

Ownership: Omni Commons vis-à-vis The Lab

November 15, 2015

This is the first of two fishbowl conversations featuring members of The Lab and the Omni Oakland Commons and moderated by Open Space. This conversation, as part of our current issue, is centered around issues of ownership, loosely described. In particular, both organizations were asked to respond to the prompt: “How do your organizations’ working practices engage or reflect an ideology around what it is to own, or hold in common?”

A second conversation, to be held in January at the Omni Oakland Commons, will respond to concerns raised at this event. Please note that this is an edited transcript.

SUZANNE STEIN: Thanks, everyone, for coming to participate in this fishbowl conversation. The topic today is ownership, and perhaps more particularly, how can or does art complicate our notion of what it is to own, collect, or hold in common? We’re going to begin with a closed fishbowl, which means that for the first forty-five minutes, The Lab and the Omni are going to hash this topic out themselves. Gordon [Faylor, of *Open Space*] will lead with a question that will help them get started, we’ll all listen, and then we will open up the fishbowl and invite the rest of you to come in and participate.

Open Space is SFMOMA’s community-facing digital publication. One of our key aims is to find ways to support and empower artists and artist organizations to talk about issues that are critical to them and to the rest of us here in the Bay Area, and to broadcast these concerns through the *Open Space* platform.

As part of our newly expanded initiative to support organizations in the Bay Area, we are now focusing on at least two local cultural organizations each publishing season, and featuring them. The conversation today comes out of that initiative, along with our inquiry this fall into questions of ownership, loosely described.

DENA BEARD: Thanks so much, Suzanne and Gordon. It's great to have the opportunity to come and talk about these issues. When you run organizations, or run a public-facing space, usually you put the content first, and the system kind of recedes to the background. Which is always a complicated position to be in, because so many systems these days recede to the background. And so the idea of forefronting the system itself is precisely, I think, what we're here for.

My name is Dena Beard. I'm the director of The Lab, which you're sitting in now. It was founded in 1984, by a group of artists from San Francisco State University, as a workshop, a theater, and an artists' residency. It was really a space for emerging artists to come and display their work right after school, test those boundaries. It gradually became a mid-career space, where people could do group shows and show their work publicly, in a setting with their peers. It was very peer-to-peer oriented. It recently became a noise and experimental music venue. I took over The Lab about a year ago, after working for seven years at the Berkeley Art Museum.

DAVID KEENAN: My name is David Keenan. I am a member of the Omni. The Omni is a complicated organism: It's a collective of collectives. So it's only real representational dimension is through the practices of participating collectives. A lot of those collectives work in areas of cultural production and the arts, politics. And there are a lot of DIY spaces and resources for people to use on their own. The Omni also functions as an events space for those collectives and for members of the community. I'll just say that, as someone who helped to conceive it, and helped to convince people it could be possible: this has been a project in which the 'systems' are deliberately in the forefront – very much so. We had to incant the idea of it, before we could do it. Then we needed to get the money together and to get the consensus and agreement and vision solidified.

It was a eight-month process, before we ever even walked into possession of the space. One aspect of this project is that it was considered from the start as something bigger than we could really handle. We intentionally said, "Hey, let's try something at an economy of scale

that's biting off more than we can chew, just because we haven't done that yet and it might be really fun." [laughter] You know, like why not? Let's just try it. What do we have to lose? And there's a lot to say about that, but just a footnote to that: There's a lot to lose. [laughter] You can end up with far less than what you started with, in many, many ways.

ALEX SIZEMORE-SMALE: I'm a member of Omni Commons, and some of the collectives that form it. The Omni Commons is a really beautiful space that I hold very dear to my heart. I have a bit of a different perspective than David because I became involved with the Omni after we had moved into the building [at 4799 Shattuck Ave. in Oakland]. The only things I would add is that we're about two years old, and we grew out of the Occupy Oakland movement. One thing David mentioned that I'm sure we'll explore more is that the Omni grew out of political values that were very conceptual, and which are the foundation of the practical systems we've created.

SADIE HARMON: I think the only thing I would add to is that the Omni is also an experiment in systems of social space. So not just systems of political space or physical space; it's also creating a cultural space. Making all of those systems transparent has been a challenge and is as important to the project as making systems of organization and bureaucracy transparent.

CERE DAVIS: I came to be a part of the Omni in the beginning – but not quite as beginning as David – through Counter Culture Labs, which was one of the first member collectives that brought into the formation. It was interesting to me to see how the founding of The Omni happened, based on a lot of ideals which I agree with, but also a lot of assumptions that I don't agree with.

