The Feral MBA
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Supervisors: Teresa Dillon and Jon Dovey

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Declaration

I hereby certify that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Kate Rich

Abstract

The Feral MBA investigates what taking business as medium for artistic inquiry might open up, both in relation to arts livelihoods and to the ways that business and economy are performed in other areas. This practice-based research is rooted in three decades of artistic practice in tactical media art, infrastructural and maintenance art. It is situated theoretically within the feminist, relational framework of diverse economies theory, and with reference to existing critiques of the MBA. The underlying premise of the thesis is that current modes of business-as-usual are fundamentally unsustainable. Intrinsic to the investigation is a recognition that the ideological shifts required to move beyond a profit and growth-centred economic model, while critically understood and imagined, are extremely difficult to materialise and maintain in everyday practice. This understanding draws inspiration from the ecological thinking of anthropologist and cyberneticist Gregory Bateson who underlines that change needs to occur both at a philosophical and a habitual, behavioural level.

These directions come together in the project of establishing the Feral MBA, a training course in business for artists and others which is concentrated on the performative effects of a prevailing business ideology and how this might be countered in practice. Two one-month pilot programmes for the Feral MBA were undertaken as part of the PhD research, in Hobart, Australia and Plymouth, UK. In the process, a number of approaches were contextualised and explored, including performativity as a tactic for intervening in expected business narratives, active listening engaged through an experimental form of business coaching, and a series of hands-on making experiments with the materials of business. A significant recognition arising from these activities is the value of close listening as a generative, embodied means to step out of our daily business lives and practise alternatives with others. The work of the Feral MBA is to create a habitual container for this collective working out.

Eleven vignettes close the thesis, each looping back to ideas presented in the opening theoretical chapters. Rather than fixed conclusions or new business models they present a set of unstable, iterable tools and insights that start 'where we are' in diversity, locality and complexity, to apply to the difficult, subtle and variable process of becoming different business subjects.

Acknowledgements

Deep thanks go out to the people, entities and processes that enabled this PhD research. It makes for a glittering roll call and in keeping with the research practice, has been entered into an online database and formatted for presentation in the form of the *Feral MBA PhD Budget.* The Budget can be found on p.6F of the *Counter-materials Ring Binder* that accompanies the thesis (see also Figure 1, overleaf). Exceptional mention should be made to my supervisory team Teresa Dillon and Jon Dovey, for their steadfast support and invaluable illuminations throughout this great trial.

Beyond the rich substrate of human collaborations a host of other phenomena and forces contributed to the PhD working conditions. Most vivid of these was the planetary appearance of the COVID-19 virus at the start of the second research year. Without the world-scale poltergeist effects of the pandemic, the PhD experience would have been substantially different. So its agency is to be acknowledged.

In Australia where I consequently found myself spectacularly displaced for much of the PhD duration, it is customary to include an Acknowledgement of Country in many kinds of communications: at formal occasions, as Housekeeping at the start of meetings, in online presentations and in the daily business of email footers. Accordingly I would like to also begin by acknowledging the palawa peoples, Traditional Owners and ongoing custodians of lutrawita (Tasmania), the unceded land upon which much of this thesis was thought out.

Figure 1: The Feral MBA PhD Budget (detail)


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,200.00      Fo.am server resources
00.00        Framework laptop
             Free/libre and Open Source Software: Debian, Apache, Perl, MySQl, Etherpad, Wagtail, Jitsi,
             Libre Office, the Gimp, Imagemagick,Evince, Alpine, Evolution, Tor browser, Terminal, Bash
7.26         Gut health consultations
,000.00      Hotel Alabama lounge
00.00        Inception venues courtesy of: Moonah Arts Centre, Broom and Brine farm, Studio 65, Museum
44.20        of Old and New Art (Mona), Tip Shop, Good Grief Studios
             Irational.org server resources
,000.00      Lenovo X1 Carbon laptop
4.60         Lifts to and from airports, mixed cars, driving around
87.80        Meals cooked by others
5.12         Meetings algorithm code
3.52         Memory of the World Library, Libgen
             Merino leggings x2
90.00        Peoples spare rooms
             Public wifi extensively adopted
             Ring binders for business counter-materials presentation, street-scavenged
             Shadow-funding from fo.am, in ethereum
             State library of Tasmania
             Succession venue courtesy of 37 Looe Street
             Tip shop IPhone
             Wealth of resources at Waldies (tools, caravan parking space, hospitality, growing spaces,
3,600.00     grapefruit tree, people coming & going, spectacular pottery)
             Wild watercress
             Zoom

53,159.44    Labour
52,712.64    Bus commute to town for Officeworks printing and other services 1h each way
             DIY network installation, crawling through ceiling cavities to find trapped 85m ethernet cable
             end
46.80        DIY PhD cohort, Tasmania
             DIY server administration
             Endless emails
             Feral business coaching sessions
             Pandemic adaptation efforts
             Thinking while out walking on other business
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Xxx **THANKYOU collaborators /gravitational forces / hosts / inspiration / interlocutors / moral support and devils advocacy / provisioners / speaking in tongues / sponsors / supervisors & shadow supervisors including and not limited to:** ALL the Feral MBA participants, Andrea Lane, Angela Piccini, A.pass, Arts and Humanities Research Council, Astrazeneca, Bianca Elzenbaumer, Binna Choi, CAMP (Contemporary Art Membership Plymouth), Carmen Wong, Chiz Williams, Claire Field, Constant, Community Economies Institute (CEI), Community Economies Research Network (CERN), Cube Microplex, David Hopkinson, Elsewhere Sauna, Femke Snelting, Feral Business Research Network, Feral Livelihood Coaching Collective, Gillian Coleman, Grace Gamage, Guy Lochhead, Heath Bunting, Heather McLean, Jelena Stanovnik, Jenny Cameron, Jim Houlihan, Jon Dovey, Joon Lynn Goh, Julian and Judi, Katharine McKinnon, Katherine Gibson, Kathrin Böhm, Kayle Brandon, LADA, Lilani Vane Last, Loren Kronemeyer, Lucie Akerman, Maja Kuzmanovic and Nik Gaffney, Maria Kunda, Marsha Bradfield, Martin Parker, Matt Allen, Monica Francia, Morag Porteous, Mum and Dad, Nancy Mauro-Flude, Natalie Jeremijenko, Nicolas Galeazzi, Pia Louwerens, Stephen Healy, Teresa Dillon, 3D3, Tim Boycett, Tim Malnick, UWE, Waldies School for the Ceramic Arts.

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The business counter-materials

The following items have been submitted as the practice that accompanies this thesis. The numbers refer to the location of these items in the *Counter-materials Ring Binder* supplied to examiners along with this text. A photo archive of the *Ring Binder* will be available for viewing online[1] after the PhD examination period.

1. Algorithmic Dance Card and Meetings Algorithm
Algorithm screenshot, redacted email. With: Nik Gaffney (FoAM), Racket, Nano, Pine, the GIMP[2].

2. Call for Applications: Feral MBA – Inception & Succession
Screenshot of web content. With: Grace Gamage, Carmen Wong, FoAM web server, Wagtale.

3. Coaching by Numbers
Deck of 64 cards, colour inkjet on biotop 300 GSM card, 50-pack edition.
With: Maja Kuzmanovic (FoAM), Morag Porteous, the GIMP.

4A. Business Development Participant Information Brief
Printed form supplied to UWE Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) and to Feral MBA participants. With: FREC, Teresa Dillon, Jon Dovey (UWE), Libre Office Writer.

4B. PhD Terms and Conditions
Printed letter; research contact extract. With: Jim Houlihan, Teresa Dillon (UWE).

4C. Feral MBA – Inception & Succession Codes of Conduct
Printed protocol, photo-documentation. With: Grace Gamage, Carmen Wong.

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[1]   At http://feraltrade.org/ feralMBAphd/counter-materials.
[2]   Item credits include the indirect collaboration of software agencies,, where known.

5. Emulsification minibar

Cola concentrate in glass bottle, printed instructions. An energising drink
to aid the PhD reader through the reading process. With: Kayle Brandon (Cube Cola).

6A. Feral Business Budget: RADMIN

Digital print on gold or coloured card. With: Jono Lewarne, Adobe Indesign.

6B. Feral Business Budget: Feral MBA – Inception

Screen-print on calico. With: Grace Gamage, Danni McGrath, Libre Office Writer.

6C. Feral Business Budget: The Thorny Conversation of Art and Economy

Digital print on gold paper. With: Nancy Mauro-Flude, Libre Office Writer.

6D. Feral Budget Generator: FoAM Anarchive

Colour laser print. With: Maja Kuzmanovic and Nik Gaffney (FoAM), Irational.org
server, FoAM server, Perl, MySQL, MariaDB, Html, Apache, Nano, Rsync.

6E. Feral Budget Generator: Login

URL, password, codeword, written instructions. PhD examiners are invited to
log in to the Feral MBA PhD budget and enter their own items in relation to
the PhD resourcing. With: Irational.org server, Perl, MySQL, MariaDB,
Html, Apache, Nano.

6F. Feral Budget Generator: Feral MBA PhD

Black and white laser print. With: Irational.org server, Perl, MySQL MariaDB,
Html, Apache, Nano.

7. Institute for Experiments with Business

Texts in preliminary preparation for the FoAM Anarchive publication (2022). With:
Maja Kuzmanovic, Nik Gaffney (FoAM), Justin Pickard.

8A. RADMIN – A Festival of Administration: Lanyard and raffle ticket

Digital print on gold card and paper. With: Lilani Vane Last and Molly Cook
(UWE), David Hopkinson (Cube Microplex).

8B. RADMIN – A Festival of Administration: Programme

Digital print on coloured card. With: Feral Business Research Network, Institute
for Experiments with Business (Ibex), Chiz Williams (Cube Microplex), Jono
Lewarne.

9A. RADMIN READER 2019

Black and white laser-print on A4 paper With: Angela Piccini, Irational.org, Molly Cook and Lilani Vane Last (UWE Graphics), Adobe InDesign, UWE print services.

9B. RADMIN READER 2020
Black and white laser-print on A4 paper, ISBN. With: Angela Piccini, Viriconium Palace, Incidental Unit, Common Wallet, Minipogon, FoAM, Bristol Co-operative Gym, Cube Microplex, Lilani Vane Last, Adobe InDesign, Bristol University print services, UWE print services.

10. Training: Phys-Ed USB
USB stick with 7-minute training video, cardboard label. A short training break to counteract the effects of sitting. With: Guy Lochhead (Bristol Co-operative Gym).

11. Feral MBA Zines 0-4
Black and white/colour laser print on A4. Zine 0 Welcome, Zine 1 Charismatic Examples, Zine 2 Everyone is an Economist, Zine 3 New Shapes for Business and Enterprise, Zine 4 Feral Business Clinic Manual. With: Libre Office Writer, the GIMP, Inkscape, pdftk, office printers (various).

Chapter 1 – Introductions

Introduction

The economy as we knew it is on fire. There is no safe route back to certainty, no way that following a 20th century market-economy playbook for business as usual will secure one's own future, let alone a collective, planetary one. This is how I begin to introduce the Feral MBA, when asked, in art spaces, at community centres, in shops, on trains. The prospect, as widely recognisable as it is difficult to take in, is the premise for this research and the precondition for the account that follows.

In recent years, the legitimacy of dominant contemporary forms of economic and business organisation have been fundamentally called into question, both in mainstream public discourse and from the sidelines (Spash, 2021; Gibson-Graham et al, 2019; Piketty, 2019; Bendell, 2020; Raworth, 2017; Malm, 2016; Mason, 2015; Daly, 2013). This flare-up of attention attests to the extent of the problem but not its resolution. Despite an urgent need to reconsider business as usual, the underlying tropes of a mainstream neoclassical economics – productivity, competition, growth, rational self-interest, calculation – retain a powerful hold over policy and popular perceptions of what our forms of economic organisation should be and do.

