

SPEAKERS

Kelly Lloyd, Hilary Powell

Introduction (Kelly Lloyd) 00:35

You're listening to *This Thing We Call Art*, a podcast about how, 'these chances to reflect slightly are quite rare when you're just in production phases. So, it's good to stand back a bit... and see how things interconnect.'

I'm your host, Kelly Lloyd, a visual artist, essayist, and educator currently based in the U.K. I've been interviewing people in the arts about their livelihoods since 2017, and today you're going to hear a conversation I had on the 23rd of April 2021 with Hilary Powell.

Hilary Powell works with hidden histories and overlooked techniques in acts of imaginative salvage - valuing the seemingly mundane and highlighting and creating the extraordinary in the everyday. Her work is led by materials and places – working in partnership with them with contagious curiosity and experimentation and inviting others into the process – be this collective roller skating in urban precincts (Air/TFL commission) or creating alterative wild operas in industrial hinterlands (during the Acme Stephen Cripps Award at High House Production Park, Royal Opera House Purfleet).

Recent projects involve collaborative acts of making - from a public production line making an erupting pop-up book history of the London Olympic site (collected by V&A and MoMA NY) to pulling off a *Bank Job* - setting up a Bank, printing money and literally exploding debt (the feature documentary film of which is nominated for a Grierson and BIFA). The work is a constant process of deconstructing grand narratives and finding ways behind the scenes to both reveal and build new stories – during the pandemic this has led to examining the realities of manufacturing and container shipping with projects supported by the Museum of London and Ffotogallery.

Her belief in the power and necessity of artistic and cultural action to challenge an increasingly unjust system and imagine another way of living has led to long term collaboration with Daniel Edelstyn. They have set up both a community interest company Optimistic Foundation dedicated to anarchic, joyful cultural production and a co-operative energy company in their new project *POWER*.

Powell completed a post-doctoral AHRC Fellowship in the Creative and Performing Arts at the Bartlett, UCL and was Leverhulme 'Alchemist in Residence' with UCL Chemistry.

She shares her work widely with academic institutions and arts and community organisations, most recently as visiting tutor in Visual Communication at the RCA.

I met Hilary when she gave a lecture to the Blackhorse Responders a group of youth from Walthamstow interested in socially engaged art. I knew of *Bank Job* though, as they had won the Artlicks Workweek Prize in 2018.

Our conversation was an hour and 15 minutes long, and while I wish I could share it with you in its entirety, today, you'll listen to excerpts from it. I'm going to drop you in at the beginning...

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Kelly Lloyd 03:16

Yeah, how is teaching at the RCA, especially during the pandemic?

Hilary Powell 03:21

It's been a bit challenge; I was new to it anyway. [I'd always been more of a visiting tutor - always in and out visiting, maybe running a module but never constant, and even now I'm still on a precarious contract.] That's coming up again at the RCA, casualisation. So then [I] started, and there was strike action. Straight in there, and just like having to go on strike and then [the] pandemic [began]. So, it has been a big challenge because I was new, but [I've been] lucky to have really good mentors. And it's weird, because although [a lot of us have only] met online, that sense of kind of solidarity and care is actually [increased]. So, now I feel a real kind of affection to all of [these] fellow tutors [brought together in tough times].

When the pandemic first hit, it all went online the first-year MA students and having to quickly adapt to that, but everyone was so resilient. I really get a lot out of the teaching. I'm learning [a lot] from [the] students- and just [the] different ways of thinking particularly about digital and virtual technologies and how they might interact with my work, which has always been much more [focused on] the [physical] materials and people and communities and how that extends online. So yeah, I've been enjoying it.

Kelly Lloyd 04:33

Is it yearly that your contracts are renewed, or...?

Hilary Powell 04:36

I don't know. [It is precarious work] this year, I developed with two other tutors a course that had been running, but it had to adapt for online. [It is a] course about site and engagement with sites and communities [and] that would [usually] have involved a lot of field trips. So last year (led by artist Jessie Brennan) they came to the bank where [our *Bank Job*] project was. This year, obviously, that couldn't happen, so how do you talk about site and materials and physical spaces? That took a lot of work, and it's really something I valued [doing].