GORDON FAYLOR: I'll lead with a question that should feed in nicely to what several of you have been saying about systems at work: *The Bay Area has long been known for radical political as well as aesthetic concerns. It seems apparent that both The Lab and Omni serve as contemporary social conduits and arbiters for the development and exploration of both of these histories. Since we're talking about ownership, how or do your goals in this context*

relate to the day-to-day labors required to run your respective organizations? And if you would like, you can elaborate on the similarities and differences between your organizations.



SIZEMORE-SMALE: Last week Sadie and I were meeting at the Omni and we began talking about the building's aesthetics. The building feels like it's under continual construction. Sadie was talking about how the visual culture at the Omni is kind of uneasy – or not uneasy, but with a tendency to change rapidly. The physical space at the Omni seems to reflect the social and the political environment, which is something that spoke to me. I think the aesthetic of the physical space has a lot to do with the systems that surround it. Because it is a collectively run space. Probably one of the main differences between the Omni and The Lab is that we're all volunteer run. We don't have any employees. Everyone gives what they can when they can. And that creates a particular ebb and flow of work and movement and change. As the social space and the work happening there ebbs and flows, so does the visual culture, along with changes in the workspace.

BEARD: I made the decision to come over to The Lab from the museum environment precisely because I started taking a log of everything I was doing in a day—a five-minute to five-minute perspective. How much email was I going through, and was that email related to

actual creative thought, or was it related to the day-to-day banalities? Of course, banalities are obviously a part of any job and they're a part of maintaining any kind of organizational system of structure, but I began to realize that the institution itself depended on me to maintain its bureaucracy. It didn't want me to maintain the integrity of the artwork or the idea or the concept; it wanted me to maintain the integrity of the institution.

In the modernist idea of verticality there's an ideological profundity at the top of any institution. Modernist institutions were created to limit the sovereignty of the ruler, so that no one person could entirely determine our shared system of value. Instead, a bunch of interested people band together and create an institution that helps them ascribe value on the basis of some profound ideal. Everybody works towards that profound ideal, but there are limitations involved... You have to demonstrate a certain kind of expertise in order to get to the point of being able to make decisions about value.

So, our conception is still that institutions are vertical. They are hierarchically led. Yet, what feels falsely horizontal is the invisible system that we all actually work under, which is capitalism. Moreover, now it's technocracy. Institutions are hiding behind the false democracy of audience data, touting crowd-sourced curating and the sheer volume of their output to pretend a sort of horizontality, to give the illusion that they are democratically run. And I realized that everything that I was doing was related to maintaining the technology of that system. It related to collecting data, creating data, feeding data into other systems. And that is completely antithetical to what I wanted the project of art to be and what I wanted my project in that overall schema to be. I'm saying, I'm going to take my day-to-day work and I'm going to try to make something of it that shows that art can create freedom in some way, that it can dismantle systems of perception, that it can enable something that's not previously existing — yet, after looking over my day to day work at the museum I had to admit that I was case in point of why that sense of profundity doesn't exist right now. So taking over a space that was \$150,000 in debt seemed like a much better plan for some insane reason. [laughter]

As soon as I was free of it, I realized that that invisible system was managing not only my day-to-day activities while I was at work but also everything I was doing outside of work was also a part of my life as a bureaucrat. It was like I had this little sweatshop in my phone that was telling me what to do constantly. And it was taking over my value system. So that became very clear.

HARMON: The Omni occupies a vast potential space, and it always has to exist in one or more possible futures in order to bring people into it as a paradoxical, impossible project.. Maybe we could trace a lineage or a legacy with other radical spaces, some of which, particularly in the Bay Area, have become institutionalized or historicized to a certain degree. I think there's always a feeling that the Omni has to do something different in order for it to unequivocally succeed, it has to create a new space that doesn't yet exist, and we don't know what it will be or what it looks like or how it's sustained. That creates a space that's alluring to enter into, but is also a space of constant potential failure. And it tends to absorb physical, emotional, and intellectual labor into itself and into its own potential; but then there's always a sense that it's generating more possibility.