This disjunction is apparent in the arts, where a sustained contraction in public funding has increased pressure on arts organisations to generate their own forms of enterprise, with an emphasis on financial and business resilience[3]. Yet the models of entrepreneurship on offer, which consider the potential of art and culture as assets to be monetised, are freighted with the language and processes of an incumbent economic system that is fundamentally antithetical to many of art's values and practices. In the creative industries – an umbrella term for economic activities that enrol individual creativity toward the generation and exploitation of intellectual property (Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 2001) – the emphasis is on innovation, competition, networking and getting investment. In artists' professional development it is on gallery representation, social media and competing for grant funding. Attention to the mixed livelihood ecologies of survival and

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3   See for example Arts Council England (2020)

subsistence that support art and artists, in their significant diversity, is missing In order for the arts to go beyond reproducing a bankrupt economic paradigm, a different approach is required.
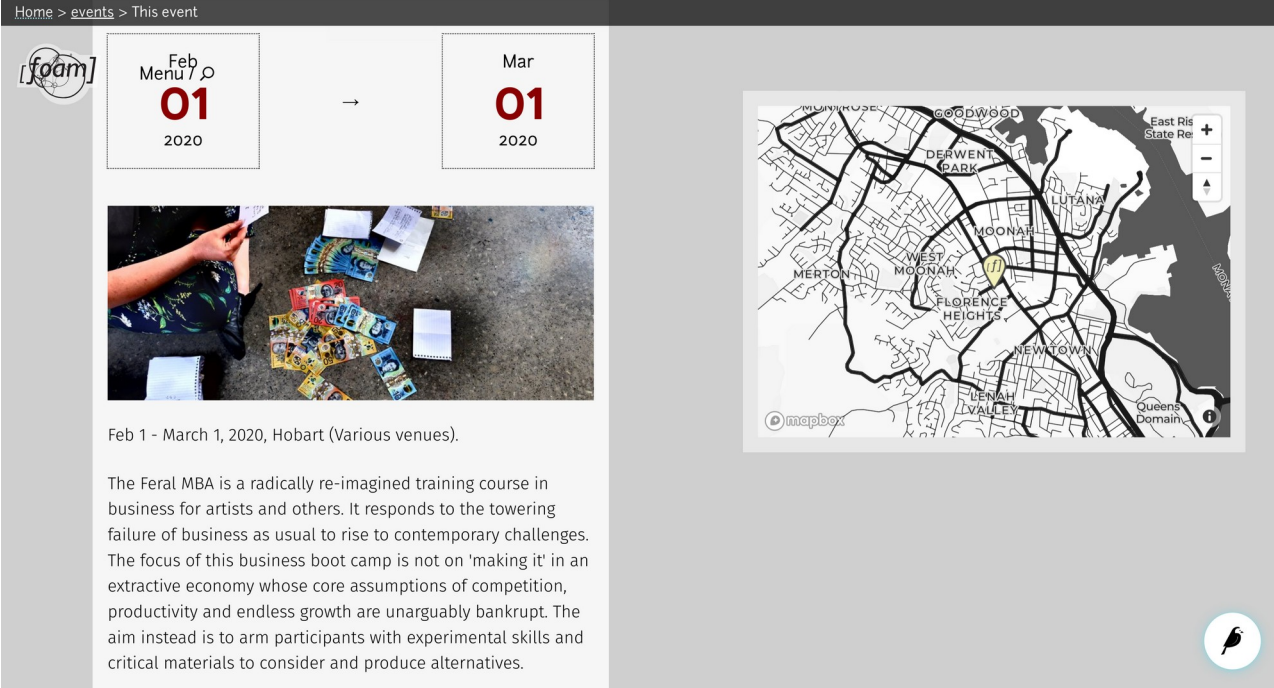
This research explores what I as an artist and trader could contribute to the interlocking questions of how to get by as an economic entity and how to engage with the burning dilemma of the economy as a whole. The heart of the research is a practice, manifested in an array of 'business counter-materials': objects and processes that works to materialise new and experimental ways of thinking with business. At their centre is the pilot programme of the Feral MBA, an experimental training course in business for artists, that ran in two iterations in 2020.

The Feral MBA

The Feral MBA is a radically re-imagined training course in business for artists and others. It responds to the towering failure of business as usual to rise to contemporary challenges. The focus of this uncommon business gathering is not on 'making it' in an extractive economy whose core assumptions of competition, productivity and endless growth are unarguably bankrupt. The aim instead is to arm ourselves with experimental skills and vital camaraderie to consider and produce alternatives.

This four-week programme of activities will include monetary experiments, (feral) business coaching and other often neglected business staples such as how to sit well. We will start from a feminist theory of economy as 'surviving well together' and examine exemplary examples of alternative art–business practice. We will also and primarily open up our own 'business' endeavours to mutual investigation and generative collusions, to think together on the quandaries of survival and livelihood and how these could be otherwise (Feral MBA Call for Applications, extract).

Figure 2: The Feral MBA – Inception – Call for Applications

The thesis assembles contexts, connections and artefacts uncovered through the practice, rather than mapping a terrain as a more conventionally academic approach might do. It is a container not in the sense of sealing things in, but a loose gathering or string bag, in the spirit of writer Ursula K. Le Guin's (1986) 'carrier bag theory of fiction', in which a number of contingent things can be bundled together and lugged around, at least for a while. The gathering may not always be in order, it includes found materials and loose connections. The device of the string bag means that things regularly fall out, mixing security with instability.

The things it assembles take different forms and qualities. There are administrative materials, items of merchandise, scheduling devices, accounting procedures, images, code and a (long) piece of text. This introductory chapter remixes a format I am more practised in – the artist's presentation with slides[4] – with the uncanny demands of academic writing: forms that will continue to jostle together in the chapters that follow. Elements of montage and mixed media (in the art tradition of combining disparate materials and methods in a single work) are applied as a means to bring a complex

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[4]   Rather than solely a presentation of evidence, the images included with this text represent a parallel line of thinking – a mixture of illustration, scene-setting, counterpoint, interruption and diversion. Unless indicated otherwise, the image credits are my own productions.

undertaking into focus. At times the efforts of other editors are sampled in: it is a polyvocal effort. It is also a mode of writing in which not every connection will be made explicit.

Business experience

The work to establish the Feral MBA is a three-year time slice of a 30-year working practice in business, art and economy, a mode of research that inhabits a situation rather than analysing it from outside (Rogoff, 2006). Its introduction here involves some reverse engineering: figuring out what an established practice is doing.

I came to art and business through inclination, happenstance and life. Having started out as a radio producer, I became an artist through a kind of osmosis, taking up the role of radio-engineer and roving reporter with media art collective Bureau of Inverse Technology (B.I.T.) in the 1990s. At the turn of the century, I moved to the self-invented occupation of 'artist and trader', running *Feral Trade*[5] (since 2003), a grocery dealership that investigates its own economic surroundings. *Feral Trade* was founded from the impulse to trace and experiment with my own economy as an artist, in a quasi-business world of itinerant culture work played out through an international circuit of exhibitions and conferences, plane and rail travel and speakers' fees. I was interested to repurpose some of the fleeting connections and resources of this unsteady infrastructure so I started using the jobs and opportunities I encountered as an artist to run an actual grocery business, trading goods along extended art and social routes. In parallel, the agenda of *Feral Trade* was to gain an understanding of the business sphere from the inside, engaging in a practice primarily associated with market-driven competition in ways that are investigative, peer-to-peer and hands-on (Rich, 2016).

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[5]   I use italics to distinguish business ventures (such as Feral Trade) that are art works and businesses at the same time.

Feral Trade

> **Feral Trade** **is a grocery import-export business**, art endeavour and long range economic experiment, trading coffee, olive oil and other vital goods over social networks and outside commercial systems. All my suppliers and all of my customers are gleaned through social connections. Goods are dispatched worldwide in the spare baggage space of friends, colleagues and passing acquaintances travelling on commuter, vacation and diasporic business, conference agendas, artist residency work and curatorial junkets. The word 'feral' describes a state that is wilfully or street-wild (as in pigeon), as opposed to the romantic imagination of a self-sufficient wildness (like the wolf). As a social protocol run over time, ad hoc and with no tangible assets other than a shared web server, *Feral Trade* materialises an underground freight network that is at least as robust and reliable as Fedex or DHL. *Feral Trade* is an important reference point for the Feral MBA research and I will return to it.

Figure 3: Feral Trade

Feral Trade business card.

In other business affiliations, I am part of the *Cube Cola* manufacturing partnership (since 2004), an open source soft drink, distributed worldwide[6], and have spent the past 20 years in various operational and governance roles[7] at the *Cube Microplex*, an artist-run cinema and arts

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6   Cube Cola, https://cube-cola.org, in collaboration with artist Kayle Brandon. Last accessed, 22/06/22.
7   Over the years these roles have included bar manager, cola producer, venue hire coordinator, web server administrator, driver, bar staff, usher, co-operative director, fundraising team member, event programmer, event manager, accounts team member, banker, keyholder, office floor sweeper, licensee. https://cubecinema.com. Last accessed, 22/06/22.

venue in Bristol. It is an unplanned and contingent CV, but one converging on or anticipating something slowly coming into form.

Figure 4: Cube Cola production, Science Gallery Dublin.

In 2011, precipitated by a rock-climbing accident that landed me at home for long stretches of time between rounds of foot surgery, I enrolled in a distance-learning undergraduate degree in business and economics at the UK's Open University (2011–2017), to supplement what I was learning as a trader on the ground. The degree was undertaken 'undercover' as an artist, with the objective not to learn what economics and business 'are' but how they are formatted and represented as forms of knowledge. In parallel (2015–2017), I established *Home Ec*, an informal economics salon in my Bristol flat, to try to untangle some of this intensity of information with peers. I was also starting to come across others whom I consider as trade artists (a category of practice that is yet to be established) through the networks of relations that *Feral Trade* was building up. On the trade side, I was invited to join the newly formed Sail Cargo Alliance, an assembly of ship owners, sailors and commodity traders working to reinvent the ancient art of transporting cargo on traditional wind-propelled ships. Through art

connections[8], I took up an opportunity to train as a life coach, a practice that has been influential for Feral MBA (I return to it later in this thesis). And it was via *Feral Trade*'s appearance in artist Kathrin Böhm's *Trade Show* exhibition (2013–14)[9] that I encountered feminist economic geographer Katherine Gibson, one half of symbiotic writing entity J.K. Gibson-Graham, whose theory of a diverse economy is one of the anchor points of this research.
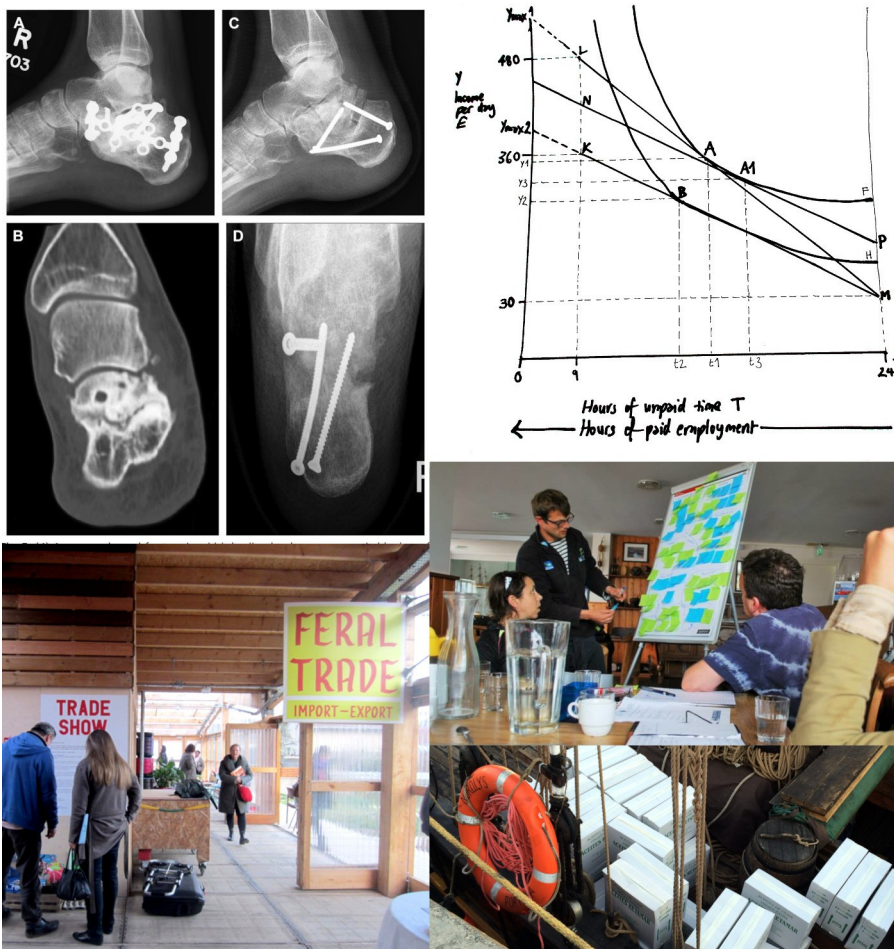
Figure 5: A gallery of events

Some events that produced the conditions for the Feral MBA. (Clockwise from left): Foot x-rays from the Bristol Royal Infirmary; Economics homework for the Open University (Doing Economics: People Markets and Policy); Sail Cargo Alliance meeting, Den Helder; Feral Trade olive oil boarding sail cargo ship, Porto; Meeting diverse economies theorist Katherine Gibson (centre) at Trade Show, R-Urban, Paris (Image credit: Trade Show).

