

*field studies on (reframing) support*  
by curator Marta Lola Staudinger

When the Honfleur Women in Arts Program released an opportunity for curatorial grants, I proposed a project that centered on surveying five local women-identifying artists who come from a cross section of practice and background, and who work in various media. The survey was meant to better understand their current needs (for space, joy, time, rest, and anything else that might arise), while also discussing types of discrimination and pressure points women in the arts face and those respective impacts on women pursuing creative careers.

Upon receipt of the grant, we already knew this field study would result in an exhibition that included an artwork from each of the five participating artists, but the scope of the final artworks remained unclear as the artists were not given any limitations regarding the final artwork they would create. From the beginning, the emphasis was process- rather than product-oriented, allowing each of us to hold deep reverence for our own practices.

The result is an ongoing call and response about support needed for women artists, and the evolution we collectively feel is required of art spaces and publics.

*Auxilium ~ meaning "aid", "assistance" or "reinforcement"*

In continuation.

**How can support be more generative? How much space, time and rest do artists need to be able to develop ideas and experiment? What does support for the process look like? How can we celebrate the *wisdom* of process more?**

It is a sobering fact that women-identifying artists (and arts workers) are largely under-represented and under-supported. Artwork sold by women artists only makes up 2% of the global art market. This calculation of market sales stems from data covering fixed transactions, so it can be assumed other, less-linear, forms of support for women-identifying artists are even less present.

There is also a general under-representation of the local (i.e. non-museum) arts ecosystem in the DC area on the international art world stage. This region is filled with artists working at the epicenter of the United States' political landscape, yet we have no representation in Congress, and our voices/work are largely overlooked by art world media.

The opportunity to use funding focused on local **and** women artists, allowed for a project that positioned these two points of marginalization as a foundation for exploration, connection, and growth.

I often feel women and (all) artists are vessels that many take from without replenishing. As a woman artist, art historian, and arts worker whose practice mainly centers on women-identifying artists, I have witnessed women artists experience this effect in an overwhelming number of instances.<sup>[1] [2]</sup>

## How can we support women arts workers, so they are able to exist fully in their essence and have the space and time required to be the vessel?

It is my hope that through more awareness, art spaces and communities will begin to examine additional ways to support artists that expand beyond sales/transactions/conditions in order to more fully brace and honor the labor of the creative process. Can this project serve as an example? Approaching a curatorial project for an exhibition with artwork yet to be created felt like true stewardship. The freedom of time and space provided the artists an opportunity to take a chance without consequence or judgment. The fluidity continued as each of us navigated setbacks and triumphs in our personal and professional lives that at times redirected our attention and impacted availability over the past year working on this project. I feel I have exercised flexibility in ways I cannot when honoring client timelines and limitations. As the curator, I was committed to guiding a process and then upholding the artists' works via a final exhibition without regard to the scale, stage of completion, or aesthetic of the works each artist decided to present. I also appreciated the trust and patience the artists held for me, while I attempted to carefully integrate their individual expressions into a fused approach.

The openness and elasticity of this project is a rare opportunity to lean into redefining support and opening a door for future projects. As our world is changing post-pandemic, the strain on the arts has shifted too, and yet the systems that claim to support the arts have not yet graduated to new understandings. For example, I have noticed over the past few years that more opportunities for exhibitions, residencies and even grants, are **conditioned** on artists' presence and participation in multiple types of programming for art spaces. Is it the job of the artist to produce the artwork? Or present the artwork to the public? Or conduct interactive workshops and programming for the public? These requirements may be within full capacity and interest for some artists but shouldn't be a barrier for others. We need to discern how these requirements impact full-time mothers or artists experiencing mental, physical and/or emotional health struggles or disabilities. Moreover, stipends should reflect each specific requirement as a separate job, i.e. the payment for artwork acquisition is separate from the stipend to host a workshop. For comparison, in the museum environment, producing (artist), presenting (curator), and programming (educator) are three different jobs/people/departments. This gets lost in translation in smaller spaces, which hold the burden of impacting change on a root level. In these scenarios, we need to ask: where is the line between collaboration v. artist-gallerist-curator responsibilities?