Kelly Lloyd 05:02

I'm just super interested in, yeah, picking all these things apart. First, I want to ask you about the mentorship that you've gotten at the RCA and the solidarity, is that something that was kind of built in as a part of you entering into the community? Or have you had to, like reach out to people or have people reached out to you, or? Just because I feel like that's so important, and I'm wondering how much of that is a part of the job description that you have, like, people who are watching out for you, and also people who will help you to be, like, a better educator and people you can turn to have honest conversations, you know?

Hilary Powell 05:37

I don't know how much [of] it is part of the job description. I feel lucky that some of the senior tutors have just had that kind of ethos that they were there to offer that guidance. Initially you're like, 'I'm sorry to bother you, but what the hell...' But they were very forthcoming with all of that advice, and so I was lucky that [some of them were] quite new as well. They were needing guidance and learning together, [supported by] some really stalwart amazing tutors that were already there. So, it was kind of more ad hoc and intuitive building these relationships. And then there's even a course- for the students [but] that I wanted to actually go on [called] *The Practice of Teaching*. So, you're kind of grabbing knowledge from different areas and then putting it to use. It's a combination of things.

Kelly Lloyd 06:25

You said casualisation, what does that mean?

Hilary Powell 06:27

I'm a Visiting Tutor and you are contracted, and you are on PAYE, but there's no security really and it's by the hour. So, when you're teaching [there are] all of these excess demands on you because you want to care and offer more help [and] it's like, well, I'm actually not getting paid for this. [Laughter] So where [do] you draw the line? That's coming up quite a lot. But at the same time as an artist, I'm like, well, maybe I'm happy casualized. How much more admin and responsibility do I want? And the kind of balance of all that.

Kelly Lloyd 06:59

So, I'm like not sure how unionization works in academia. Like, who went on strike? Was that like a union activity? Or was did you have to join that union, or?

Hilary Powell 07:10

There's a strong union across RCA- a wider teaching union, that I actually am not part of [but] you don't have to be in the union to then go on strike in agreement and solidarity. It [is] tricky, because at that time, you don't want to abandon your students either. I had some lucky days [in] that- strike action wasn't [on] a Friday, and my course was [on] Friday. That continuity for the students carried on because you are really aware of wanting to just have education for the sake of learning and education.

But now there's extra [complexities in] the fact that students [pay] a lot of money, and they're kind of clients or consumers that need a service provided. And that really changes that relationship for the worst. And how [do] you balance that with, how the students come out in solidarity too? But we're [all] subject to these kind of government higher up actions. So, it's complex, because you really don't want to, like leave them stranded when they've got such a short time to actually learn and experience an MA. But I think mostly, there was real support among the students for the actions of realizing that it was all part of the same kind of financialization of everything that's going on.

Kelly Lloyd 08:26

What is your teaching versus what is your community activism versus like, what is your, you know, art? Or are those all kind of the same thing for you, and how do you allocate your energy based on that?

Hilary Powell 08:39

It's almost like having, like in a film production company you have a slate of projects, but [recently] *Bank Job* became like, everything. It took over our lives... and we learned so much about building audiences and reaching out through various means from book to film, and, you know, a physical kind of participatory project. The next kind of project on that scale is *POWER*. And that's kind of central to everything, orbited by the other projects that feed in and out of it.

When there is a project like *POWER*, which has so many levels from direct community participation to building a feature film, and in this case, building a membership site that allows us to grow from the very beginning, and build the audience. That's kind of the central work.

I do lots and [lots] of lists. I've just discovered Miro, this online whiteboard thing... and that's because I haven't even got a wall big enough, or any wall [even], to put it all on and [I] need to see it all spread out. And that's helped to kind of cluster and find the links between projects because sometimes you're like, 'why am I doing...?' Particularly with [smaller projects] working with container shipping and the tin industry [in that their] methodology is quite different from *Bank Job* and *POWER*. [They're] more contained kind of projects, they don't have the ambitions for social change or contributing to a movement, but it's still [about finding the] values within these smaller, quieter projects as well.