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[8]   Artists Information Company, a membership and advocacy organisation for artists and art workers.
[9]   These events are tracked/recorded in Feral Trade Shipment FER-1887, Hot chocolate to Eastside projects, Birmingham https://www.feraltrade.org/shipment/FER-1887.html; and Feral Trade Shipment FER-1977, Coffee to R-Urban, Paris, https://www.feraltrade.org/shipment/FER-1917.html.

A diverse economy

Diverse economies theory supplies a radical reconception of the economy as something we produce together, rather than an abstract, fixed entity or external condition. Its defining proposition is to reframe 'the economy' as not a singularly capitalist domain but a powerful discursive effect that can, with concentration, be displaced by other discourses and visions (Gibson-Graham, 2006a; 2006b). As well as an explanatory framework for the kind of investigations that *Feral Trade* was doing in practice (Gibson and Rich, 2015)[10], the salience of diverse economies theory for this research is the mode in which it is offered. Rather than a critical exposition of a capitalist economy or a blueprint for its future transformation[11], the proposal it makes is to think and act differently with the diversity of economic practices we are already engaged in: to open possibilities for change in the present.

The Feral MBA appears

Here then, loosely bagged, are elements of a larger idea taking shape. Art as an economic habitat, trade as a mode of research, economics as it is perceived and diverse economies theory as a framework for action. The final catalyst was a personal 'futuring' session facilitated by colleagues from the FoAM network[12]: a speculative exercise to generate different visions of possible futures, and the paths and roles these might reveal[13]. The session concentrated on my question of what to make of these live wires and loose ends: what I as an artist and trader could contribute to the interlocking questions of how to get by as an economic entity and how to engage with the omnidilemma of the economy as a whole: problems that are both widely experienced and at our throats. Some weeks later, I was out walking when the general shape of the Feral MBA appeared as if by magic, all in one piece[14]. The breakthrough understanding: to apply what I know from art and

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[10]   A conversation between *Feral Trade* and Katherine Gibson, in which Gibson describes the work of *Feral Trade* as practising the politics of language, subjectivity and collective action that diverse economies theory is focused on.

[11]   These were the primary forms of resistance to a capitalist economic system I was encountering at the time, in the large-scale movements of anti-globalisation protest (Katsiaficas and Yuen, 2002) and in comprehensive theories of capitalist critique (Harvey, 2005).

[12]   Kuzmanovic, M. and Gaffney, N. *The Art of Futuring*. https://fo.am/publications/art-futuring. Last accessed, 22/06/22.

[13]   The session was underwritten in part through the eventful trade of a post-operative bottle of morphine, transferred through the futuring process to a colleague in greater analgesic need.

[14]   I was out for a stroll on a friends' property in rural Victoria (Australia), having just delivered 1KG of *Feral Trade* coffee to my hosts – see Feral Trade Shipment FER-2292, Coffee to Pobblebonk, https://www.feraltrade.org/shipment/FER-2292.html. The effect was of an ocean liner or perhaps a spaceship suddenly materialising, metres away from where I was standing. A hazily outlined but fully-formed world that I could just step across into.

trade not to the abstract arena of 'the economy', but to the sites and stuff of business, through its associated forms of business education and advice.

Why take business as the unit of investigation?

Business is a vehicle in which to navigate the abstractions of the economy, hands-on. It is inhabited: literally an occupation. It can be human-scaled, diverse and collective. Business presents both a containing form and a wealth of material contents in its fixtures and fittings, its logistics and administrative devices[15]. From the perspective of an artist and trader, these are not just items to study but things to experiment with and change.

Whose business?

The specific area of business this research addresses is one overlooked or merely glanced over by majority forms of business training, education and advice, with their focus on leadership and management, or on alternative forms of business organisation such as co-operatives and community interest companies (CIC's)[16]. The concentration of the Feral MBA is less on a category of business than a sprawl of different entities and identities: the sole trader, the family firm, the informal collective, the shopkeeper, the freelancer, the administrative worker who sews these things together. This is the 'sector' in which the Feral MBA is at least starting its work, one of people and relations rather than industries.

A term that may suggest itself is the *'lifestyle business'*, although this is largely used as a pejorative, for enterprises that are built around the wider values and interests of their operators rather than creating market value (Lashley and Rowson, 2007). Another term with mixed connotations is the bestselling concept of the *'side hustle'* (Guillebeau, 2017), where taking on extra work to make ends meet is recast as an aspirational pathway to a better life. In the vision of the side-hustle, individual empowerment (or self-preservation) is the centre of the action, while the workings of the wider economy are largely blurred out. In the context of social enterprise, there is also the concept of the *'good company'*, where business success is redefined beyond financial profit to include its social and environmental benefits (Upward and Jones, 2016). That 'business' would be coloured by these

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[15] A material orientation is why this research concentrates on specific business practices ('the MBA', 'administration'), rather than abstractions ('capitalism', 'neoliberalism').

[16] A commonly adopted legal form for socially directed enterprise in the UK

mixed associations ushers in another important component of this research that is the business imaginary: how business is perceived.

Why work with artists and art?

Art brings in a particular set of techniques and aptitudes. It is a field that is receptive to open-ended experimentation. On the practical side, it is also a logistics space with its own forms of infrastructure and resources that might be drawn on. Broadly speaking, art is a domain that is less than enamoured with the prospect of business: in art, 'business' is often conflated with having sold out. Yet artists are effectively small businesses themselves – exemplars or stand-ins for the broad range of business types (diverse, small and micro-scale) that the Feral MBA is concerned with.

The interest of the Feral MBA is not the art world as such, but in bringing artists together with other people and practices in the interest of what might be learned toward rethinking business more broadly. The question of 'what artists know' (Elkins, 2006) can be itemised as a set of skills or capacities, in navigating disparate value systems, making the implicit explicit, manipulating visual and spatial codes or managing whole projects from initiation to execution (Whitehead, 2006: Thompson, 2004). It can also be expressed as 'how artists think' (Wesseling, 2006)*,* where the artwork is thinking made tangible[17] and making is a form of thinking in its own right that generates its own knowledge forms (Manning, 1996). The idea of knowledge embodied in practice, process and objects, extends outside art into other domains. It brings the artist closer to the 'ordinary' occupations of the computer programmer, baker or bar owner (McRobbie, 2018), the sportsperson, banker or farmer (Brook, 2011). For the Feral MBA, an understanding of embodied knowledge is a means to move beyond the particular concerns of an art economy and into a more expansive arena of practice.

There is also an evident blindspot. On the one hand, artists are already playing with form and practising modes of embodiment that are intrinsic to the kind of change that this research is invested in. On the other, while artists are at home with indeterminacy and paradox, this superpower is rarely

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[17]   Cultural theorist Christopher Frayling (1993) puts artistic research into three categories: research 'into', research 'through' and research 'for' art and design. 'Research into' investigates and contextualises art and design practices, while 'research through' reports on art and design experiments with materials, processes or technology. 'Research for' art and design, the 'thorny' item on Frayling's list, is research that itself takes the form of a material experiment, where the thinking is embodied in the artefacts produced.

extended to thinking about their own livelihood practices – and it is this containment the Feral MBA is looking to breach.

'What if business was re-interpreted as a medium for critical enquiry?'

The above question, broached by designer and social entrepreneur Matthew Manos (2012 p.30), represents an outlier voice in business discourse. It is also an anomaly in critical making (Hertz, 2012), the sub-field of art and design in which it appears: to consider business as the site and stuff of meaning making. Manos' proposal reorients the entrepreneur away from profit as a primary objective, and toward the more intangible, durational and (implicitly) collective project of designing desirable futures. The proposition comes with its own baggage: a Silicon Valley culture of entrepreneurial innovation and 'inventing the future'[18], with its untroubled vision of technologically-determined human progress. Yet picked up out of context as a kind of found object and applied to the particular intersection of art and business that is assembled in this research – *'feralised'* if you like– the idea of 'business as a medium' acquires a kind of spikiness or glint, with the potential to open up thinking about what business could be and do.

Why feral?

Naming the business training programme the 'Feral MBA' started out as an attention-grabbing email subject line. The idea was to trespass on the business school's signature offering – the Masters of Business Education or 'MBA' as a protected brand[19] – but also to merge that fantastical territory with an already-inhabited way of thinking and working, through my long occupation of running *Feral Trade*. From the standpoint of the grocery dealership, 'feral' was also initially a play on words, a means to distinguish the business from 'fair' or 'free' trade, uneasy at the truth claims that these categories promote. *Feral Trade* takes as its icon the common urban pigeon. Not trespassing as such, the pigeon struts across property and infrastructure lines, mingling human and nonhuman worlds with a pigeon's ontology that does not recognise the difference (which is also what riles people about them). In its ordinary usage, 'feral' blurs between a natural state of being and a wilful capacity. Its connotations include 'going' feral, being invasive, causing disruption, being

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[18] A term popularised by computer scientist Alan Kay, it conveys an expectation that technological innovation would drive social change.

[19] MBA courses place importance on accreditation both at an institutional level and from outside industry bodies such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AASCB), who supply accreditation to a global standard.

undisciplined and disorderly,'wandering all over the place' (Harley, 2015 p.2). The feral as a status is generally conferred from outside, commonly as an expression of annoyance or dislike. By contrast, the Feral Atlas project by anthropologist Anna Tsing and others takes care to not make judgements of feral phenomena but rather observes and catalogues them. Here the feral is not inherently a problem but a descriptive characteristic of entities and activities that inhabit human-made infrastructures yet thrive outside human control, such as the wood-eating insects that tour the world on shipping pallets (Feral Atlas, 2020). Conferred from within as a piece of self-description, the feral has a different agency again. In relation to business I have taken it up as an avatar and invitation: a position to inhabit, a role to play out.

Transposed outside its usual nature/culture habitat, I am interested in the potential of the feral to run interference in that other super-naturalised arena that is business, suffused as it is in 'natural' economic laws of rational self-interest and competition. The concept of 'capitalist realism' (Fisher, 2010; 2009) describes a widespread sense that a capitalist ideology is the natural order, such that other ways of doing things are unrealistic. To survive, one must format what one does in terms that capitalism finds amenable. The potential of the feral in business, as an idea that 'puts pressure on the idea of nature' (Harley, 2015, p.6), is to wilfully do the opposite: to imagine the options for subsistence and survival outside the inevitabilities of a seemingly natural economic order.

Bringing in the feral also signals a departure from the assumptions of 'ethical' business and an often debilitating imperative to be 'good' or do 'right'. An amorphous character that veers between categories, the feral is 'contingent and performative, not pre-existent but enmeshed, co-constituted, entangled' (Neumark, 2015 p.9). Askance to virtue, it remains intricately related to the systems it operates in, including those it might contest. A feral approach to business does not get cleansed of its many attachments, as ethical business implicitly suggests. Instead it is embroiled in (and curious about) the mixed territories it occupies.

Figure 6: Grocery labels - the good and the feral
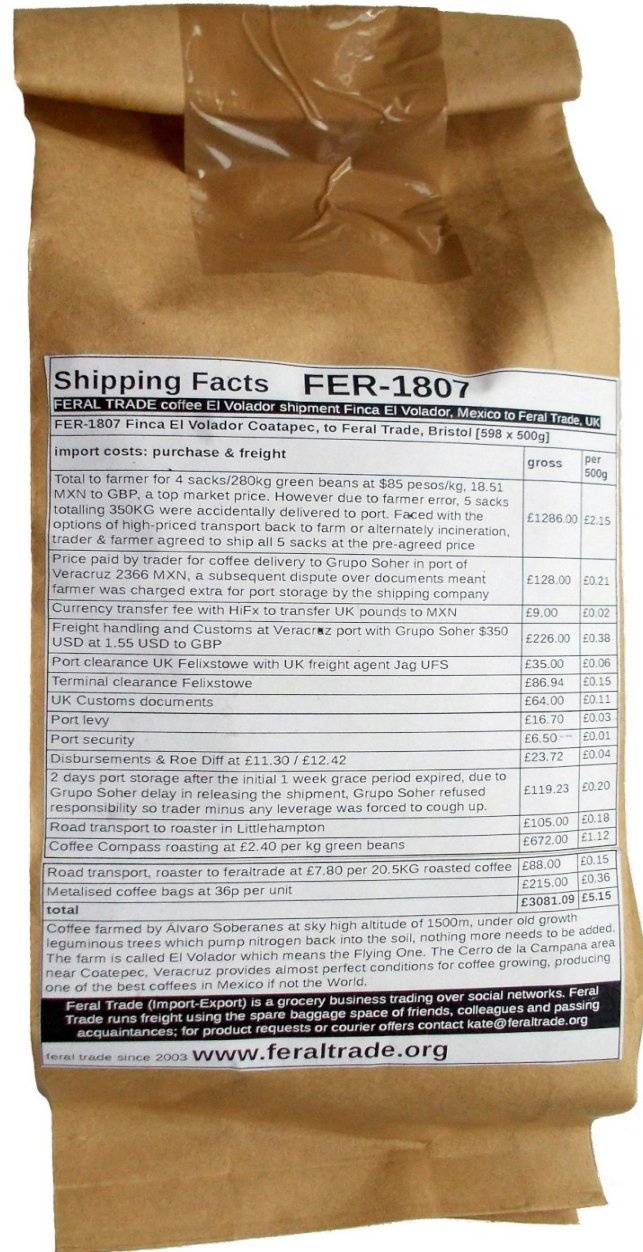
Good Hemp plant milk product labelling (left) stakes a claim to product ethics organised around the 'good'. The Feral Trade Shipping Facts label (right, on a Feral Trade coffee pack) does not express a position of virtue but traces out the complexities of the trade environment it operates in.