KEENAN: There's a lot in what everyone's been saying. It's really interesting to hear a lot of these issues discussed from the perspective of another organization. You know, the Omni is its own fishbowl. It's like time stops when you're in there, there's so much work to do — whether you define it as work, whether you define it as an obligation, whether you define it as something fun or an aspect of volunteerism, throughout it all. I was thinking about what you were saying Dena about horizontality and verticality. The horizontality of the Omni is, in large part, rooted in a very overt, written down, basically moral politic value system, that only really exists in its truly pure state as an idea. Its embodiment and enactment isn't completely there yet. For example, verticality, which I think we typically understand as being endemic to capitalist systems, is more intuitive for most of us to interact with than horizontality, in terms of: who gets to speak, who doesn't; who gets to make decisions, who doesn't; how you can together actually enact compromise.

In horizontality, sometimes there's this sort of implicit idea that everyone's voices have to be basically taken into account in whatever you are doing at Omni. And that process can be very difficult. So the value system—the *raison d'être*, really, of why Omni should be—is a blessing and a curse. Horizontalist values project everyone into sort of a future forward-facing mentality about where we're trying to get to, as Sadie was saying. But the actual implementation of it in everyday practice — what are we actually doing when we're actually there, and how are we doing those things — can be very difficult. And precisely because it's difficult, you start thinking — I mean, I know I have — "this is more work than my job". Like, we want to create an anti-capitalist framework, but this feels more like 'work', thankless and so on, than my other work. Now why is that? These contradictions emerge.

You mentioned a technocracy. We have two hacker spaces: Counter Culture Labs and Sudo Room. The heterogeneity of organizations under one roof, insofar as they aspire to a lot of these same goals — especially, I guess, anarchist goals, anti-capitalist goals — they nonetheless exist in a state of tension about what aspects of our shared moral politic are the more valuable. And so we've definitely gone through periods of difficulty. Many times, I've heard, "What's up with these technofetishists? They're the problem. They're the reason artists can't live in the Bay Area, but here we are, giving them space?" But then on the flipside, it's like, "Well, art is just essentially an arena for privilege. Who has time to make art? This is really just a kind of indulgence that really detracts from the political mission." So in horizontality, those sorts of mutually contradicting critiques can come up every day in different ways. But actual collaboration means working with people that you don't necessarily always agree with. That's really what collaboration and commoning is, you know? And that's sort of the experiment of the Omni. And it might not work.



BEARD: I think it's interesting that you talk about this kind of collectivism as being a massive group. A massive group of people where everybody has ideas that conflict and create friction. What I've done with The Lab is the opposite. I've created a weird little autocracy. And I always say, "This is my desire, my decision. I am the one to blame." The board is there too, of course. The board's essential to keeping me in check and keeping the organization alive. Yet there's a wild thing in taking on all that responsibility and taking on the bulk of the work: we have a mailing list of 5,000 people and a donor base of 1,200. And all of those people give their feedback to me. It's difficult to be that person who's constantly bouncing back the seventy-five emails per day. But that addressing of my own desires and being able to constantly face people, it's like living under a democracy or whatever we want democracy to actually be. In all the talk of autocracy and hierarchy and pseudo-horizontalism and actual collectivism, I think democracy is really just that: the constant process of reconciling one's own desires with other people's desires. We are all trying to get that right.

And the one thing that it does come down to is accountability. We talked about this a lot with Libbie [Cohn, also a member of the Omni]. But accountability is everything when money is changing hands and when people's lives are on the line. It's saying, "I'm not just running an

art space here; I'm creating a way for people to earn a living." And to do that is to say that I want to give artists a living wage. What does that look like? In addition, accountability is also about giving artists time and space and resources and visibility outside of the Bay Area, and these are things that are missing currently. But in order for me to say I'm going to do that for you, that I'm going to spend seven months of my life working to earn that money to make this project happen, I have to believe that you do your work with dignity. You're excellent. You have to be really excellent at your work. And you also have to renegotiate the institution, to renegotiate what I do and be able to reconcile my labor with your own.

DAVIS: I spent a year at the South Pole, living there with twenty-eight people, to see what a social experiment looked like when it's completely encased, without any outside interference at all – no planes, no nothing. With the Omni, what attracted me to the idea was also Kumbaya, awesome, I'll get to know people really well. In both cases, that really didn't happen. Living with twenty-eight people for a year – it's more like *Lord of the Flies*. I was really surprised by that. So what I found with the Omni was that people are really ideologically driven. And there's just a lot to do. For whatever reason, I didn't get a sense of relationship with other people, and that was what was ultimately going to motivate me to really put in the work. There was just so much infighting. So I'm curious, [in the case of The Lab], to what extent you feel like those relationships, those synergistic or codependent ones, really are the glue that keep things moving forward, you know?