Kelly Lloyd 10:08

How do you let projects die? Or like when do you know it's time to move on? You know, especially if it's not this project that, you know, has these multiple forms of like, you know, a book is done, I guess, when a book is done, you know? And a film is done when it's done, and it's released, and all these things. But like, some of these smaller projects that do need to kind of be taken to the backburner and then may be taken off, you know, the hob entirely, like, when do you know? Yeah, when it's kind of time? I feel like I hold on to everything, because I know it's all related, but, at a certain point, it's kind of like, maybe that is done. I need to step away.

Hilary Powell 10:51

That is [actually] a big issue. I suppose I was upset when I started *Bank Job*, because I thought I'd abandoned my previous trajectory. I'd been working in UCL, at that time, [with a] Fellowship in the Creative and Performing Arts. [The AHRC don't do this

anymore, but it was] amazing as an artist to have a chance to be on PAYE in a research institution to basically do a project that you wanted to do. And so, I'd made this pop-up book, and then I managed to stay on by having a residency in the Chemistry Department. And all of that work from pop-up experiments with demolition materials was focused on urban change, and the idea of setting up an *Institute of Breaking*. And that's one of those things that had quite a lot of momentum, and then I had to drop it because of *Bank Job*. And then you realize that actually, it surfaces again, because in *Bank Job*, I was blowing up the van, I mean, there's not more like *Institute of Braking* than that.

And then those themes are emerging again now in *POWER*, where we really look at our own habitats like the street where we live, and how that can transform to renewable energy, but also [look] at what a street is made of. And that returns me to this material analysis of the environment. So yeah, it's hard sometimes. Or there's [projects] that you want to do [and] it's not quite the right time, and they're kind of there on the shelf, and you wonder if you'll ever [Laughter] get to get to do that.

Currently, I'm working with container shipping, which has been this desire for maybe the last seven years since I heard about residences on board container ships. I didn't get one of the residences, but it sparked a whole interest in reading everything possible. And they're all interlinked [in an investigation of] global capital and the flows of goods and people, but right now, I'm having to kind of constrict that one. I've kind of got a timeframe to do some work, it will be exhibited at the Museum of London, and basically, I'll have to stop at that point. So, you hope you have your health and have a longer life to fit them all in this kind of slate of projects that you want to tackle. And they will mutate and change and develop through what you learn through every project that you undertake. But I think, those themes and kind of obsessions remain the same throughout.

Kelly Lloyd 13:11

Yeah. What were you doing in Wales?

Hilary Powell 13:13

That was basically working with the tin industry there-the last tin plate factory. And I was taking portraits of all the people working in this factory that produces tin that then goes off to Heinz [and packing firms]. They've been working flat out in the pandemic, because of the massive increase in demand for tinned goods. So, there's all these layers of food banks, tinned goods, Brexit, pandemic... And I'm drawn there because of my family history

as tin workers in that area of South Wales. So, there's this kind of quest there for a bit of heritage and [a] history of labour and making. And it felt good to just be on site [though] because of the pandemic, it was in and out meeting people but in a very intense way.

And I've managed to get good support for that from Ffotogallery Wales, the Worshipful Company of Tin Workers in the city, and a Welsh trust called the Colwinson Trust. So that, like all the work not responding to briefs or commissions but seeking out organizations that you [imagine] would fit the project and constantly pitching a future version of your work. Which is also quite scary and a lot of pressure because you're kind of envisaging the future of it, when you actually have nothing. [Laughter] And getting people to believe in things. And the responsibility of that to then make that happen is, I think that's the biggest kind of stress factor of all of them. [Laughter]

Kelly Lloyd 14:42

And do you feel like you quite often have to, like, envision this project for people to be able to...?

Hilary Powell 14:49

I think that is the biggest part of them and getting that pitch right but realizing it will change. So, *Bank Job* was [one] of those bigger ones, more illustrative of that, because it started off as 'Detonator'. The way you frame things, and how that [can discourage] people from getting involved. And then suddenly, when it was *Bank Job*, and a kind of community heist- suddenly it was infectious in its mischievous kind of tone. We're having the same issues with *POWER* now. We know all the ingredients but haven't got it's kind of public pitch quite right yet. That invitation in, which is always a challenge.