The interest in the Feral MBA is to transfer an understanding of the feral in business from the singular venture of *Feral Trade* to something that might be investigated in common. It is not about resolving the ambiguities of the term. On the contrary, it is in its mixed messaging, its compound character, being wild amongst not wild apart, that the potential of the feral in traipsing across some of the confident assurances of business discourse might be realised.

Why PhD?

The research for the Feral MBA is boundary-hopping and opportunistic. The opening to do this work as a practice-based PhD came up through my existing connections with the University of the West of England (UWE)[20] and I approach it as a trader, with an eye to meanings and deals. The PhD works as a substrate for the practice – a resource strand for funding and a stage for attention – as well as a useful form of containment (a stage that will end). While the practice 'owns' the research it is also inevitably derailed by it, as the demands of writing have stalled the activity of actually doing the project. At the same time, the practice and the theory are not separate tasks, they interlace.

Resources and Relations

Many of the references that populate this research, both theoretical and practical, are connected and known, as fellow travellers and first-hand stories. Some of these artists and thinkers have been engaged in *Feral Trade*, as suppliers[21], couriers[22] or customers[23]. Others have been hosts, guests, colleagues, mentors, coachees, collaborators, or encountered on the dance floor. If it is nepotism it is without the negative connotations of bringing in your own people to keep others out – the idea that I would be interrelated with other entities in the research is 'as it should be', a mesh of connections producing a conversation that others might also enter (Wilson, 2008). It rests on an ecological understanding of the world that is inescapably relational (Escobar, 2018) and a material way of thinking about knowledge production that is interpersonal and kinship-like. For anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (2004; 1995), the relation is a form of connection that can work across any scale, local or global, yet it remains effortful and particular, demanding time, energy and

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[20]   As lecturer in Media and Design Contexts (2015−18), through social contacts and contingency: UWE's three campuses are within a 30 minute bike ride of my Bristol home.

[21]   Feral Trade Shipment FER-1530, Grappa to Tyneside Cinema, https://www.feraltrade.org/shipment/FER-1530.html.

[22]   Feral Trade Shipment FER-1768, Coffee to Taoxi Village, https://www.feraltrade.org/shipment/FER-1768.html.

[23]   Feral Trade Shipment FER-2444, Swiss alps cheese to University of Bristol, https://www.feraltrade.org/shipment/FER-2444.html.

cultivation. Rather than consider this materiality as form of constraint, Strathern argues for a fundamental rethinking of the conventions that regard the interpersonal as small-scale. It is a situated approach to knowledge (Haraway, 1988), in a feminist tradition that refutes the idea of the detached, comprehensive overview for a kind of knowledge that is (always) situated and embodied in the researcher's particular location and partial vision.

Figure 7: The Feral MBA – Inception

Week Two workshop, Broom and Brine Farm.

Subsistence and survival

The first pilot programme for this research, *Feral MBA – Inception,* took place in Tasmania, Australia in February 2020. One day after the closing workshop, the first case of COVID-19 was recorded in the state. Within three weeks, a global pandemic had been declared, my flight back to the UK was cancelled, and state and national borders were slamming shut. In the face of uncertain events, I leapt at the offer of a caravan in the grounds of Waldies pottery studio and school, a business run by one of the Feral MBA participants, thus landing deep in the territory of investigation. While initially a stop-gap sanctuary, the caravan at Waldies[24] remained my studio and home for the remaining two years of the PhD research.

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[24] Technically a series of three caravans, the first two borrowed, the 3rd bought and renovated.

These personal effects are included here not as autoethnographic accounts to furnish a narrative of the researcher's unique lifeworld (Duncan, 2004). Rather their function is to surface the resources that underwrite the research, as an integral part of the research presentation. As one of the 'business counter-materials', the PhD budget (p. 30 and *Counter-materials Ring Binder* p.6F) brings the transactions and exchanges behind the thinking to the heart of what is being thought about. Here, the caravan joins an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) stipend, a salvaged iPhone, four loaned bicycles, two pairs of merino leggings for an unanticipated Tasmanian winter and 85 meters of ethernet cable strung between outbuildings, ensuring sufficient network connectivity to run the second pilot, *Feral MBA – Succession* in Plymouth later that year. Also enrolled were peoples' spare rooms, shacks, more caravans, the public library and hotel lounges (for writing residencies of varied durations) and the rural bus network. Business coaching was exchanged for sauna tickets, gut health consultations, writing retreats and copy editing. It is a host of different, incommensurable currencies, but what it adds up to is that the working conditions would inevitably become part of the work.

Figure 8: Locations and resources

(Clockwise from left): PhD workspace: the caravan at Waldies; borrowed shacks.

Figure 9: Feral MBA – Inception Budget (detail)

The resources and relations that underwrite the research include the other artists, businesses and collectives that provide its vital infrastructure in collaborations, contexts, ideas and living instances[25]. With colleagues at FoAM[26], a network of interdisciplinary practitioners and labs, I have been working in parallel on the Institute for Experiments with Business (Ibex) as the larger container that the Feral MBA will eventually inhabit[27]. The events of *RADMIN* (p.107) were co-produced with colleagues from the *Cube Microplex*. The Irational.org server collective supplied server resources and coding camaraderie. The Community Economies Research Network (CERN) provided a formidable and supportive community of others working with diverse economies theory. There is also the kind of knowledge-sharing that goes on beneath and around citation trails – informal, subliminal, speaking in tongues – including a supervisor chorus line whose voices have been sampled in, emblematic of a kind of administrative-collegiate layer of knowledge production that gets merged in or centrifuged out of the finished work. The presence of these many co-authors is implicit throughout the thesis and spelled out in more certain terms in the celebratory medium of the PhD budget (p.5).

Business as a medium

The *Charismatic Examples* – another set of relations that support this research – were presented in the Feral MBA curriculum as a constellation of different business thinking.

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[25] The *Counter-materials Ring Binder* Inventory (p.10-12 of this thesis) is indicative of the diverse collaborations enrolled in the practice side of the PhD, from the direct contributions of people (in texts, images, code, graphic design and general advice), to the indirect contributions of software tools.

[26] FoAM is an international network of trans-disciplinary labs and practitioners working across art, science, nature and everyday life, see https://fo.am. Last accessed, 22/06/22.

[27] The idea for Ibex was born at the same time as the Feral MBA research and has been taking shape alongside it. For the PhD research, Ibex provided vital collegial resources, a place to test out some of the ideas, budgetary support and a parallel publication platform, in the form of the *FoAM Anarchive* (2022) in which a number of short texts extracted from this thesis will be published. See https://anarchive.fo.am/crystal/grey-skies-thinking.

The Charismatic Examples

The *Charismatic Examples* (*Zine 1*, *in the Feral MBA cuuriculum*) is a catalogue of ventures whose means of survival are not easily benchmarked or extrapolated into a business how-to. Short profiles of these 'non-model' enterprises were compiled and distributed as one of the printed Zines that made up the Feral MBA course materials. Their collection takes its inspiration from the sheer variety and tenacity (rather than the replicability) of business forms. The assembled examples are not all art and not all 'a business': what they do have in common is that they are experimenting with business as a going concern. Their number extends to the Sail Cargo Alliance who are reinventing the ancient art of running cargo on wind-propelled ships in Europe and the Americas. There is also Premium Cola, a German drinks distributor who run their business without written contracts or a business plan, and apply an 'anti-volume discount', charging less per unit to smaller buyers. It includes the Amber Films collective in Newcastle who used their film-making budgets to buy and operate the infrastructure that appears in their films (a fishing boat, a pub and a racehorse) and Common Wallet, a group of artists in Brussels who pool and manage their incomes and outgoings from a single shared bank account. It is not a definitive set of things but a selection of endeavours I have come across. Some of these projects and people take up positions inside the Feral MBA, as counterparties, collaborators, alumni and visiting faculty, so they are connections still in the making. Their compilation is a strategic form of inventory that materialises certain things together in order to make their confluence 'more real' (Law and Urry, 2004 p. 11). It brings a new kind of business assembly into being from what people are already doing, asking: *What if this was an economy already?*

Hitchhiking in Connecticut

In 2016, before the Feral MBA had formed as a coherent idea, I was travelling in Connecticut, when I snagged a ride in the Porsche of a senior engineer at Otis, the world's largest manufacturer of elevators and escalators. His previous job involved designing engines for a major aircraft manufacturer, where his team had produced a 20% fuel reduction with implications for potentially all air traffic. He asked me what I did, so I told him about *Feral Trade*, and showed him the kilogramme of coffee that was hitching with me in my bag. He said he recognised the social benefits (encounter, interaction, conviviality) but not the societal benefits. A kilo of coffee, while travelling with the courier on existing business still adds one kilo payload to the journey, thereby not affecting the carbon equation – the societal burden – at all.

I had to think about this as the Connecticut landscape whipped by. I mentioned speculation that fuel efficiency innovations in American cars have led to a marked increase in the amount of driving – known in economic theory as the 'rebound' effect (Sorrell and Dimitropoulos, 2008) – suggesting that efficiency, as a leading approach to the towering problems we collectively face may demonstrate its own built-in obsolescence. His response was, well this is inevitable anyway – people will always want to drive or fly – so the fuel reduction per mile makes a critical contribution. We left the topic at this impasse.

Thinking it over later, it's an engineer's perspective: if it can't be aggregated, multiplied and claimed against measurable standards it doesn't count. A *Feral Trade* delivery takes on an entirely different register, stashing its value in the unseen encounters, entanglements and moments of unscripted opportunity to be found in (I would suggest) any transaction or logistics exercise, as opposed to refining or removing these from the frame. It picks up on friction and indeterminacy as sources of value, as opposed to the kinds of sweeping optimisations that are designed for in conventional logistics. It is a different mode of 'doing business', concentrated at at a particular scale and resolution of encounter and negotiation. How to make the case for that – to engineers and others – is at the nexus of this research.

Figure 10: Feral Trade coffee shipment in progress

Feral Trade Coffee shipment FER-2204, coffee El Volador from Feral Trade, Bristol to a.pass, Brussels (Image credit: larbits sisters).

The timeliness for a sea change in thinking about business and economy has only intensified as this research has taken shape. To note just a few events that scored the timeline of the PhD: the Brexit process already underway as I departed the UK for Tasmania (2019–), the extreme bushfire 'black' summer[28] that greeted my arrival in Australia (2019–20), the COVID-19 pandemic that followed before the smoke had cleared (2020–), Black Lives Matter which played out significantly in my home base of Bristol, with the toppling of the Colston Statue (2020–), and as I write, the war in Ukraine (2022–). Each presents profound disruptions in the movements, livelihoods and supply

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[28]   I have unerasable memories of visiting Katherine Gibson and the Institute for Culture and Society (ICS) at Western Sydney University for a PhD fellowship in December 2019 as the city was swathed in bushfire haze from the 2019-20 'Black Summer' conflagrations. See Feral Trade Shipment FER-2558, Coffee to Western Sydney University, https://www.feraltrade.org/shipment/FER-2558.html.

chains of 'business as usual', and each has opened significant public debate on what needs to change. Yet to live through these events underlines that change at a societal scale is more easily imagined than done.

To consider the manifold efforts required to change habitual thinking, I draw on the ecological insight of Gregory Bateson.

> The step to realizing – to making habitual – the other way of thinking – so that one naturally thinks that way when one reaches out for a glass of water or cuts down a tree – that step is not an easy one (Bateson, 1972, p.469).

To me, Bateson gets to the core of the matter: we comprehend things, yet to act on them is another story. The difficulty of enacting change is fundamental to this research and I return to it in the chapters that follow.

Order of proceedings

The research for the Feral MBA investigates what taking business as a medium might open up, both in relation to arts livelihoods and to urgent questions of business and economy in other fields. The fields it speaks to are diverse, and bringing them together involves some heavy lifting. Chapter 2 lays out the contexts and relations: in diverse economies theory, the business school, in theories of scale and in art.