BEARD: I have, I'd say, a group of really extraordinary people who I can bounce my ideas and my freak-out sessions [off of], who I can go to and I feel like they will give me an honest answer. They say, "Hey, this is probably not going to work. You'll probably have to rethink this." Or, "I really like this. This is great." But when it comes down to it, it's for me – it's self-interested.

Maybe there is a distinction between making a political and social space, versus thinking of the project of art as really exhibiting and observing the activity of one's own mind. The project of art is about saying, I'm going to sit here and look deeply at this strange thing. And

in doing so, I'm going to be able to more clearly understand how I perceive things. It's precisely what design and technology and capitalism don't do. Design and technology and capitalism say, let's blur it, let's take aesthetic experience and make it more facile, more of an illusion that doesn't call the system into question. Instead, looking at art is about being willing to make oneself uncomfortable, dismantling all the familiar parts of perception and saying, "I'm just going to look at how I actually think and how I see the world." And in so doing, and in doing so constantly and consistently and thoughtfully, that's when I'll actually have access to my sense of agency, I'll be able to break those systemic rules and be satisfied inside my own skin for small moments of time.

HARMON: We talk a lot about how frustrating the Omni can be, that you go into it with this idea of changing something concretely and seeing this change happen. A lot of people imagine creating a new system that actually functions in the world. I get really excited about being a part of the Omni when I think about it as a conceptual art project. Because of the way the space functions and the people within it, there are all sorts of weird, uncanny things that happen. And to me, that space is interesting, and is what makes me feel like it's worth it to keep doing it, is just to see. We're trying to erase all of this existing infrastructure and create something new. And there's this constant renegotiation. So, we'll create a system and then we'll have to take it down. And we'll get involved in [one kind of] work and then it won't do what people want it to do. Through that process, the Omni becomes a kind of open vortex. Invisible systems are made visible because they're constantly being renegotiated. Things are constantly appearing and disappearing within the community and within the space. If I thought about it in terms of *what progress are we actually making, what changes can I actually see in the greater society because of the work we're doing*, I wouldn't be able to do it.

SIZEMORE-SMALE: I also like to think of the Omni as a conceptual art experiment. I don't think we've ever talked about this, but I do. We're redefining relationships and systems, and also redefining what accountability looks like. There's something really beautiful about that. Especially since, you know, maybe we will make huge social changes in our community. But if

it is happening, it's going to happen really slowly, because that's how systems change: slowly. Not always, but often.

HARMON: What's interesting too is thinking about the ways that [the Omni] fails, and thinking about the ways that, when any individual enters into the project, their own ideas about what it should be and what needs to happen because of it end up — they end up witnessing the failure of that within the project, and if you want to continue working on the project, you have to be okay with that [failure]. Like, that has to be a part of your —

BEARD: Eliminate the armchair activists?

WOMAN: Yeah. [laughter]

KEENAN: I always considered a space for cultural production and art as a fundamental piece of the Omni's really necessary ecosystem. Partly because I feel that art and the experience of art, the creative act, as engaged by the author and the person who goes to see it or hear it, opens up a space of possibility, you know? A project like the Omni can sometimes feel very deterministic in terms of its social and political goals, you know, that can feel constraining in some ways—in spite of all of its resources and things, like the printing presses, the 3-D printers, all of the amazing equipment that Counter Culture Labs has, and so on — precisely because, if you're going towards a grand ideal and an objective, you're also always kind of measuring yourself against that ideal. In our case, the ideal of a commons that's super-fair, that's anti-capitalist. But, art is something you should not have to think about what you're 'supposed' to do, you know? And art doesn't 'have' to be aligned with anything in particular. If you think about art, at least Art with a capital A, as an honorific term, that's one of its social responsibilities. But in the context of the Omni, it's fundamental, in my view, that there be this open space for possibility. Phenomenologically within the Omni, the organic solidarity of a group of people who can invoke the wide-open potentialities of art, is something that opens up a greater sense of possibility in many other endeavors going on there too, you know? That one can feel like it's okay to speak, to contribute, to freely create, even if you

don't have an excessive literacy in any particular domain, whether that's art-historical theory, or tech stuff, or operating a printing press.