I suppose things like the tin project, you kind of imagine you might have difficulties explaining that you want to put faces on tin cans, but actually, that in a way is simpler. Because it's like, 'Here. Imagine this object.' [Laughter] So, it is the act of persuasion at the very beginning and promise, which for things like when I did this project called *Ring Cycle* in Purfleet and was going along to local heritage centers and the RSPB reserve and a community choir, and [saying] we're going to redo Wagner's epic, [Laughter] but we're going to do it in the landscape-making that desirable for engaging in.

[Whereas] the *Bank Job* and *POWER* [are] more overtly political, then there are certain audiences that you expect to get involved. But you're often quite surprised that actually the kind of groups that you imagined would align with your work actually don't. And

you find these unexpected kind of supporters and allegiances. So, it's always interesting. And I suppose it's important to analyze as you go along. But all of that kind of official evaluation and stuff is not really, we don't build it in enough.

Kelly Lloyd 16:37

I think you can engage with these moments of, yeah, like you said, like mischief, you know, like that are a bit more light, perhaps. But in order to justify it, you have to have this thing that like has, that holds meaning. And that, you know, other people recognize as being valuable, I am interested in things that clearly matter. But I also push up against a lot, this feeling is though, I can't that things are so segmented because everything needs to matter. And because everything needs to have a clear and discernible topic.

Like I remember, I was teaching at this one High School, so like 15/16-year-olds, over the Summer, and we visited this one community center. And we just ended up like sitting down and having tea with some older people who ran it, who had been a part of that community. And they were saying that, you know, when they were growing up, during the Summer, there would just be a bus that would, like, come and pick anybody up. And then it would drive you to like this, you know, more green location, and you'd have lunch, and then you'd come back home. But then now you have an art camp, or you have like a science and tech camp, you have like an if you're interested in whales camp, you know? And there isn't really that much for and obviously these things need to exist, because, you know, these things are interesting and matter, and there's an audience for them, but also, they're so specific. I think in part because that'll get you funding. So, then what happens to like, all of the really great ideas that just haven't found their boxes yet, or like all of the things that matter, but maybe don't matter as clearly, or like all the people that should yeah, just get on a bus and like, hang out together and talk about whatever. You know, where do they go during the Summer?

Hilary Powell 18:37

Yeah, that's true, because it has to not be constrained by labeling every action that you have to take- that you can maybe create a kind of framework [and] within that, it's just free play. [Finding] the value of that kind of joyful, just nothingness.

We, both me and Dan, have been really looking into solar punk and how our project is solar punk. [Solar punk is] different from cyberpunk, and [there are] some really great writings around the kind of political dimensions of solar punk and this idea of infrastructure

as resistance. What can we build in the gaps? I really like that idea of what escapes through the holes and in the gaps, and what can thrive there? You want to envisage a future that's just full of, you know, a thriving abundance, of abundance in a different way, like joy and play, and creative action. [Laughter]

Kelly Lloyd 19:32

These, like, holes and gaps, how do you find them in a city like London?

Hilary Powell 19:38

London, I'm not sure, because right now, we're thinking, well, you know, we've kind of become more compact through necessity, through the pandemic. We lost the bank. We're lucky that we have a garden and a house, but everything that we were doing is just now in our house, and it is getting a bit much. We're planning to reach out to the world again, and kind of needing space to do that.

Where are we going to situate this project that wants to have collective making? And if we are finding somewhere, then what does that involve? Just constant production and admin? Negotiations trying to find sites with councils, and you know, Mayor's office... I think we were lucky with the *Bank Job*, to have that space for longer than we thought that [we] did. [It] was like a gap in planning almost. And it was really sad when we lost it, because I felt like that was our biggest fight there. We managed to explode a van in front of the Towers of Finance.

