



Antagonisms:

featuring Caitlin Jones, Adrian Blackwell and Reza Nik

October 20, 2024 2:00PM-4:00PM

Event Respondent Essay

Response to Antagonisms

by Sneha Mandhan

This reflection centres the central tension that underscored the presentation and panel discussion at the event – between the desire to imagine alternative social and spatial futures and the need to remain financially viable (and, in some cases, survive) within structures that increasingly rely on private capital, real estate markets, and institutional affiliation. The themes emergent from the event are put into conversation with conceptual work by two primary authors – Sharon Zukin and her work on symbolic economies and the role of property and capital in shaping urban life¹, and Andrew Ross and his work on cultural labour and precarity².

A comment about place: The event was held at the Top Top Projects space in Geary Avenue in Toronto, which in itself is known for its transformation from a quiet, light industrial pocket in the city to a destination for art, events, artisanal food, breweries, and creative spaces. Being in this space, which went from being marginal to central in the planning and creative sector imaginary, where we heard a train rumbling by as the conversation began, made the realities of the topics being discussed uncomfortably real and palpable.

At the event, conversations about property, housing, and work in the creative sector repeatedly returned to a shared and urgent question: how to continue making, organizing, and sustaining cultural work under the worsening conditions of shrinking public funding, rising space costs,

and increasing dependence on private and institutional support. All of the speakers, from the arts, architectural, and cultural sectors, grappled with the tensions between thinking long-term about work that was meaningful and political, while struggling to survive in the short-term in a context that increasingly treats creativity as a resource for urban development and economic benefit rather than as a public good.

Both Zukin³ and Ross⁴ offer conceptual ideas that add to and align with this conversation. Zukin, in her work on the symbolic economy, highlights how urban spaces are marketed, branded, and justified, using arts and cultural symbols, as sites of investment, even as the people who create those symbols experience precarity and insecurity. Ross, similarly, highlights how cities have increasingly been focused on attracting the creative sector to gain an edge over their global competitors in a race to capture investment. As a byproduct, arts and cultural workers have had to participate in the marketization of their work, often through casual and gig employment, and at a high cost, including longer work hours, “price discounts” in return for recognition, exploitation for autonomy, and “dispensability in exchange for flexibility”⁵. Because their work is framed as meaningful, expressive, autonomous and self-directed, precarity becomes tolerable or even desirable. At the event, these contradictions were visible in how often solutions to cultural displacement were tied to real estate strategies – property ownership, development partnerships, and making space for cultural work to be financially feasible. These approaches were presented as necessary responses to funding withdrawal and resulting precarity. They also reinforced Zukin’s argument that property and capital increasingly shape what kinds of cultural life are possible in the city⁶. Cultural value, in this framing, becomes legible primarily when it can be translated into financial metrics such as revenue, margins, and long-term asset stability. This idea was particularly poignant in the presentation by Caitlin Jones who highlighted how public funding agencies, such as the Canada Council for the Arts, were increasingly pushing arts and culture organizations to “change the narrative” and focus on “creative place-making,” instead of acknowledging and fixing systemic underfunding; artists need to better sell themselves and their work to appeal to potential funders. As the Executive Director of BC Artscape, Caitlin described several experiences where her work, instead of being focused

3 Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities*.

4 Ross, “The New Geography of Work.”

5 Ross, “The New Geography of Work,” 34.

6 Zukin, *Naked City*.

1 Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*, Oxford Scholarship Online (Oxford University Press, 2020); Sharon Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities* (Blackwell, 1995).

2 Andrew Ross, “The New Geography of Work: Power to the Precarious?,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, nos. 7–8 (2008): 31–49, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276408097795>; Andrew Ross, *Nice Work If You Can Get It: Life and Labor in Precarious Times* (NYU Press)

on growing the organization and offering supports and services to artists, centred on branding techniques and property management.