BEARD: Yeah, and one thing I should clarify is I don't do it alone. I ask for help seven times daily, you know? And it's help from professionals – legal professionals, accountants, tax people – and also help from people who come to the events and I'm like, oh my God I haven't set up all the chairs yet! I have a core group of volunteers that are absolutely essential: they help do lighting and sound, painting the walls or constructing these crazy sound clouds or ripping up the linoleum floor or pulling up the 40,000 staples that were in the linoleum floor. But art, you know, it always comes over those systems and stops them from working right, because that's what art is supposed to do. It's dismantling the systems that we adhere to. Anything that becomes familiar or too functional or not a part of our conscious lives is not a part of artistic activity. And so if art is doing its job it's making that system slow down and stop working and hiccup a little bit and look at itself and be like, *aaah*. So it's crucial for me to say to everybody who's working on these projects, yeah, it may fail. But hopefully it will fail as a result of great art rather than crappy systems, you know? If you're trying to create

something that works in some way, shape or form, it's risky adding art into the mix, but it's great.

DAVIS: The notion of safe space is interesting to me. That was discussed a lot in the context of Omni, more from a political perspective. There's the interpersonal safe space, but then there's the safe space to have your art not messed with by random people coming through and whatnot. And that changes the art considerably. That changes the space of potential ideas that you even dare to think about. So I don't know, I just wanted to kind of throw that out there, because that's such a huge, fundamental difference in what's really driving things.

BEARD: Yeah, it's hard. [The Lab] is still a pretty raw space, in the sense that there's still work to be done. In some ways, art requires a neutral environment, because you're trying to go in there and have this intensely focused experience, you're trying to eradicate the noise that happens by seeing too many other things, and you really need space to hone in on what's going on with yourself in front of that thing. But I don't necessarily mind [the rawness]. I think artists are really good at negotiating the exhibition and distribution structures for their work. And if given the resources and the time they can figure it out. Something I was telling people when I first started going to the Omni is that the Omni's building used to be owned by the Scavenger's Protective Association, a group of radical garbage men who upcycled and recycled trash. The Scavengers inspired Bruce Conner to organize his group of artist friends into the Rat Bastards Protective Association. They said: we want to be affiliated with the street. We want all of our art to be seen as trash put up on the wall. Back then it was considered disgusting and aberrant and abject, but now it's just part of the canon, and it fundamentally changed how we see art. The Scavengers were a huge inspiration for this group of artists in the Bay Area, who already considered themselves outsiders from the gallery scene of New York. So, yes, if we're going to be a part of the system of the art world proper, there is a way of doing things. There's a way of exhibiting, there's a way of distributing your work. But if you're not necessarily interested in that, if you're speaking to a different audience or if you're trying to function divergently by creating art projects within a

space like the Omni, you're going to have to renegotiate those rules of exhibition and distribution.

HARMON: Part of the promise and challenge of the Omni is its permeability. It's a defined space, but it's pretty open. The last thought I have in terms of ownership is that that ownership of the Omni is really flexible and really changes, but it's not something that is owned by everybody. It's really owned by the people who commit labor to it. And that is defined by the culture that's created. So it ends up being a hypothetically permeable space, a space that's hypothetically open to everyone, and then ends up being really defined. Its boundaries are defined by the culture that it's creating.

SUZANNE STEIN: I'm going to step out of the fishbowl now, and invite someone else to come in. Who will be the first brave conversant?

LAURA MILLER: I have a question for you. I'm Laura Miller. I'm a part of Birdhouse [arts collective at the Omni].

My question has to do with audience. I know the Omni has collectives within it, but there is [also a] shared idea of bringing in the community at large, or different communities. And obviously, The Lab has events and talks and artworks that bring in [different] audiences and communities. I guess my question would be about the structures of sustainability and value for you who are running these spaces and how they function in a more insular way. What are your experiences with and hopes and dreams for how that translates to the community at large, and then [for its] reciprocation?



CERE DAVIS: What I was really excited about, and what I think Omni Commons was founded on – because it was founded on the Occupy movement – was a reclaiming of the commons and breaking down of the partitions. Who would we be to each other if we had the commons, if it wasn't taken away?

ALEX SIZEMORE-SMALE: It's hard to measure the success of a community space or evolving political project, but then, I see success at the Omni. It's a community that can be very nebulous, but people are curious enough that you end up intersecting with people you wouldn't otherwise, and learn about them in the process. And that's special. It's been really interesting to see myself and others grow as individuals and as a community through what has been an often uncomfortable and surprising process of reinvention.

