve.
- **Know when to close**
  Not every initiative needs to last forever. Ending well, with transparency and care, can be part of its success. Leave people connected and ready for the next thing.

Artists don't need official frameworks. Throw your own party and invite others. Share the work. Share the load. Build the relationships and communities that will sustain you.

Resources

Peer mentorship

Resources on building and sustaining peer mentorship:

- Artist Peer Support Groups by Chloe Cooper (PDF)
- Juggernauts' Guide to Peer Mentoring (PDF)
- Crit Club by Rosalind Wilson and Eleni Papazoglou (PDF)
- Building a peer mentoring group (Artquest Guides)
- Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process: The Basics (PDF)

Self-organisation

- Freeman, Jo (1970). The Tyranny of Structurelessness. Updated version. Originally published in Second Wave vol. 2, no. 1 (1972), pp. 1-6.
- Exploding Cinema (2004). Make Your Own Underground Cinema. Exploding Cinema website.

- Bibliography on self-organisation. Includes collaboration, collectivity, co-operation, group dynamics, DIY, peer-to-peer networks, solidarity economy, and study groups. videomole.tv.

Artist coops

- Art.coop (2021), USA.
- Ceramics Studio Co-op (2014), London.
- Feral Art School (2018), Hull.
- Kosmaoglou, Sophia (2023). A co-operative art school is pie in the sky. In Towards New Schools. Gerrit Rietveld Academie (Dec 2023). A guide on setting up a cooperative art school.
- Resources for a Co-operative Art School (2019-ongoing). Includes resources on alternative art education. videomole.tv.
- Bibliography for a Co-operative Art School (2019-ongoing). Includes sections on alternative art education, art education and pedagogy. videomole.tv.
- Directory of Alternative (Art) Schools & Networks (2017-ongoing). Includes, peer support networks, projects and vanguards of the alternative education movement. videomole.tv.
- A co-operative art school? (2019-20) Research project on cooperative art education. Artquest Research Residency at the Conway Hall Humanist Library. videomole.tv.

References

- Adorno, Theodor (2002/1970). Aesthetic Theory. Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. London: Continuum.
- Batchelor, David (1992). Under The Canary. Frieze Issue 5 (Jun 1992).
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1993). The Field of Cultural Production. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 42.
- Duchamp, Marcel (1959/1957). The Creative Act. In Marcel Duchamp, Robert Lebel ed. New York: Paragraphic Books, pp. 77-78.
- Freeman, Jo (1972/1970). The Tyranny of Structurelessness. Second Wave vol. 2/1, pp. 1-6.
- Lerman, Liz (2020). Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process: The Basics. lizlerman.com.
- Norton, Michael (2022). How to Listen Well: Practising feedback and collaboration. Radar workshop, Artadmin.
- Schjeldahl, Peter quoted in Hickey, Dave (1997). Romancing the Looky-Loos. In Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy. Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, p. 152.
- Sennett, Richard (2012). Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation. New Haven: Yale University Press, pp. 8-9.

- Trevelyan, Esme et al (2025). Who gets to be an artist? Artquest (Oct 2025).