The emphasis on “working within the system” (here, the capitalist system) was discussed as a matter of survival at the event – radical change was only an option if a cultural worker could survive the day to day, which was becoming increasingly difficult and expensive. Zukin and Ross’ work provides a deeper dive into how the pressures faced by arts workers are not accidental, but produced through a convergence of urban development strategies and labour regimes that depend on cultural energy without providing corresponding stability and financial security. Cultural organizations are increasingly asked to fill gaps left by reductions in public funding while simultaneously contributing to neighbourhood revitalization and place-making initiatives. Yet, as Ross⁷ notes, the celebration of creativity often masks the uneven distribution of risk and the erosion of collective protections and benefits for workers. This tension was present in the conversations during the event, particularly in the panel discussion, where speakers described the role of universities, nonprofits, and cultural institutions as crucial supports, but also as gatekeepers who controlled the kinds of projects that were funded, scaled and sustained.

Discussions about public life and collective ownership of space were offered as potential solutions during the panel discussion, but there was a foundational tension between the want for decentralized, slower interventions while working within existing systems. Cultural and art-based work, within the capitalist system, is valued in the same way as any commodity is, where speed, efficiency, and cost are prioritized. This system stands in direct opposition to the way arts and culture work – slowly, intentionally, and at smaller scales. The event did not resolve these contradictions, nor did it claim to. Instead, it exposed the limits of an imagination that remains tethered to the very institutional and market structures that have produced the current crisis of cultural work. For arts and culture workers, the challenge is not only to secure space, funding, or institutional partners, but to resist a model in which survival itself becomes individualized and depoliticized. If cultural work is to support more equitable urban futures, it must also confront the conditions under which that work is made possible – and the costs that continue to be borne by those who produce the city's cultural life.

7 Ross. *Nice Work If You Can Get It.*

Bibliography

Ross, Andrew. *Nice Work If You Can Get It: Life and Labor in Precarious Times*. NYU Press, 2009.
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About the writer:

Sheha Mandhan is an urban planner, architect and educator with an interdisciplinary practice in planning, urban design, architecture, design research, and community engagement. She is currently working as an Intermediate Planner – Project Manager at ERA Architects. She has collaborated on a range of city building and engagement projects in the Greater Toronto Area with Monumental Projects, People Design Co-operative, and the Department of Words and Deeds. She teaches undergraduate and graduate courses at the John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design at the University of Toronto, and holds a PhD in Planning from the University of Toronto, a Master in City Planning from MIT, and an undergraduate degree in architecture from India. Her work focuses on unearthing and incorporating culture into the planning and design of cities. For her PhD dissertation, she studied how municipal cultural and heritage planning practices in Toronto, Brampton and Mississauga respond to ethnic culture through the case study of banquet halls as important sites of cultural celebration for the South Asian diaspora in the Greater Toronto Area.

About Pumice Raft:

A **pumice raft** is an ecological phenomenon that usually follows an underwater volcanic eruption. Amongst the lava, plumes of pumice stones slowly float to the surface of the ocean. If the wind is calm the individual stones form what some sailors have reported as floating islands that appear out of nowhere. The pumice raft has even been known to ferry flora and fauna to new shores. More than an illusion on the horizon, a pumice raft represents a vessel, a conduit, a vehicle; its very constitution cultivates an environment where things can come together in the spirit of collaboration.

Pumice Raft is also a federally registered non-profit organization in Tkaronto/Toronto, incorporated in 2018. From November 2019-December 2025, Pumice Raft hosted exhibitions and events at unit 103 of 348 Ryding Avenue. Pumice Raft is currently pursuing nomadic programming and working on a variety of oral history research projects. Pumice Raft's activities begin from an ecological activist approach to the display of visual art and the facilitation of related education. This means that the guiding principles of the organization are rooted in a conception of place that begins with the protection of people and the planet. The activities of Pumice Raft take place on the land of the Haudenosaunee, the Huron-Wendat, and the Anishinabewaki ᑭᓄᓂᓴᑦᑭᓄᓂᓴᑦ. We are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this territory and participate in the lineages of this land.