Chapter 3 turns to the practice, central to which is the design and delivery of the two Feral MBA pilot programmes. The thesis here is interleaved with its material counterpart, the *Counter-materials Ring Binder*: objects and processes that form the practice submission for this PhD and stand as items of knowledge in their own right[29]. Chapter 4 reports on the findings – what opening the research concerns with others did – followed by Chapter 5, a presentation of conclusions that strives to not tie things down but keep them open.

These components generated a set of research questions that have flickered in and out of view as the research unfolded, but remain as valuable framings for the knowledge produced.

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[29] For a detailed contents listing see p.8 . A photo archive of the *Counter-materials Ring Binder* is available online after the PhD examination period at https://feraltrade.org/feralMBAphd/counter-materials .

Research Questions

1) What could it mean to approach business as a medium for artistic enquiry?

2) What formats, experiments or interventions could be designed to test this proposal?

3) How might these experiments contribute to and challenge current thinking about how we do business?

Chapter 2 – Contexts

Chapter 1 introduced the problems and the backstories behind the Feral MBA at a personal and political level. In Chapter 2, I assemble the academic approaches and working environments that form its contexts and connections. This review opens with the feminist, ecological perspective of diverse economies theory. It continues with an introduction to the Masters of Business Administration (MBA), along with some alternative forms of business education that are instructive for the Feral MBA. The third section represents a short intrusion from a sticky question of scale. And in the fourth part, I locate the Feral MBA in the context of its ancestors, allies and antitheses in art.

Context 2.1 – Economics for artists

If business is the unit of investigation in this research, economy is the terrain: the habitat we navigate when we think about business and livelihood. The Feral MBA is informed by a feminist, ecological standpoint: substantially different to the mainstream, 'neoclassical' economics that has become synonymous with the way 'the economy' is presented and perceived. In order to begin rethinking business, certain perceived economic inevitabilities – both those in daily circulation and those that appear beyond discourse, as background, implicit, masked effects – need identifying and breaking down. It is a powerfully compacted terrain, calling for energy, tactics and equipment. Diverse economies theory supplies both a vital theoretical framework and implements for this work.

This section introduces diverse economies theory[30] through some of its tools and devices that inform the Feral MBA research, and broaches the difficulty of actually inhabiting a radically different understanding of economy on a day-to-day basis. In the process, it sets out the task for the Feral MBA – to move from theory into other forms of action.

Diverse economies theory

Diverse economies theory is formed around the thinking of symbiotic writing entity J.K. Gibson-Graham, the group name of economic geographers Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham (Gibson-

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[30]   For a more comprehensive walkthrough through the core ideas, see the introduction to the Handbook of Diverse Economies (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski, 2020 pp.5-17).

Graham, 2008; 2006b; 2006a). It marks their transition from the critical study of 'capitalism' as a framing condition of contemporary life with essentially immutable laws (in a critical Marxist tradition), to a feminist, poststructuralist orientation that reframes the economy as a space for ethical action. The concept of an ethical practice refers neither to a blueprint for doing 'good' nor to another normative vision of what the economy could be. It instead describes a commitment to 'becoming different kinds of economic beings': a 'co-implicated processes of changing the self/thinking/world' (Gibson-Graham, 2006b p.xxviii) through an ongoing exercise of choice about how to think and act. Rather than channel energy toward critiquing capitalist systems or modelling alternatives[31], diverse economies theory follows the feminist principle to 'start where we are' (Gibson-Graham, 2006b p.196) and rethink the economy from there.

Diverse economies theory considers the economy not as a science with fixed laws[32], but as something that we are all involved in making and stabilising. Through an iterative process of articulating, de-centring and reframing, it brings the economy's discounted peripheries to the centre of attention: the many, interconnected activities of sustenance and livelihood that, because they lie outside a capitalist frame, are not normally credited as economic[33].

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[31] As exemplified in alternatives to growth-oriented economic models such as the information technology-driven vision of 'postcapitalism' proposed by Paul Mason (2016), the 'degrowth' movement that envisions a profound global shift to a smaller, sustainable economy (Feoloa, 2019; Escobar, 2015; Latouche, 2004), the 'circular economy', modelled on design principles for decoupling economic activity from the consumption of finite resources (Ellen Macarthur Foundation, 2021) or the 'doughnut economics' put forward by Kate Raworth (2017) as an economic model for managing human prosperity within planetary limits.

[32] As expressed in the near-ubiquitous image of 'The Circular Flow': a diagramme of the economy as a simple set of exchanges between households, firms and governments, still dominating the account of how the 'macro' economy works in contemporary economic education (Raworth 2017).

[33] This approach connects to a body of feminist scholarship that highlights the importance of unpaid and informal economic practices, in particular the invisible 'reproductive' labour of women in households that goes towards reproducing human life and maintaining a capitalist workforce. See for example McKinnon (2020), Federici (2012), Weeks (2011).

The economy as an iceberg

The diverse economies iceberg communicates an already-existing diversity of economic practices. The capitalist economy of waged labour, commodity markets and capitalist businesses that dominates mainstream economic accounts is just the iceberg's tip, supported 'under the waterline' by the mass of livelihood practices and relations that contribute to collective survival and wellbeing, from housework and informal loans to alternative currency systems. The motivations behind these activities extend well beyond a narrow model of utility – the maximisation of rational self-interest established in neoclassical economics – to also encompass 'trust, care, sharing, reciprocity, co-operation, coercion, bondage, thrift, guilt, love, equity, self- exploitation, solidarity, distributive justice, stewardship, spiritual connection, environmental and social justice' (Gibson-Graham, 2014 p.1). Through articulating the breadth of livelihood practices we are already involved in, and claiming these as also economic, the iceberg acts a conversation-starter to explore which of these activities could be strengthened and how.

Figure 11: The Diverse Economies Iceberg

Diverse Economies Iceberg by Community Economies Collective (CEC)
http://www.communityeconomies.org is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0
International License http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0
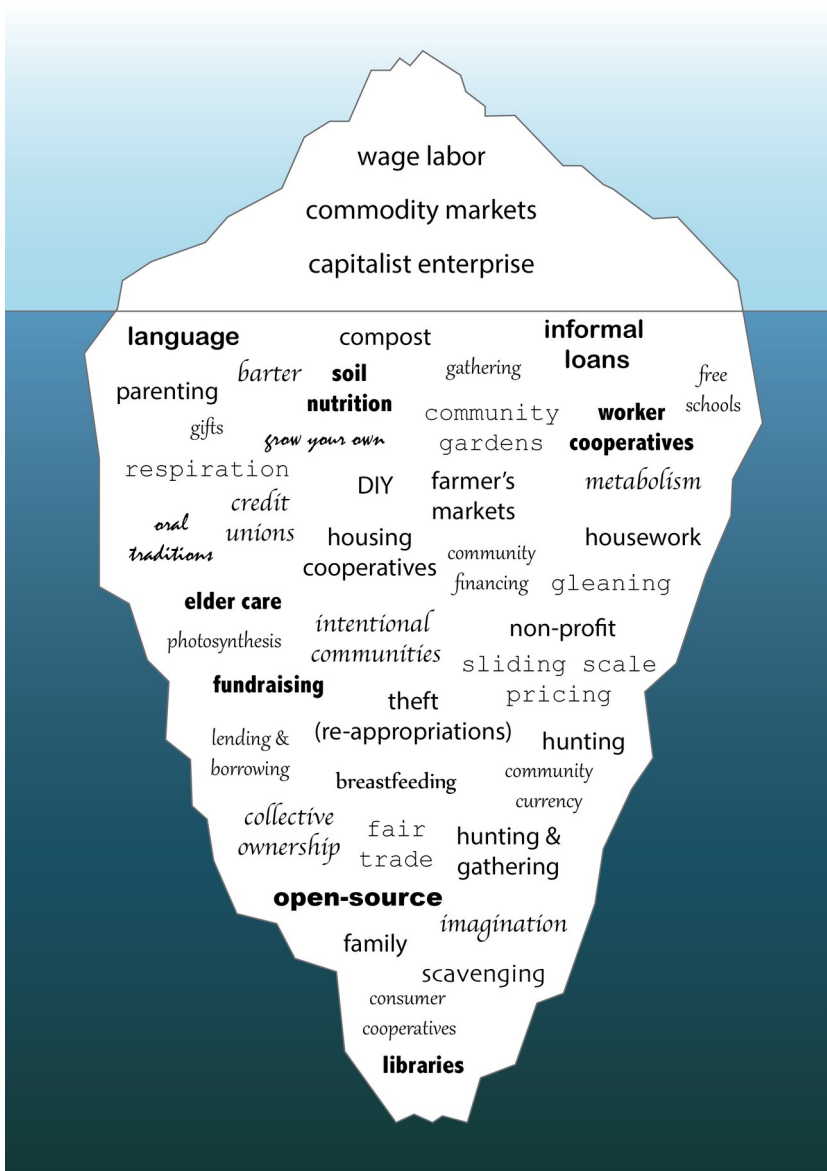
Performativity

Diverse economies theory is primarily a discursive project that credits the way we think and talk with material effects (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski, 2020). It takes a performative approach that holds that how we understand the world contributes powerfully to what the world is. The concept of performativity refers to a certain type of utterance (writing a will, naming a ship, or just the everyday habits of speech that place things into expected categories) produces rather than merely describes social reality (Austin, 1970; 1962). Diverse economies theory works with an understanding that performativity extends beyond words to the behaviours and routines that reiterate social meanings, including those that stabilise the economy (Butler, 2010; Callon, 2007; 1998; Callon and Muniesa, 2005; Mitchell, 2005; Butler, 1993; Sedgwick, 1994). Anthropologist Koray Çalışkan and sociologist Michel Callon (2010; 2009) use the term 'economisation' to highlight the agency of economic devices – from accounting conventions to the organised discourse of economics itself – in establishing what is considered 'economic'. These devices do not just report on their operating contexts but contribute actively to shaping them (Callon, 1998). While sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1990) underlines the self-reinforcing character of performativity (for Bourdieu, preformativity is citational, in that it calls on the authority of existing practices for its binding effects), feminist and queer theorist Judith Butler (1999) has challenged Bourdieu's assignment of power to only those forms of authority that are already institutionalised. For Butler, the authority of language (and other social practices) can also be seized through 'improper' use – such as the way that the performative power of the terms 'queer' and 'black' has been taken back by those who have been radically disenfranchised by them (Butler, 2010; 1999).

Following Butler, diverse economies theory takes the economy as a place for intervention, rather than as something we are inevitably subject to. In concentrating on the enabling effects of theory to change social meanings, Gibson-Graham join thinkers in other fields from literature to science studies (Felski, 2015; Rogoff, 2006; Latour, 2004; Sedgwick, 2003) who have backed away from a critical stance for its disabling tendencies to confirm and reinforce existing power structures. Whereas critical theory risks confirming the inevitability of the world as it 'is', performativity 'accept(s) that how we represent the world contributes to enacting that world' (Gibson-Graham 2020, p.483). The intention is not to abandon critique – or to force a binary choice between critique and creation, but rather to experiment with the combination of these positions, trained on the

possibilities for action this might produce (Miller, 2019). The effect is to mobilise scholarship as a form of activism, in Gibson-Graham's (2008) terms.

De-centring, destabilising and reframing[34]

The first intervention of diverse economies theory involves 'displacing the economy from its founding and unifying role' (Gibson-Graham, 2006a p.36), whereby the seemingly incontestable superstructures of 'capitalism', 'the economy' and other categories that order economic life ('the workplace', 'market forces') are revisited as complex, partial, unstable, messy assemblages. Despite their monolithic appearance, these constructs are invariably in a process of breaking down: diverse economies theorist and farmer Ethan Miller (2019 p.88) applies the analogy of 'decomposition' to describe a process that is always underway, but can be helped along by the farmer's composting agency.

Inventory and thick description

De-centring and destabilising the economic status quo is accompanied by a process of material inventory, naming and articulating a plethora of livelihood practices as also economic. Gibson-Graham call on the ethnographic writing technique of 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973): an observational process that seeks not to refine the essence of things or decide what they 'mean', but to bring their inherent variety to close attention (Gibson-Graham, 2014). In place of identifying things with or against a dominant capitalist system, thick description turns a confirmatory attention to the agency and diversity of marginalised economic practices, making them 'visible, legible and legitimate' (Gabriel and Sacrimento, 2020). Rather than a neutral scan, it is a 'strengths-based' approach that does not ignore the needs and deficiencies of individuals or enterprises but prioritises attention to their assets and capacities (Gibson-Graham et al, 2019): things that might invite action, rather than reinforce negative affect.