[But] I felt like when we then lost the fight for the bank, it was like, those forces of speculative capital [had] come back to go, 'Ha ha, you haven't won.' You know? 'We're still stronger than you', you know, 'artists, move along, move along out of here.' Where can we operate now? In these gaps? So yeah, London, I think is city... well, I think Max Haiven (*Art After Money, Revenge [Capitalism The Ghosts of Empire, the Demons of Capital, and the Settling] of Unpayable Debts*) was saying he's lived in Berlin and smaller towns in Canada [but] is like, 'London's just a city where finance has taken over all of the spaces.'

Kelly Lloyd 21:15

So, you and Dan, work together a lot. How did that happen? How does that work?

Hilary Powell 21:25

It's been a long time developing because we first met in our 20s in Hackney Wick and had no idea [as we were] attempting to start off as artists. And so, then we worked kind of separately, and he was working more [on commercial broadcast film]. And I was [doing a] PhD moving towards artists projects so when we did work together, it was more hierarchical, like, I might work in the background on a shoot for Channel Four. So, we were skill sharing all the way through. And then when he did his first feature film, which became our first feature film, I was there filming it and doing all the set design, but it was still very much, even though it was co-directed, that was very much his project. And things like the tin and container are very much led by me, but I've then got this support [because] we're equipped well for film. So, there's this kind of cross pollination but *Bank Job* was the first real collaboration where you could just see that everything we'd both learned in our separate trajectories came together.

I don't quite know how we manage it. Because I mean, we're married as well. And it's frustrating and we're really different personality types too and he is much more extrovert, does more of [the] marketing [and community building]. And I thrive [in intensive] moments of production. Constantly being in a public role, I find the most exhausting, but I've got [the] stamina for labour and physical production and organization. So, it is a good collaboration.

But at the beginnings of projects like this *POWER* one, it is frustrating, because we're working out the best way to... and making loads of mistakes as well. But I think it helps, I think, for all because we're filming this behind the scenes of production [which is] hard, but it makes the challenges you face part of the storyline, 'Well, this will be good for the narrative arc, this disaster! [Laughter] Oh, you've embarrassed your central character!' So, it's weird, [as] we're kind of at one-step-removed thinking in these archetypal story structures and what's required for a good story. [Laughter]

Kelly Lloyd 23:33

Yeah, definitely. And then you, you know, I was interested when you said, you know, with *Bank Job* that you had these different formats. And so, you have this film that has, yeah, a certain kind of narrative structure. And then you have a book, which has a certain kind of narrative structure, and then you have a participatory event, which has another kind of narrative structure. What did you find out about working between these very different forms and the different stories that you could tell in each one?

Hilary Powell 23:58

Hmm. I think, like the immediacy of having a bank and physical shared space of making that was really at the center of everything, because from that, these kind of provocative conversations came and these new relationships and understandings and so that's kind of the heart, of the project. The film was always going to be there, and that was finding a different kind of structure that could include elements of that kind of participatory making, but not become just a document of an artwork, that it had another story to tell, that could get in more of the concepts under the bedrock of the project around debt and money. And so, you can explore more of the complexities but again, with limitations, because [there's] only so much you can fit into a one-hour feature film.

And the book enabled a bit more of a personal narrative or kind of origin stories. We wanted to call it 'Exploded Views' [and] dismantling the project and looking at it as parts and trying to kind of figure out components of the finance industry and our own industriousness. It wasn't like we planned a book. We were approached and we're like, 'Oh, okay!' And didn't really realize the amount of work. Well, I think we did realize but, you know, you always put off things to the last minute, and we missed lots of deadlines. But I feel really happy that there was a book because that's just another way that project can travel out and greet new audiences and things. And for the new project, I suppose we've learnt that we're trying to build in sharing with an audience as we go along, rather than just the final product of a feature film and maybe a book that we build that into the structure of the project. That we can share and go from the local to the global along the way, and not just wait for distribution at a kind of endpoint.

Kelly Lloyd 25:53

Yeah. So interesting. Um, so, I mean, part of me kind of wants you to, like, top to bottom, just be like, this is what *Bank Job* is. Like, this whole idea of buying local debt with... it's like, it's still something that my brain just can't quite process. How do you buy local debt? And then, I just want to hear about specifically, like, how you lost the building?