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[1] From women forbidden to practice as artists, sometimes needing to mask their identities (since from before the Middle Ages to early modernity), to modern women artists being recognized first as the wife of a male artist over her own practice, to the vast 98% gap in sales by women artists in the contemporary art market... [multiple sources / no disputations]

[2] Conversations for another time and space could include connecting this to collective/culture care [also, parallels between artists and healing practitioners / society's givers], generative forms of business, women empowerment & equality, activated female psyche...

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The exhibition *auxilium continuum: reframing* provides an example of what originates from unrestricted support and demonstrates the need for valuable non-production time in the artist's practice. By gifting the participating artists time and space to create freely, the exhibition presents under-investigated aspects of feminine energy in the arts marketplace...

Ceci Cole McInturff presents two artworks that reflect on the notion of radical unity. During our conversations together, we discussed the energy and emotionality in creative works as well as the universal reality of impermanence, all of which is reflected in her natural, organic, and often temporary materials and wabi sabi approach. We also discussed how the ways of categorizing ephemeral art, such as "feminine" or "ecofeminine" can be confining. In response, Cole McInturff created exhibition pieces that suggest there is wisdom in living and operating beyond traditional identity and marketplace boundaries. She presents a hybridized and unitive perspective, both in the way her work can be understood categorically, and by probing the gender of her works.

Leah Lewis elaborated on the various pressures that social media places on the artist's practice: "*The goal is to be in flow, but social media often makes people speed up or lose focus*". Her 6-foot-long painting reflects crabs in a kitchen sink, a play on the parallels of crab mentality and social media's manipulation of contemporary creative practitioners.

In our conversations together, Jean Jinho Kim mentioned society's high expectations of women (ex: to be a good daughter, mother, cook, etc.) and the duality she upheld for many years creating large sculptures from heavy autobody parts, purposefully rejecting feminine conformity in her work. In this exhibition, we witness a coalescence of the two as Kim expands on a recently started series of metal sculptures, titled *Filling her Shoes*, resembling women's boots in tribute to her own mother's resilience.

"*Rather than procrastinating, it's gathering*" – something Rania Hassan shared in our conversations that will be forever engraved in my mind. Hassan's ceiling-to-floor installation of woven threads embodies the natural process of rest and regeneration via cycles of menstruation. She encapsulates this essence by depicting how blood moves through water, visually transferring its weight and density, communicating the power of our ability to (re)gather.

For someone whose portal into the arts was through poetry and who has co-hosted a monthly drawing group for the past five years, it is no surprise that mixed media and installation artist Nicole Salimbene is presenting artist books – a medium she has wanted to incubate for quite some time. In our reflections on generative projects and her social practice perspective, Salimbene shared with me that "*Generosity is a key component [to any collaborative work]*". Her work *Books of Nourishment* holds the purpose of archiving seeds of inspiration from her own practice, and then sharing them with other artists.

Throughout all five artists' work, subthemes of radical unity, generosity and hospitality are present. Collective care, rest and regeneration hold space while matriarchs and mother lines are honored. Materiality is considered beyond its gendered categorizations, and societal pressures are met with higher boundaries, fortitude, resilience, and protection. In this exhibition, women artists and their works gather and exchange – yet this is just a seed and ultimately, an invitation for future participation and collaboration.

The exhibition provides space (in person and digitally) for other women artists to participate in the survey to share their perspectives. It also provides the opportunity for the public to engage further in this discourse via exhibition prompts and a wall where the participating artists share more details of their processes.

Lastly, this exhibition questions the give and take relationship many artists experience with communities and the world at-large, and how that intersects with the spectrum of gift-to-commodity, and a push to produce, particularly for women-identifying artists...

*“... every modern artist who has chosen to labor with a gift must sooner or later wonder how he or she is to survive in a society dominated by market exchange. And if the fruits of a gift are gifts themselves, how is the artist to nourish himself, spiritually as well as materially, in an age whose values are market values and whose commerce consists almost exclusively in the purchase and sale of commodities?” – Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World**

It is our hope that additional artists will participate in this exhibition, allowing the conversation to grow into future projects and exhibitions supporting local women-identifying artists as we collectively reconstruct the concept of support in our ecosystem.