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[34] Helpfully to an academic outsider struggling to communicate their complexity, these tools [use a language of / are expressed in terms of] shape, position and texture.

Weak theory and reading for difference

Thick description is coupled with a practice of 'weak theory' (Gibson-Graham, 2014; 2006b), drawing on queer theorist Eve Sedgwick's (2003; 1997) concept. Weak theory turns away from the unifying accounts of 'strong' theory – 'powerful discourses that organise events into understandable and seemingly predictable trajectories' (Gibson-Graham, 2014 p.1). Instead it is largely observational, tuned to anomaly, nuance, minor connections and the unforeseen, it 'refuses to presume in advance what forces are at work and what outcomes are being generated' (Cameron, 2020 p.37). A 'weak' approach to economic analysis means relinquishing the predictive power (and seductive appeal) of comprehensive models, confident schema and generalised truths that mainstream economics relies on, for close-up renderings of how an economy looks in place (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski, 2020).

A further fundamental strategy is the feminist practice of 'reading against dominance and for difference' (Gibson-Graham, 2020 p.476): unfixing expected associations in the way we read the world to instead consider words and processes for where they might lead. As a non-deterministic way of considering the economy, reading for difference is also applied to research methods. The *Handbook of Diverse Economies* describes a process of experimenting with a range of methods, not for the traditions they are associated with, but for the 'possibilities they might help to produce' (Roelvink, 2020 p.458). In geography for example, researchers are using geographic information systems (GIS) in ways that detach that technology from its primary association with a positivist, reductive approach to knowledge[35]. Rather than reject GIS for its dominant connections, diverse economies scholars are suspending their assumptions to experiment with how GIS tools could be used in non-positivist research processes – and how those tools could be changed to better fit different knowledge paradigms (Drake, 2020)**.**

The Community Economies Research Network (CERN)

My encounter with diverse economies theory provided a rich theoretical framework and context for the Feral MBA research: a means to articulate existing activities and position new ones. It also served as an introduction to a transdisciplinary community of thinkers convened around Gibson-

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[35]   And by extension, from geography's historical implication in projects of imperialist expansion (Roelvink, 2020)

Graham's work, in the form of the Community Economies Research Network (CERN), an international mailing list of several hundred participants, which I have joined[36]. CERN members are predominantly academics but include a number of artists and designers who are applying diverse economies theory in their work, who I return to at the end of this chapter.

Bateson's dilemma

How to actually inhabit a diverse economy in day-to-day living is a central question for the Feral MBA research. The difficulty is prefigured in the ecological thinking of Gregory Bateson, whose work spans biology, psychology, anthropology and cybernetics. In his theory of 'ecology of mind', Bateson extends a conception of the 'unit of the mind' and the 'unit of survival' from the individual organism to a complex interconnectedness of 'organism plus environment' (Bateson, 1972 p.472; 489): a system of relations that is intermeshed, inextricable and unbounded. Crucially, Bateson also points to a disjunction between an intellectual recognition of the relational nature of the world and the kind of understanding that is inhabited at a behavioural level.

> The most important task today is, perhaps, to learn to think in the new way. Let me say that I don't know how to think that way. The step to realizing – to making habitual – the other way of thinking – so that one naturally thinks that way when one reaches out for a glass of water or cuts down a tree – that step is not an easy one (Bateson, 1972 p.469).

Bateson's ecological, relational perspective marks a paradigm shift in the sciences and humanities. In evolutionary biology, Lynn Margulis has challenged the competitive model associated with Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory with one of symbiotic relations, where interdependence, not individual competitiveness, is the essential condition for survival (Margulis and Sagan, 2002). In parallel, scholars from the social sciences have theorised humans as profoundly entangled with other entities and forms of matter (Haraway, 2016; Tsing, 2015; Esccobar, 2011; Barad, 2003). An ecological perspective envisages the world as a mesh of interconnection without centre or edge (Morton, 2010), 'within which nothing preexists the relations that constitute it.' (Escobar, 2018 p.101).

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[36]   My CERN activities have included workshop and seminar participant, copy-editor, budget advisor, interviewee, mentee, host, guest, business coach and grocery dealer.

Mapping an ecological paradigm onto business and economy is not an idle exercise, given the degree to which the individualistic, competitive world view associated with Darwinist evolutionary theory has been diffused through economic and business doctrine[37]. It is also not an easy step. Ecological economists Herman Daly and Joshua Farley (2011) point to the close co-evolution and co-influence between the free market economic doctrine associated with Adam Smith (commonly described as the 'father' of modern economics) and Darwin's theory. While Darwin and Smith each emphasise the importance of co-operative behaviours as well as competitive ones, it is their theories of the benefits of selfish behaviour that prevail in popular economic understanding (Daly and Farley, 2011), where the notion of the utility-optimising individual, the competitive firm and the national interest go largely unchallenged. The effect is to normalise self-interested, competitive behaviour as a natural social force.

Bateson's thinking performs a double manoeuvre for the Feral MBA research. In positioning interdependence as the precondition for survival, it dispels the notion of the autonomous business or livelihood entity as a meaningful category. And in drawing attention to the struggle to apply this understanding at the granular, gestural level of everyday life, it shifts the work of knowledge-making out of a primarily discursive arena and into practice.

The predicament that Bateson marks out is one particular to Western thought. In Indigenous knowledge systems where relational ways of referencing the world are foundational, to consider an organism apart from its environment makes no sense to start with (Akomolafe, 2021; Yunkaporta, 2019; Wilson, 2008)[38]. Yet assumptions of separation and boundedness present persistent habits of mind in the rationalist tradition that this PhD (and business in general) is embedded in. The Feral MBA research must think its way out of this dilemma and into other understandings of the world. The prospect calls for leaps of imagination, but also for embodied practice.

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[37] See for example Herbert Spencer's (1884) concept of '*s*urvival of the fittest' the 'selfish gene' theory of evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (1976)] and the market competition of Milton Friedman.

[38] Cree Indigenous scholar Shawn Wilson (2008) describes the importance of relationality in Indigenous ways of understanding the world, through the concept of self as relation (with others, land and ancestors). For Wilson, Indigenous scholarship works to re-activate the relationships and contexts that academic convention strips out [the measure of research integrity means asking: does this help to build relationships?].

Business as the unit of investigation

The Feral MBA takes up diverse economies theory through the medium of business. Taking business as the unit of investigation serves as a means to break out of a bind noted by Miller (2019): that even a radical reframing of what is considered 'economic' reinforces the idea that the collective composition of livelihoods would take the ultimate form of an 'economy' at all.

Recent work in diverse economies scholarship (Gibson-Graham and Dombrowski, 2020; Miller, 2020; Barron and Hess, 2020; Miller, 2019; Gibson-Graham and Miller, 2015) sets out to undo the distinction between economy and ecology. Miller (2020; 2019; 2014) replaces the concept of 'the economy' with that of 'ecological livelihoods': an interdependent web of behaviours and relations that extend far beyond human collectives or human needs. The agents involved in photosynthesis and fermentation are as much a part of a diverse economy as co-operatives or unpaid carer work. Miller (2019 p.125) deploys the spectral device of the 'fog bank', dissolving the categories of 'economy', 'society' and 'environment' from distinct, competing domains into a dynamic space of radical possibility, in constant negotiation. While drawing from these understandings, the Feral MBA steps back from this level of abstraction in its own operations, to start instead from business as a something that is tangible, navigable, hands-on and inhabited.

A note on 'business' language

Business as a vehicle in which to engage with and navigate a relational ecology is something that Bateson did not think about. To scan for 'business' in the ecological writings of Bateson (1972) or Escobar (2018), or even in Callon's (1998) fine-tuned attention to the material construction of economics and markets, returns abundant references to 'businesslike', ' 'the business world', 'business forces', 'businessmen', 'the business community', 'business life', 'business skills' and so on. These usages mark a habit of mind that can also intrude into this text: the easy lapse into a narrow characterisation of 'business' that is entirely at odds with the nuance and complexity you get, for example, in speaking in depth to an entrepreneur or to a critical business theorist (or in actually doing business yourself). The word carries its own consolidating entropy that requires a singular attention to disaggregate.

For diverse economies theory the tactic is to read business for diversity, highlighting a category of enterprises such as households and community organisations that are producing goods and sharing wealth in varied ways 'not often recognised as "business"' (Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healey, 2013 p.51). Peter North (2020) contrasts the myth of the heroic entrepeneur, mover and shaker of the ecoomy, with a more detailed and nuanced image of independent and small businesses, motivated by morality, curiosity, enthusiasm, as much as the financial bottom line. In legal scholarship, Janelle Orsi (2012) suggests a radical redefinition of how we think of enterprise: 'as any productive activity that could bring us sustenance'[39]. These approaches (each of which substitutes the consolidating tendencies of 'business' with the less-overdetermined term 'enterprise') do not react to business as a singularly capitalist prospect, but look to its potential as part of a larger project of collective survival instead.

Beyond business as usual

For the Feral MBA, aplying the dismantling tools of diverse economies thinking to the medium of business feels like a timely move. In 1996, Gibson-Graham (2006a p.201) imagined their work as 'an act of epistemological terrorism', such that to present an alternative vision of the large corporation as:

> decentered, fluid, disorderly and racked with uncertainty … as multiple, as the site of competing and exhaustive claims, as made up of individuals who are many things… is almost too daunting in the face of an overwhelming scepticism born, perhaps, of a lack of desire for such a discourse.

Since that statement, the context for rethinking business has substantially shifted. The legitimacy of business as usual has been breaking down from numerous directions – financial, climatic and social. The fires, plagues, political movements and wars attending the birth of the Feral MBA have only

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[39]   A shorthand that the Fetal MBA has readily adopted.

added fuel to a widespread desire to talk about change[40]. It makes for a radically different starting point from which business might be envisioned, in its myriad functions and motivations, of which capitalist forms might be prevalent but not transcendent (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski, 2020).

Bateson's (1972) understanding of the disjunction between knowing and doing – the theoretical and habitual – marks out two substantial tasks required for enacting this change. Both are important and each calls for its own technologies and tools. Diverse economies theory provides a set of implements for the theoretical work of reframing the economy. It combines a 'weak' approach with a performative one, to produce an orientation to knowledge that accepts both the indeterminacy of knowledge and its powerful effects (Gibson-Graham, 2020). Rather than a new economic truth or model, it supplies the conditions for an 'ethical' economic practice, as 'a choice to be/act/think a certain way' as economic subjects (Gibson-Graham, 2006b p.xvii-xviii). The task and the opportunity for the Feral MBA is to move this expanded understanding of economic agency into practice.

The two challenges that Bateson marks out – how to understand oneself as relational and how to enact new behaviours based on this understanding – are central concerns. Returning to the research questions (p.36), the Feral MBA contributes to the diverse economies field with experiments, techniques and technologies that actualise the thinking implements of diverse economies theory in the course of day-to-day business. A feminist reading of performativity as an interventionist practice that allows for a rearrangement of the business landscape is central to this understanding. To this end, I am taking the MBA as the scene and stage of engagement, where the formats, materials and routines of business (and business training) might be performed differently, in ways that alter the realities they operate in, directly and piecemeal.

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[40]   See for example: IPCC (2021); Nelson (2020); Roy (2020); Gibson-Graham et al (2019).

Context 2.2 – The MBA

The subject and the point of intervention for the Feral MBA is the way that business and economy are enacted and perceived: their performative dimension more than what they 'are' (as the preceding section establishes). This includes the way in which the contours of 'the economy', prioritising competition, growth and financial profit, have been naturalised in business as inviolable common sense. This way of thinking is diffused into popular understanding through news bulletins, government policy, funding criteria, public discourse, business education and popular culture. It appears in 'the business case' for things, and in the economic argument for 'what business wants', as if there were a single actor called 'business' that can be spoken for (North, 2016). It is exemplified in the way that the 'hip pocket' argument (the impact of a world event or a policy direction on individual spending power) is brought in as an inexorable logic that renders other possibilities not only invisible but *unintelligible:* signifier of an economic 'reality' to which business must adapt or face extinction (Miller, 2019). While the neoclassical economics underpinning the way in which business is usually understood is also widely contested, the heterogeneity of existing economic thought is largely absent from the business plan templates, the business school prospectus and the conventions and syntax of business training – some of the means via which the hallmarks of a competitive market economy are translated into everyday business operations. A primary activity for the Feral MBA is to de-centre and destabilise this dynamic.

