

Authorization Sessions

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Emma Hedditch
Devin Kenny
John Neff
and the Staff of Artists Space

November 2016 – March 2017

Introduction to Authorization Sessions

Authorizations Sessions consisted of an internal program of events, workshops, and discussions that took place at Artists Space from November 2016 to March 2017.

For this duration of five months, Artists Space was without an Executive Director. Stefan Kalmár had recently left the position to take up the role of Director of the ICA, London. The organization's Board of Directors was in search of his replacement, leaving the staff without formal leadership for a period of time.

The staff of Artists Space conceived of Authorization Sessions as a way to take advantage of this exceptional interim period. They took the opportunity to focus their work inwards, designing a program through which they could investigate the culture of the institution—culture understood as material that sets precedent, gives models for action, and defines protocol. These investigations were collectively determined and open-ended, with the loose goal of identifying the structure of the organization's labor, as well as the norms that regulate it. To identify the culture of the institution is to directly inquire as to the principles—both shared and disputed, both visible and inconspicuous—that make the institution possible. In short, what constitutes Artists Space? What might Artists Space be otherwise?

Among the staff, it was deemed important to spend time with these questions before the arrival of a new leadership. Authorization here is understood as both power and permission, where the staff members granted themselves and each other the authority to determine where they directed their energy and time, as well as, more provocatively, the authority to engage with the question of what an institution like Artists Space should be.

To help give form to these considerations, Artists Space invited a small group of artists and cultural practitioners—Amalle Dublon & Constantina Zavitsanos, Emma Hedditch, Devin Kenny, and John Neff—to each lead sessions of inquiry with the Artists Space staff. The artists were asked to engage the staff in critical discussions about the institution and its work, though the particular structures and strategies of each session were the purview of the artist.

Emma Hedditch designed a curriculum for a study group, and led Artists Space staff through seven weekly meetings. Readings were themed around the ideological and logistical frameworks for cooperatives, with the goal of inviting staff to consider whether Artists Space should itself become a cooperative. Though to restructure the institution in this way was determined to be impractical, the question put into relief the way in which labor is organized within the existing management structure of the institution, as well as the politics that sustain it. At the completion of these sessions, the staff expressed the desire to maintain a weekly general discussion group, a plan that formalizes discursive time, and distributes the work of critical engagement across all levels of staff.

Amalle Dublon & Constantina Zavitsanos proposed, as their contribution to *Authorization Sessions*, to provide the gallery of Artists Space for free, at predefined times, to groups in need of space to meet, put on events, produce work, and organize. In so doing, Dublon and Zavitsanos developed a set of protocols in tandem with the Artists Space staff for the use of the space. When working together, what do we owe? What in turn do we expect? These protocols, so defined, can inform how collaborative use of space is organized at Artists Space in the future.

Devin Kenny's project related to Artists Space's Unaffiliated Artists File, a registry to which New York State artists, starting in 1974, could contribute slides of their work, alongside descriptive material and contact information. In this manner, the work of underrepresented artists was made accessible to dealers, curators, and collectors. The Irving Sandler Artists File is still active online at www.local-artists.org, though at present its function has been largely superseded by that of artists' personal websites. Kenny proposed the installation of a mesh network at Artists Space. Using this, visitors would be able view and contribute to the File while at Artists Space, an action that would reunite the archive with the physical space of the gallery, and reestablish its community function. As an addendum to this, Kenny suggested that Artists Space formalize their support of grassroots organizing and community work.

John Neff led the staff members in a process of inquiry-based learning, a pedagogical method where learners identify questions as well as the methods by which they might be answered, often in collaboration with a facilitator. Neff asked staff members to complete worksheets detailing their relationship to the institution, through which he determined the larger concepts—those which would define practical assignments—to be care and balance. Through this process, Neff decided to spend intimate and unstructured time drinking and conversing with each staff member—an activity often integral to an artist’s relationship to a curator, though not one other staff are often made part of—and document these experiences with a video camera. The completion of the inquiry cycle mirrored the larger structure of *Authorization Sessions* itself, in that it encouraged participants to decide on what their assignment should be, rather than just fulfilling it.

In February 2017, a new Executive Director, Jay Sanders, was appointed, bringing this interim period to a close. To mark the beginning of Sanders’ directorship, which began on April 3, 2017, Artists Space is sharing materials that informed *Authorization Sessions*, as well as documentation of the process. Some sessions are more public facing than others. For certain sessions, the methodology is the material.