DAVID KEENAN: We live in a language and a world that's got a lot of words we might consider over-determined, in some ways: one person's "community" might not be another person's "community," but they could both be talking about [the same] community at the same time with no apparent disagreement. And all the nuances around that only really emerge through a sustained imbrication and dialogue between people.

So what is "community"? You know, for some people, Omni's community actually isn't the community of people that go to the Omni: the community, the real community, is the community outside Omni, that we need to be – or are supposed to be – bringing in. And why

is that? Like gosh, we have the space, why aren't they just flowing in and making art and doing awesome stuff? I think because of the evolving nature of our understanding of community in Omni, we're moving towards something that isn't as singular: to say that actually, it's a space for multiple communities. It's a space for overlap. You know, like a multi-part Venn diagram overlap of communities. And in that respect, it's sort of a liminal space. It's a space for transection that isn't always comfortable. Which is good because in some ways, we can construe the Omni as essentially – and I don't mean this in a religious way – a kind of evangelical project, in the sense that we want that: we want diversity. We want people who aren't used to hanging out in a [particular] community to come [in] and see how social difference can be positively negotiated. And for that reason, maybe Omni will always be a little bit uncomfortable.

MILLER: It's a complicated question. You know, the words, the lexicon behind all of the endeavors in this room, their meanings are shifting. But more importantly, [so are] the values of the words we use. So for example, the word *community* – it's a surface non-term. But there is an idea of being, for example, a space that has radical values that needs [community] to be liminal. But how do you realize that you're in a place, an urban place with all these different groups, and want to share those values with people that may not know they exist, may never have considered it, may have considered it but don't know their neighbor considers it? When we have these spaces, The Lab and the Omni, what can we hope to provide, based on our internal values? If you're going to put on programming in The Lab, for example, or have people walk in the door to a culture at Omni which is completely outside of and trying to be outside of what we already know and are comfortable with, how do you convince people to walk in the door, and then sustain energy?

BEARD: I mean, aesthetics plays a lot into it. It is the art of seduction. The art of seduction and frustration. That's desire. That is pretty much everything that we go for in for in life. We're like, oh, that's sexy, that's wonderful, I'm infatuated with it. Then you get to know it and you're like, fuck. [laughter] I grew up in a right-wing Christian environment, right? Where you go to church once, if not twice, a week, and you're part of the community. And this

community of people all believe the same bloody thing. They all believe it in slightly different ways. In some, kind of creepy ways; in some, kind of okay ways. But it's not terribly reflective of the core value system, how the core system of value is created and how the system itself is created. That's basically not for us to understand. You know, they believe that [this understanding] is in a higher sphere, literally. But the idea of the church always kind of intrigued me, because it's made up of individuals who are complicit in maintaining that system. You have collectives, you have churches, you have institutions; they're all just made of a bunch of people who believe in something, but each exists within a different sphere of reflectivity. I like artists who know people that I don't know and who can bring those people into The Lab. And those people offer and say things about the work, or are reflective upon the work in a way that I would never have been or my friends would not have been, and who provide something that's completely and utterly different and takes the rug out from under my feet.

SIZEMORE-SMALE: Something your question brought up for me is also the [problem] of trying to build a community or build an audience or involve more people in something that's very much based on an ideal that is hard to understand. We say that we want diversity, we want to pull people in, we want to involve people with different backgrounds and experiences. At the same time, a lot of our ideals and values are so intellectually grounded that they are inaccessible to people without those resources or that education.

It's even in the language. When you join one of our meetings, there are certain buzzwords that we use. It seems to me that sometimes our values, or the culture we've created, gets in our own way by making our community less accessible – something I've been thinking about a lot.

MILLER: I think someone in the audience needs to take my chair. Thank you.

JEANNE GERRITY: I'll apologize in advance; this [question] is a little bit ignorant of the mission of the Omni and how you function. But I come from a background of working at art spaces and museums, and after a while, I became disillusioned by the fact that there is this kind of

ownership of an art space by [its] funders. And ultimately, you have to do things according to what the funders want. I mean, it's not always that direct, but there's always that, sort of in the background. I'm just curious to know how you do simple things like pay the rents or buy the 3-D printers, or how you function within what is a capitalist system without having those values.