First to note – there is an extensive realm of literature on other economic schools of thought that speak to business practice, including commons-based, ecological, co-operative, community-led, and peer-to-peer approaches (see for example Raworth, 2017; Orsi, 2012; Daly and Farley, 2011; Linebaugh, 2008). In Latin America, the Buen Vivir (Good Life) movement builds on relational principles and Indigenous knowledge systems to privilege ecological criteria over the objectives of economic development (Escobar, 2015; 2010). In Europe, traditional land-based commons remain an active form of economic organisation for the collective management of resources beyond principles of private property, scarcity, competition and unlimited growth (Bollier and Helfrich, 2019). There is also an array of business models designed for non-profit, sustainable and social enterprises (see Upward and Jones, 2016 for a survey). These ways of organising can be hugely informative for those seeking an exit from the business status quo, and I have my own experience in this area as a long-standing member and sometimes director of the *Cube Microplex* workers' co-

operative and community land trust. Yet these areas of knowledge are not the focus of the Feral MBA, which instead takes up a position in relation to the tenacity of a mainstream business ideology– however contested – and the performative power it wields to signify what is true.

Taking the Masters of Business Administration (MBA) as a departure point is a means to situate this ideology in a place and a process. This tactic shares a 'thing'-based approach with actor network theory (ANT) which considers subjects like business not in the abstract, but through the materialities that constitute them: the performative agency of '*things and their circulation'* (Çalskan and Callon, 2009 p.384; Latour, 2005) – including objects, processes, protocols and institutions. The difference that the Feral MBA proposes is to consider these things as raw materials – things to tinker with and remake rather than just analyse and inventory. While arguably remote from much of contemporary business life, the MBA is closely associated with an incumbent business imaginary grounded in individuality, instrumentality and profit-driven ends (Parker, 2018). As such, it can serve as a lever to open that imaginary to change. The tactics are further a trick or hook, to make connections into those areas of the business school that might be receptive to this work.

I will start with a brief history of the MBA, viewed through a critical literature from within the business school where it has been challenged philosophically, ethically, structurally and for its relevance. By way of contrast, I introduce some examples of alternative Masters programmes in business that also inform the Feral MBA.

A brief history of the MBA

The first MBA was established at Harvard University in 1908. At the time it was considered a bold move to connect business management with the status of post-graduate study, and a professional calling with universal application that transcended the learned proficiencies of a specific workplace. While the MBA concept slowly gained in popularity, its programme was widely critiqued for haphazard teaching methods, an emphasis on vernacular or 'folk' knowledge[41] and a lack of academic rigour (Mintzberg, 2004). In 1959, following the publication of two highly critical reports from the Ford Foundation and Carnegie Corporation (influential private foundations), the MBA

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[41] While this 'folk' approach could appear of interest for the Feral MBA, in Mintzberg's telling it meant teaching management as a set of vague and untested principles, rather than drawing on a collective knowledge base.

project was substantially redesigned. Lecture-style teaching from a strict set of academic disciplines (economics, maths, behavioural psychology, statistics) moved to the core of the programme, complemented by Harvard's Case Study approach, in which students are given a written summary of a business problem and asked to rapidly respond with recommendations (Mintzberg, 2004). These reforms, supported by millions of dollars in direct funding from Carnegie and Ford, are credited with a large-scale rollout of the MBA project from a handful of offerings in the 1950s, largely in North America, to close to 800 accredited programmes worldwide today[42].

The salience of this history here is that the contemporary MBA in its global proliferation did not evolve from diverse business practices and cultures in different global regions. Rather it represents the mobilisation and diffusion of a singular educational model, carrying with it a set of beliefs originating in Cold War USA (Khurana and Spender, 2012): a focus on scientific, quantitative models and methods, a rational-instrumental approach to knowledge and an adherence to the school of neoclassical economics with its doctrine of individual self-interest, optimising utility, shareholder value and economic growth (Hill and Myatt, 2010). As well as its taught curriculum, the MBA promises social capital for its students through access to alumni networks that form part of the justification for the prestige and price of the degree[43]. These elements combine to reinforce a narrow business school habitus (Akrivou and Bradbury-Huang, 2015), in Bourdieu's term that describes deeply ingrained habits of thought and action.

Internal critiques of the MBA

Despite moving to the centre of the business school, the legitimacy and relevance of the MBA remained under challenge. In 2002, management scholars (Pfeffer and Fong published an influential paper, based on a wide review of empirical studies, that charged the MBA with a failure to deliver on its own terms, in not improving outcomes either for its participants or for business at large. In their assessment the MBA is primarily a networking environment for students to build social capital, and a recruitment filter for business, in a way that leaves its teaching and research activities largely redundant.

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[42]   Hertelendy et al (2021) count 786 courses accredited by the largest MBA accreditation body, AACSB
[43]   A globally accredited MBA degree in the UK can range from £19,500 to £92,735: see de Novelllis, M. *Top 10 Most Affordable MBA Programs In The UK*, https://www.businessbecause.com/news/mba-rankings/4760/top-10-most-affordable-mba-programs-uk. Last accessed, 22/06/22.

Further critiques from within the business school point to a core curriculum of generalisable tools and rule-based models making unsubstantiated claims to universalism, and to classrooms remote from the scene of actual business operations (Mintzberg, 2004; Moldoveanu and Martin, 2008). Harvard's Case Study approach comes under fire for a problem-solving stance that promotes action at the expense of reflection, reducing the art of management to a process of decision-taking, and for an exclusive attention to the accounts of senior managers at the expense of other actors (Harney and Thomas, 2013). The critics' prescriptions range from reorienting the MBA as a professional programme with an agreed body of knowledge and a 'public good' outcome (Bennis and O'Toole, 2005), to a programme grounded in tacit, experiential knowledge (Mintzberg, 2004). The debate continues to swing between an ultra-rationalist paradigm and a more humanist orientation, focused on team-building and self-awareness – or 'endless exhortations to critically analyse oneself and build '"adaptive capacity" to be a better manager', as a recent MBA graduate (Allen, 2020) describes it. Yet these competing approaches ultimately converge on a conviction that the problems of the business school are of urgent social consequence that only the business school is positioned to address (Akrivou and Bradbury-Huang, 2015).

Organisation scholar Martin Parker (2018; 2002) offers a diagnosis of where these critiques might fall short, as a closed ecosystem of debate, staged within (and funded by) the business schools it challenges. Barriers to change include faculty resistance, student conservatism, the wider university's dependence on the MBA for revenue, and an accreditation and rankings system that inhibits risk-taking or change. While reformists stress the need for business to be sustainable and responsible, a capitalist framing is taken as a matter of fact, rather than contextualised as ideology.

Performativity and the MBA

Parker's assessment also touches on a more fundamental question of the performativity of knowledge in a business context. Pfeffer and Fong's results-based critique of the MBA is measured in the programme's negligible effects on managerial salaries and corporate revenues. It reflects a 'means-ends' performative logic that is dominant in business discourse more widely – taking philosopher Jean-François Lyotard's (1984) definition of performativity as the deployment of knowledge in the service of optimising outputs. 'Performative knowledge is legitimate not because

it is true, but because it has a technical value associated with producing results' (Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman, 2009 p.541). A company's 'performance' is a widely used metaphor for its efficiency and profitability (Gond et al, 2015). Critical management studies (CMS), a loose grouping of scholars inside the business school who are critical of its operations, takes a substantial 'anti-performative' stance (Fournier and Grey, 2000), against the use of knowledge in the service of optimising managerial effectiveness.

Rather than an anti-performative position, Parker (2002 p.132) raises the prospect of a business school that is performative towards different ends, such as '[a]chieving a better world or ending exploitation'. Such a business school might for example establish a resource library of alternative business case studies – from co-operatives to complementary currencies – as a means to move past the abstraction of 'business alternatives' into specific instances of organising (Parker, 2017). Rather than consider such examples of business difference as ideal or finished, Parker enrols Chantal Mouffe's (2014; 2013) concept of 'agonism' that seeks a position between 'for' and 'against' (Parker and Parker, 2017). Agonism in Mouffe's understanding is neither brokering consensus with a dominant regime nor rejecting it outright, but a form of active opposition. '[T]he opponent is not considered an enemy to be destroyed but an adversary whose existence is perceived as legitimate' (Mouffe, 2014, p.150-151). For Parker, agonism is a valuable device, through which the overarching stories of capitalist business – and those of its alternatives – might be understood as necessarily political and unfinished, rather than 'bad' or 'good' (Parker and Parker, 2017).

Non-MBAs

For a demonstration of business education that performs differently, I turn to two UK Masters-level programmes that my research encountered, each located inside a conventional business school[44]. My first example, the MA in Sustainable Leadership Development (2015–2018) was established at the Institute for Leadership and Sustainbility (IFLAS[45]) at Cumbria University[46]. Designed for a small cohort of in-work managers, the programme aimed to challenge basic assumptions about both 'leadership' and 'sustainability'. After a storm of public critique of mainstream business practice

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[44]   I came across each of these courses not through literature but via word of mouth. In April 2017 I took up the offer of a free place on a 3-day *Money and Society* module that was part of Bendell's IFLAS programme. A fellow student in that group pointed me towards Coleman's programme.
[45]   IFLAS https://www.cumbria.ac.uk/research/centres/iflas. Last accessed 22/06/22.
[46]   Also available in reduced form as standalone as a post-graduate certificate.

following the 2008 financial crisis (IFLAS founder Jem Bendell observes), universities rushed to add responsible leadership and sustainability components to their MBA agendas. However the resulting programmes still cleave to mainstream management paradigms and the styling of the MBA as a high-profile personal development activity for those seeking lucrative senior management positions (Bendell, 2007).

Rather than adding sustainability as a business goal, the focus at IFLAS was on the sustainability of conventional leadership and management behaviours themselves, considered to be significant contributors to broader social and environmental ills. The programme looked beyond the corporate sector to non-profits, co-operatives and activist groups for its models and examples, with a reorientation from individual leadership skills to other modes of managing, including those that enable leadership to emerge from a group (Bendell and Little, 2015). Its approach to leadership fostered other subjectivities beyond an 'almost-required optimism', including making 'space for despair' (Bendell and Little, 2015 p.22). This orientation runs fundamentally counter to the assumptions of socio-economic progress and individual efficacy that are deeply embedded in the discourse of business sustainability and in education more widely. Initially run as a two-year, part-time Masters degree, the course was substantially redesigned and absorbed into a distance learning MBA in Leadership and Sustainability from Robert Kennedy College in 2019.

My second example is the MSc in Responsibility and Business Practice, run at the University of Bath School of Management (1997–2008) and then at Ashridge Business School (2009–2017)[47], initiated by by action research scholars Gillian Coleman, Judi Marshall and Peter Reason. Its agenda was to address issues of business sustainability and social justice, with a commitment to transforming business education from within the business school and demonstrate an alternative to the MBA approach (Marshall, Coleman and Reason, 2011). Like the IFLAS course, it worked with small cohorts (around 20 people), primarily from managerial jobs in business, social enterprises and NGOs. The coursework was designed around a series of intensive residential workshops, linked by ongoing workplace enquiry. Drawing on a broad set of influences (ecology, radical feminist theory, systems thinking, social planning) the programme turned away from a classroom setting and the disciplinary boundaries of a generalist business education in favour of the reflective, embodied and intuitive methods of participatory action research (Coleman, 2013). Bateson's (1972) radical

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[47]   In each instance the course took the form of a two year part-time programme organised around 8 five-day ntensive residential workshops.

understanding of interconnectivity, with its attention to relationships rather than things, was at the centre of its informing ideas, signalling the programme's substantial divergence from business school convention. The approach to business leadership was modelled on the inside-outsider who is committed to the organisation they are working in but also to a cause, community or ideology that could be fundamentally at odds with the dominant organisational culture. Coleman's (2013) reflections on the project include the difficulties faced by a resource-hungry programme – both in pedagogical attention and in the ongoing work to defend its survival within an orthodox management school whose values and directions were profoundly different. The programme was discontinued by each of its host institutions, first at Bath and then by Ashridge Business School[48].

Ethical directions

The radically exploratory orientation of these two programmes can be contrasted to broader trends in business education. Attempts to reform the MBA have included the move to incorporate business ethics and notions of sustainability into the curriculum – exemplified by attention to the triple bottom line (TBL) of financial, social and environmental accounting – as such concepts gain traction more widely. While TBL reporting is commonly held as synonymous with sustainable business practice, it has been subject to a more rigorous audit from the academic field of Critical Accounting, which considers the the social, economic and political consequences of accounting practices (Laughin, 1999). Critical Accounting scholars Rob Gray and Markus Milne (2004; 2002) dissect the TBL as a voluntary and selective process (compared with the legally enforced rigour of financial accounts), inevitably tilted toward making the reporting company look good. In conflicts of interest between financial expedience and social or environmental responsibility, the financial will inevitably dominate, otherwise 'there will be no company' (Gray and Milne, 2004 p.74). Gray and Milne point to the systems-level urgency of a planetary sustainability crisis that belies the 'entity concept' in accounting which takes the singular firm as its unit of analysis. From a systems perspective, it is 'implausible that an individual company could be sustainable (or responsible) in an unsustainable (or irresponsible) system' (Gray and Milne, 2004 p.73). Viewed from this angle, the MBA's embrace of the TBL takes on the tinge of an unchanged performativity that has simply expanded its goals of financial productivity and efficiency to incorporate additional social and environmental cues.