Hilary Powell 26:23

Well, it did start with Dan. And when he talks about it, it was like starting in a crisis of meaning. I think it was coinciding with us having children, but I was kind of super busy with pop-up book production. I suppose I think I got that Fellowship... (this is like, really backstory) [Laughter] probably early 30s, and it was a turning point in I'm an artist, working

full-time on projects, rather than the more just surviving piecemeal stuff before. So, I was really focused, but he in the meantime, was having a real existential crisis, which was a bit frustrating. He'd started to read all these books- George Orwell's *Why I Write* and [asking] like, 'why am I making films?' And he was doing some kind of crappy commercial work for money, like you have to but without any kind of sense of meaning. And then a friend mentioned a newspaper article, I think it was the Guardian about *Strike Debt!* in America, who were part of *Occupy Wall Street*, and their focus was debt abolition.

One of their key thinkers, Andrew Ross wrote this book *Creditocracy: And The Case For Debt Refusal*, and the arguments in that were so compelling- the idea that we are all living in a creditocracy, where a creditor class kind of wraps debt around basic human rights of medical care, like in America- education, student debt, food, clothing, just the need to survive. And how people cannot afford these basics and are forced into debt. It's not like a choice and [questions] the moralising narratives around the debtor [as] the other, and the shame and stigma that's still there. And that was coupled with reading David Graeber's book *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, which, again, tells this kind of epic journey and challenges those dominant narratives in public discourse around debt, and just the lack of understanding around debt and money creation.

So, we knew that we wanted to do a project, and he was involving me more and more, but I was still like- back off, [Laughter] I've got my own things going on. But I was getting more involved because that sense of injustice and hypocrisy that is at the core of that was driving, kind of factor for getting involved. And it took a long time to plan how you would tell the story of debt when these things are so elusive and abstract- debt, money, [and] now *POWER* as well. How you make an accessible narrative and [we] went down lots of wrong ends. We started to look at our home [of] and whether Walthamstow... [and] so that was when it changed. Rather than look at it in the abstract we were like, well, what about where we live in Walthamstow in London? Is Walthamstow a creditocracy? To and still finding resistance to talking about debt but managing slowly to build up some allies- talking to Gary at the food bank and the school and realizing there are so many people fighting the fallout of this unjust economic system.

I'm still unsure about how it became a *Bank Job*, but this kind of building from the ground up and identifying this need for change and the idea of a community heist on the financial system came about. And that was really when it got traction, because suddenly we could invite people into this- getting people to run around the streets as if they were on a stake out and stuff and playing with that genre. And we knew that we wanted to explode

debt, buy up debt and see if we could do it in the U.K. buy up debt for pennies in the pound and write it off. And to do that, we thought that we would print our own money, [giving] ourselves the power of central banks. And, you know, to do what we [wanted to do] with it, which would be to write off debt and stimulate the local economy.

So the banknotes had people from the local community on them: Gary, who [runs] the Food Bank; Saira and her family [who] run the Homeless Kitchen; Stephen and Josh, who run the local Youth Project; and Tracey [from] the local primary school, and they were all featured on these alternative banknotes, which had the special purpose of being sold as artworks to raise the pound sterling, to buy up one million pounds of local predatory debt, and the other half to support those causes.

So, the way that one million pounds is bought [for] by just [the] £20,000 that we raised is that there's a whole secondary debt market. So, if you owe £1,000 to whatever creditor, the bank, or payday lender, they don't want it on their books for too long. It's automatically sold down the chain to someone who might buy that debt for £500, and [they still try] and chase you for the full amount, and then it's sold on for less. So, in a way like the direct impact to people in debt by buying that might not be massive, because that debt is already old, and is probably part of many debts that they've got. And it doesn't help, you know, they might still be stuck in a kind of spiral of debt, we're changing the system through that.

So, the real purpose of that debt write off was like *Strike Debt!* to really make a massive do about it, [Laughter] and pierce [the] public conversation about the kind of illegitimacy of such debts through this write off, which in the end became a big explosion of that debt in a van in front of the Towers of Finance [of London]. And we [called] that *Big Bang Two* after Big Bang One when Thatcher in 1986, [deregulated] the finance system.