SADIE HARMON: It's hard. It's a constant struggle. There are different aspects of the culture at the Omni that make it difficult. One of them is this decentralization of power, so you don't have one person or a group of people who are figuring out how to raise money, for instance. You don't have somebody like Dena, who says "this is the plan and this is how we're going to do it." At a really basic level, the way that we make money is the collectives pay rent or exchange other [things]. One of the basic tenets of the Omni is "for each according to their ability and to each according to their need." Basically, it's whatever people can contribute to use the space, they do. And that depends. That's one way.

Then we also have individuals [and individual organizations] like The Lab, who donate different amounts of money. We've had Kickstarters and an Indiegogo campaign. But in a

larger sense, we do most things through working groups. Right now we have a fundraising working group and a buy-the-building working group — it's a group of people who come together in smaller meetings and try to strategize ways to make money.

Again, [we're] trying to create a new system where we're not beholden to large funders; we're trying to create a system where we're not beholden to a large grant, where we'll have to fulfill certain expectations and we're not beholden to one person.

GERRITY: What if one collective isn't pulling their weight? Who would do something about it, or how would that work?

KEENAN: This is a really fundamental axis of tension and difficulty for the collective problem-solving abilities of the Omni. I think in some ways, it's hard for anyone in the world to live in a capitalist system and figure out money [within] any organization. But for an organization that is explicitly anti-capitalist, it's especially difficult because you end up with a group of people that actually don't want to talk about money, aren't very good at talking about money — myself included — and actually kind of want to avoid it. And that's bad. The rent of the Omni is at least \$15,000 a month, by way of a triple-net lease. By and large, it's paid through donations, primarily from the member groups. So it's like if you're a member of a group, you kick down what you can, and then that helps to pay the rent for that group, and in this way all the groups together, then, pay for the Omni's rent. But we've been actually running at a loss pretty much the entire time, in terms of our rent roll alone, although that is not our only source of charitable income.

How does that happen? Last year, we paid about \$200,000 in rent. That's a lot. None of these groups have endowments — it really comes, truly, from the community. Sometimes it comes from foundations, with discretionary year-end funding — if anyone's here from one ... [laughter] ... I know a really good cause, if you just have like \$10,000 lying around, wondering what to do. But we've gotten that, and that has been just the kindness of others, you know? The whole project was predicated on this quixotic idea, "build it and they will come," in a way. We knew we didn't have enough money to sustain the project even six months down

the line, after we moved in. We're constantly on the brink. You know, we could've (and should've) spent this year applying for the NEA Our Town grant or something [like it] and getting \$250,000. But no one had time, because it's been such a struggle just to keep the lights on and keep things going day-to-day, and to move past a state of initial becoming into something that's established and more productive. Even with all the people involved in the Omni, I don't think we were able to do that yet. We were able to get some money from Alternative Exposure grants again this year, [and from] some groups.

It always boils down to a skeleton crew of really selfless, committed people who ensure Omni persists and ends get met via a combination of taking on far too much work on the one hand, and by reaching out within our community for help on the other. And like I said, it's an experiment. I wouldn't hold it out like a recipe for success for any group. But you know, the fact that it's persisted for a year is something that we can be proud of.

HARMON: That's the thing about the possibility of the Omni and working within these systems, especially financial systems, and through other bureaucratic [ordinances] like building regulations and city codes and things like that, and the fact that people are willing to negotiate those in ways that aren't horrible. On top of that, we want to be really critical of them and to be really critical of the way that we work within them, and of how we can operate in such a way that we're consistently challenging them and we're consistently trying to upset them. I find that really interesting and exciting. That's kind of what the Omni presents an opportunity to do, that it's not so much like financial solvency. As long as we can keep operating, we want to keep challenging [people] and being really critical.

IGNACIO VALERO: I think it's not a coincidence that now we talk about commons, because basically, there is no commons. Or we no longer recognize the ones we have in front of us.

We are, in some ways – depending on who you ask, either [in] the eye of the hurricane or in heaven, in the Bay Area. [laughter] What are your relations to or reflections on the shared economy, the so-called shared economy? Because today, I feel that capitalism has basically co-opted and appropriated something that is very much in people's minds and hearts. It's a

desire. It's that seduction at which Madison Avenue is so fantastically good. And so my question is: how do you negotiate that, and how do you see that as a kind of noise in the system that is profoundly disturbing, in the sense that even they want to appropriate the concept, you know? It's like what Rosa Luxemburg used to say. At the end of the day, capitalism will even appropriate socialism itself, you know? I'd like to hear your opinions and reflections and points [regarding that].



From the November 15, 2015 Fishbowl Conversation at The Lab.

MAN: It depends on what you meant by that phrase “shared economy.” There’s this concept of shared economy that I’ve heard with regards to Airbnb and Uber. And that is an utter, utter farce. Right? If you don’t agree, talk to me later. Fight me later, if you want. That’s an utter farce, right?

VALERO: I completely agree with you. We could include Facebook, we could include the entire whole thing, you know? I have nothing personal with Mr. Zuckerberg, of course. But how can you possibly become worth \$30 million dollars in eight years?

MAN: Yeah, they’re appropriating, just like you said.

VALERO: That, to me, infuriates me in so many ways, because a taxi dispatch company now calls itself a technology company. You create this thing about techno this, techno that; but it's just techno style. They don't discover here the cure of cancer or some fantastic new way of spinning the atom or doing quantum whatever, you know? It's just simply algorithms and a whole bunch of people working 24/7.

And so my point is, how do you open up and say the emperor has no clothes?

BEARD: That's precisely what you have to do. And it's funny, we have a surveillance camera up there. [laughter]

The idea is that it [sends] an image of whatever's happening in The Lab to the homepage of the website. Every thirty seconds, it updates. The idea is to say: we live in a surveillance state. We don't live in a democracy, we live in a pseudo-democracy that's masking the surveillance state that protects capitalism. And the accumulation, the collection of data and the collection of information about us, is precisely how, over the last thirty years, the wealth gap has exceedingly, intensely changed. But the American perception is that we live in a democracy; the wealth gaps aren't nearly as wide as they actually are. We're all operating under these illusions. We operate under the illusion that Facebook itself is a commons. You know, that's an illusion. People say, "this is so great, we can talk to our friends in public." And it's like, yeah, for fuck's sake, go outside, go to the park. But instead of saying, "oh, fuck the surveillance state, we won't reconcile with it.," I say, no, let's replicate it on this small scale and let's figure out how to deal with it. The emperor has no clothes; let's make that situation visible and ask, how, in the experimental laboratory of The Lab, would you change that situation?

DAVIS: I mean, I think it's really hard to even understand the system you're in and the effects it has on you. For myself, again, I like seeing my own purchasing habits change as a result — and I thought this for a long time, when I was in Seattle, but it was super isolating for a whole bunch of reasons. I mean, just seeing my own motivations change as a result of access to other people through the commons — you know, it's like *Cheers*. You go to a place where

everybody knows your name, even if you fucking don't like them or whatever. [laughter] It's really worth something.

KEENAN: Yes, at Omni, it's like we're always trying to disassociate ourselves from even appearing to enact anything like a "sharing economy" as conventionally understood. "Sharing" in its original sense has no function in a marketplace, nor is it a "kind" of economy — by which we all mean a capitalist economy. Rather, sharing is a fundamentally different paradigm that actually counters, and can replace, the domination of the economic frame as the preferred way of ordering and understanding social relationships and moral politics. The "radical" sharing that Omni practices is one in which any appendage of "economy" is removed, or really just sharing in its basic form. Partly for that reason, I think at Omni people probably feel way less inclined to say that they "own" anything, whether an idea, space, or project. It can even become ironic how, in the context of collectivity, everyone's also always trying to de-center their own speech acts, and un-privilege their particular points of view — even coming into this circle, we were like, should we really sit in the middle? [laughter] Maybe we should be on the edge.

I think making the invisible visible is important. By actually demonstrating what a real "sharing economy" could be, namely "sharing" absent any "economy," [Omni provides] the relief needed to contextualize the commons' invisible co-option by capitalism everywhere else, a diluting process that's diffuse and all around us, you know? The problem is, it's not super straightforward. Somehow with Uber, we know what to do. But walking into the Omni, people feel like they have to ask permission to be a part of that commons. They don't know if they have the agency to engage non-transactionally. That's been one of the biggest challenges: simply getting people to participate in that feeling of sharing, and to truly, radically share. Radical sharing requires a sort of internal deprogramming and a freeing of oneself to say, "It's okay; we can do this together. I'm not stepping on anyone else's toes by just participating." Silly example; but we have a lot of food donations — and, feeling like you can just grab a sandwich that has been donated, and not worry about like —

SIZEMORE-SMALE: Paying for it.

KEENAN: Maybe you think you have to pay for it or go mop the floor because you ate a sandwich – and that’s how [laughter] the shared commons works? It’s all of those fears.