And that explosion was made possible by again, putting the bank back into operation and printing bonds. And people bought these bonds as a way to help that explosion happen, and their return on their investment was a piece of that explosion. So, we made coins and ingots out of the van. So, there's all these kinds of cycles of materials and making and all the while that was happening, there [were] constant events and action in the bank. And then that's part of the feature film and a book. And I suppose, unlike other projects at the center of it was a need... a kind of desire to get lots of press. And make sure that the voices- ours and debtors (as [in] all of us [are] debtors) were heard nationally and internationally. And so that's why we wanted to explode the van, and not go quietly with this project. So, was that clear?

Kelly Lloyd 32:51

Oh, yeah. Super clear. And then, um, and then with the bank not being able to keep the bank right before the pandemic?

Hilary Powell 33:02

When we first got the bank, we [needed] a space [for] two weeks to turn into a bank and print money. And then we were lucky that the tenants of the bank were a Welsh co-working organization called *Indycube*, and they were really welcoming. I mean, we couldn't have done it without them because they were so open to me really pushing it with like, 'Oh, can we have a bit more of the bank?' We were anchor tenants, so, we were looking after it. It was meant to be a co-working space, but it was so cold that it would never really compete in London against all these bright, swanky, [warm] co-working spaces. They said, they'd let the buildings speak and the building was speaking that it needed to be a bank. And it had been a cooperative bank and before that a Midland Bank, so, this was a kind of alternative new kind of rebel bank as it became called.

But then the footfall and the events that happened there made us really think this needs to stay. This kind of place on a High Street, where there's, I mean, I say radical education, but it's not even 'radical', you know? All this stuff that's labeled radical is actually kind of sensible stuff that needs to be implemented right now. So, we put together a big proposal to try and buy the space, [and] develop it as the event space, knowledge bank, studios [and] residencies on the High Street. Because I think lots of artists' studios, you're kind of relegated to the industrial margins quite hidden away, but to have that presence on the High Street... and it really became my kind of crusade. We worked, and we got support from Council, Mayor's Office, Heritage Architecture Fund, but our relationship with the owners just didn't work out. It's kind of my fault... but we were in a catch 22 situation.

I registered the building as an Asset of Community Value, which offers some kind of planning protection. So, for six months, we were able to bid for the bank. And we were bidding, we were bidding like two and they were asking for three million, which was kind of ridiculous. And we were bidding, and we could have kind of paid 2.5 million, but we were constrained by business planning to, you know, for doing it up and running it as a business. But basically, when I put that in as an Asset of Community Value, it created an enemy of the owners. But if I hadn't done it, then they would have just sold it over our heads anyway.

Kelly Lloyd 35:17

Why was that an issue?

Hilary Powell 35:19

Because that was the only power we really had as tenants. We were talking to them but we knew that they were going ahead to sell. And the only way we could put the brakes on that sale to allow for more negotiation would be an Asset of Community Value [which] gets the property listed in the council planning as an asset of community value. So, for six months, the community has the right to bid. But it doesn't mean that the owners have to take any notice of your right to bid. So basically, they were constantly batting us back, waiting for this special moratorium period, when it was an asset to pass, before selling it to the highest bidder. Even though we could have been the highest bidder we weren't trying to get it for a low rate, just the fair rate. Thing is the valuation for it came back as what they bought it for which was 575,000. And that was its valuation, so, they were asking like close to three million. So that discrepancy between this kind of speculative value and bricks and mortar value and our kind of trying to meet-in-the-middle negotiations broke down. It was really hard to kind of just recognize that it was now futile, and they said to move out on Christmas Day. And Christmas Day was not punitive, 'This is just an official day that is known in legal terms as a day to move out.' [But] it's Christmas Day! You've kind of given us ammunition to paint you as the baddies, even though we know they're not the baddies. These stories are always [more] complex, because the owners were legal aid solicitors suffering from massive cuts, [and] seeing that building they bought speculatively as their retirement [fund]. It's just that we weren't ever trying to block that, we were there with money, but our money was tied up in you know, big grant funds and a share offer that needed to go public.

So, talking about it, I'm like, oh, it was really stressful. But we moved out. And it took a while. When we talked to Steve from *The Soul Project* who'd lost their building, he said that four years later he still had seven storage units and [was] still kind of spinning from the aftermath of that. They've now got a building and a new collaboration. And for us, [we were] sorting through the storage units getting rid of everything that now we need again [Laughter], but in a way then the pandemic came and it's been kind of a relief to not have the responsibility of being [there]... because the dangers with that is that as an artist you become a venue operator and building manager, and, you know, a public meet-and-greet person and you actually lose track of what your purpose was there in the first place. So

maybe we were saved a bit of that because you have to be careful. But now, we're thinking again... finding a space to work from.

Kelly Lloyd 38:05

Tell me about *POWER*.

Hilary Powell 38:06

POWER comes out of *Bank Job* and what we learned through that about debt write off [as] a reset button for a whole raft of economic measures that are needed to tackle global injustices. And that basically translates as [a] Green New Deal. We met Ann Pettifor who was one of the [founders] writers of the Green New Deal in the U.K., and Kate Raworth [of] *Donut Economics*. So, all of that thinking has come directly into how, it's almost like *Bank Job- The Sequel* about how – [it's almost like *Bank Job* the sequel] – now we kind of want to create a grassroots Green New Deal, here [and] now, not waiting for 2050, or some government directive, because it's not happening.

So, we start, and particularly, I suppose, [are] inspired by pandemic lockdown, seeing what could we do from our street? Just looking at the street anew and thinking, well, what if the street could become a speculative future street... fully solar paneled, you know? Phase one is solar, then insulation. And we create a community energy company. We look at these ideas of decentralizing power in all its forms, and the kind of value of that. And we fuel that whole project by the production of Solar Arts. And we then make a film that explores this process, but then asks those bigger questions of power. In terms of who holds that power, in terms of electricity, I mean, that's our focus, but also on a bigger scale.

Kelly Lloyd 39:36

Is there anything that you thought we would talk about that we haven't talked about? Or do you have any questions for me? Or is there anything that you'd just like to say?

Hilary Powell 39:45

Hmm, no, it's been quite enjoyable. Yeah, I didn't imagine talking about the teaching, because it's always more of an invisible part. But that was quite interesting to be more analytical about how teaching plays a role, and all of the casualisation. I suppose maybe I imagined it would be more talk about institutional structures and funding and everything, which I didn't really want to talk about. Which obviously is another big part of all practice but

[I'm] kind of glad we didn't. So, I suppose these chances to reflect slightly are quite rare when you're just in production phases. So, it's good to stand back a bit. And that's prompted me to look again at my wall charts [Laughter] and see how things interconnect...

Kelly Lloyd 40:34

Yeah, it's been really wonderful talking to you.

Hilary Powell 40:36

Yeah. Thanks so much.

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Epilogue (Kelly Lloyd) 40:38

On the 24th of January 2022, Hilary wrote to me, 'Since talking... the project *POWER* -building a power station across the rooftops of Walthamstow, has developed a lot and on the 22nd of May will see the public production of the 'greenbacks' a new currency backing this grassroots Green New Deal.

Bank Job continues to screen and fragments of *Big Bang 2- The Explosion of Debt* will be part of 'Currencies of War and Dissent' at Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge in October 2022. *Navigating Light* -a project exploring the container shipping industry, is on show as part of Port City at the Museum of London Docklands until May. And *TIN WORKS* continues with plans for film and publication and upcoming exhibitions at Ffotogallery and National Museum of Wales Swansea Waterfront.

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Outro (Kelly Lloyd) 41:35

If you are interested in hearing more excerpts from conversations I've had with artists over the years, head over to the website this thing we call art dot com

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The logo was designed by Eva Duerden, the episode artwork was created by Fiona Reilly, and the theme song was made by Alessandro Moroni. This podcast was produced by me, your host, Kelly Lloyd.

Thanks so much for listening, and tune in next week to hear a recording of the conversation I had with Zarina Muhammad and Morgan Quaintance on the 24th of February at Whitechapel Gallery.