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[48] Coleman led the course at Ashridge and retired from academia after its termination.

By contrast, the performativity taken up in the Feral MBA relinquishes or even stands in opposition to the idea of an efficient, results-based, measurable efficacy, something I return to in the chapters that follow.

Working with paradox

Marshall, Coleman and Reason (2011 p 15) reflect on their Bath MSc programme as 'an exercise in paradox, or perhaps folly': to intentionally move away from the rational knowledge expectations embedded in the business school while operating from within that space. A state of paradox supplies conditions for meaning that are not deterministic, positivist or fixed: its occurrence in the business school reads as an anomaly. The association of ambiguity with folly or failure could signal the business school's intellectual isolation from the thinking in the humanities, where paradox is recognised as a valuable basis for knowledge. Yet similar fissures can also appear in the art school, where the learning outcomes established by the institution may bear little resemblance to the forms of knowledge that artists are practising (McRobbie, 2016). It suggests that the experience of paradox may be less a feature of a 'business school' way of thinking, than a rift between content and context. Coleman (2013) looks to Bateson's (1972) emphasis on the importance of context in shaping meanings. To really consider business differently requires a commensurate shift in frame and setting. The ill fit of the Bath MSc with its operating environment (to radically reimagine business in and against a habitat that was powerfully performing the opposite) signals the difficulty of this task.

The response of the Feral MBA is to shift the scene of engagement out of the business school and formal education altogether. It is working at the level of habit and habitat, context and perception, to reimagine business not from models or templates, but starting 'where we are', in peoples' lived experience and through a process of sensing out. This move brings with it a number of challenges, not least in relation to scale. For Marshall, Coleman and Reason (2011), individual and small group transformation are essential foundations for systemic change – yet the effect of this commitment was to limit the capacity of their programme, in terms of student numbers (and its survival in the business school).

For the the Feral MBA, the question of scale appears as a potential negation: a challenge to its efficacy and consequence. While the specific, situated, weakly-theorised forms of knowledge the programme is working with are massively applicable at scale – small business is also 'everywhere'[49] – they are functionally invisible to a prevailing MBA ideology. The next section of this chapter takes a brief excursion into scale, as a necessary feature of the Feral MBA enquiry.

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[49]   Enterprises with 0-49 employees accounted for over 99% of total UK total businesses in 2021, or 48% of all business employment. Federation of Small Businesses, *UK Small Business Statistics,* https://www.fsb.org.uk/stats. Last accessed 22/06/22.

Context 2.3 – Scale Interruption

(Imagine). You are standing around talking about or even experiencing somebody's business or livelihood endeavour, perhaps your own, in all its material detail and undeniable existence as a fact on the ground and the intricate relationships it is bound up in. Then someone asks – 'So, does it scale?' It is a potent question that brings with it a snarl of things, which I will try to reduce to something manageable in this short account.

Scale is the *lingua franca* and the bugbear of business. The question 'does it scale?' comes up on a regular basis for the kinds of businesses the Feral MBA is working with, including its own as a going concern. The question – levelled by parents, funders and business advisors, in small talk at parties or while hitching rides – can be a means of expressing scepticism, or just a nest of expectations that call for further examination. That bigger would be better goes without saying: 'scale' is code for scaling up.

A preoccupation with scale permeates contemporary economic discourse with its focus on output, financial profit and economic growth. Such expectations translate largely unquestioned into business school education, as the business strategy of pursuing growth at all costs (Banerjee et al, 2021). In a mirror image of this position, scale underwrites arguments that the market economy is unsustainable in the substantial critiques levied by ecological economics (Daly, 2013) and the degrowth movement (Latouche, 2004) which challenge the plausibility of unbridled (or even 'sustainable') economic expansion. Scale pits those arguing for the inherent value of small-scale enterprises as intrinsically less harmful than large-scale business activity (Illich, 1973; Schumacher, 1973)[50] against those who dismiss these as irrelevant, utopian-nostalgic practices that do not address the scale of the problem – a voracious 'grow or die' capitalist economy (Sharzer, 2012).

In diverse economies theory, the question 'that's nice, but is it scalable?' comes up as a regular critical-sceptical refrain to challenge the value of community economic practices (The Interdependence, 2020). For Gibson-Graham, 'questions of scale are usually another way of

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[50] For Schumacher (1973), human knowledge is inherently patchy, and the multiplicity of different, patchy knowledges of a small business ecology is intrinsically less harmful than a single incomplete knowledge unleashed wholesale on a larger scene.

broaching power' (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski, 2020 p.18; Gibson-Graham, 2002; Gibson, 1999) where only the large-scale and global are assigned consequence as sites of significant change.

From the standpoint of the Feral MBA, while scale may be the wrong question, its persistence calls for a response that might unmask some of its assumptions.

Does it scale?

'**Does it scale**' is a question long asked of *Feral Trade*, and it is from the standpoint of that particular business that I learned to formulate my own reply. *Feral Trade* was founded in 2003, 6 months prior to Facebook, and stands as a countervailing response to the emergent potential of computer-formed social networks. *Feral Trade* takes its own extended social and professional connections (as opposed to the exponential capacity of 'social networking') as its primary infrastructure. The connections it runs on are designedly ad hoc and commercially inefficient. These sociable, occasional relations of collaboration, acquaintanceship and passing encounter do not scale up. The business instead behaves like an organism: to relentlessly grow would be like cancer. The *Feral Trade* database-generated network maps are a portrait of the business over time, viewed through a haze of relations that do not expand in size or extent but increase (thicken) their connections. The maps mesh human relations with those with other entities – the products, organisations, offices, homes, air and rail hubs that constitute the stuff of the business – becoming effusively more illegible as deliveries layer up. The effect is of a business *in or as* its ecosystem, dissolving the schematic of a network into something more indeterminate and unbounded.

Figure 12: Feral Trade network map (detail)
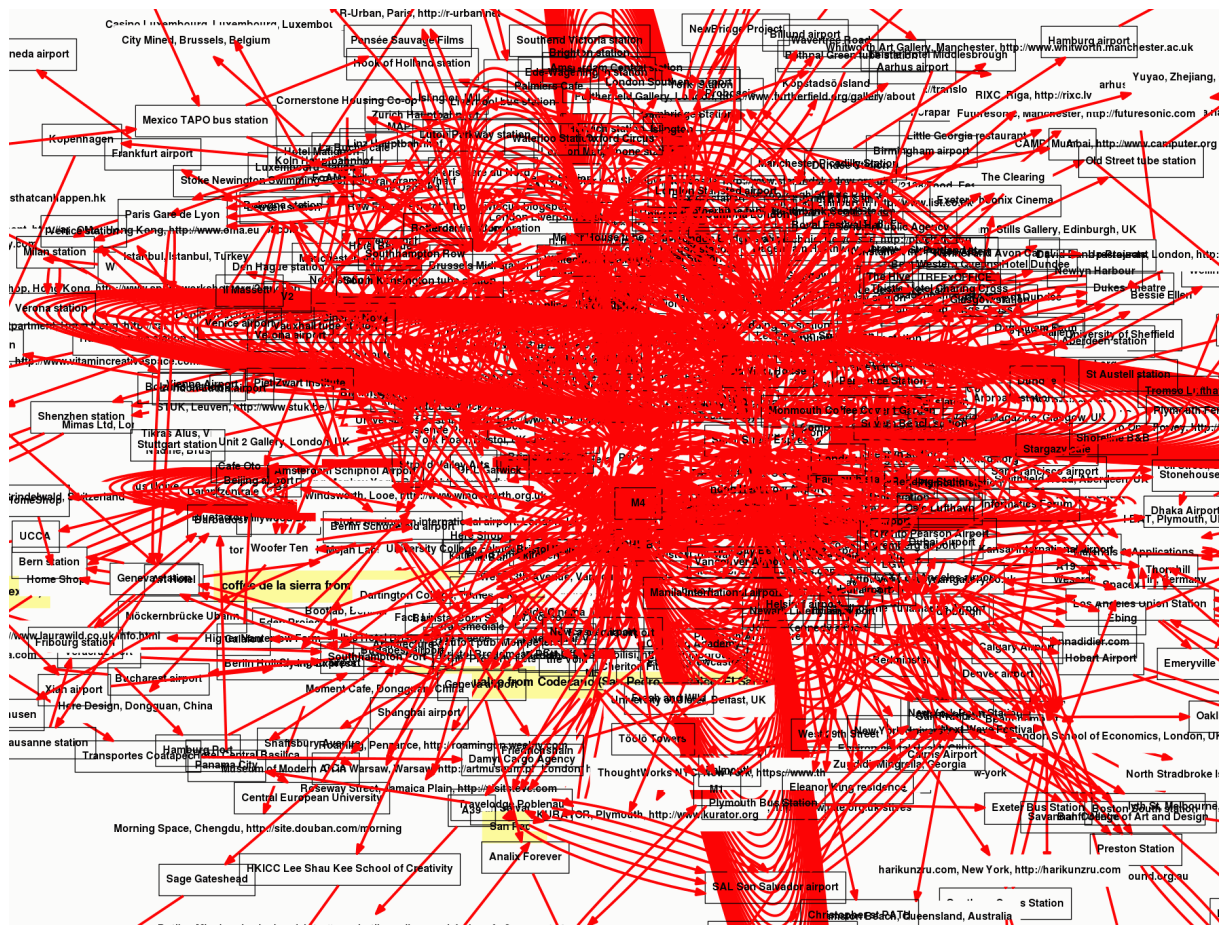
Feral Trade Courier database-generated map shows all coffee transport in the network since 2003.

Theories of scale

There is substantial critical theorisation of scale in human geography, anthropology and ANT (Häkli, 2017; Lempert and Summerson Carr, 2016; Tsing, 2012; Moore, 2008; Marston, Jones and Woodward, 2005; Marston, 2000; Strathern, 1995) yet it is not necessary to go deeply into these discussions to realise that their application to the business operator on the ground is limited.

Debates in human geography reaching back to the 1980s highlight the contingency of scale as a socially-constructed spatial phenomenon, rather than a preordained, natural category. These arguments are summarised by Marston, Jones and Woodward (2005), who note a common

conflation between scale as *size* or scope (small to large) and scale as *level* or reach (local to global). These dimensions are not synonymous but can overlap in their effects. Scale predetermines agency through fixed hierarchies in which small forms 'look up' to large ones, or the edges look to the centre. Marston, Jones and Woodward suggest abandoning thinking with scale altogether for 'flat ontologies'[51] that reconfigure the world in complex, emergent webs of relations, rather than hierarchical or territorial ones[52].

In relation to business, there is a further association of scale with *growth,* in the form of expansion or replication[53]. Anthropologist Anna Tsing (2015; 2012) traces a scale imperative in Western thinking to the early European colonial plantations, organised around the forced segregation, standardisation and modularisation of labour, investment and materials, designed to maximise output through centralised control. Rather than argue the case for small or large-scale practices, Tsing concentrates instead on the mechanism of 'scalability': the ability of a project – whether an enterprise, a research undertaking or the 'world-making' projects of economic development – to expand without changing what it does. Tsing's analysis does several things. It denaturalises scalability, revealing it as an effortful, manufactured practice not an ordinary feature of 'how things are'. It presents capitalist enterprise as a mixed ecology where scalable forms and practices are intertwined with and dependent on 'nonscalable' ones (from unregulated labour to complex ecological processes) that do not appear in the stories told to consumers and investors[54]. And it points to a significant juncture where scalability fails. For Tsing, scalability is not the precondition for a project to have transformative effects, but its opposite. A scalable design can only succeed by suppressing the kinds of meaningful diversity – the weeds, microbes and human cultures, the unexpected encounters and relationships across difference – that might change the outcome of the whole project.

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51 An idea adopted from Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and broadly used in geography: Marston, Jones and Woodward (2005) and Gibson-Graham (2006b) are my sources here.
52 Dispelling scale entirely is controversial and other approaches from political geography argue the importance of attending to multiple spatialities as a means of understanding the geopolitical world, rather than a binary choice between a relational perspective and a territorial one (Häkli, 2017).
53 The 'does it scale' question touches on all three elements: size, level and growth.
54 Tsing (2012) takes as her example her investigation of the global supply chains that deliver foraged matsutake mushrooms from North America to Japanese commodity markets. Its protagonists include the matsutake as a commodity that refuses to grow under industrial conditions, the itinerant migrant workers who gather the mushrooms and the powerful forms of inventory that that translate these non-scalable production elements into scalable business.

Scale in research

There is another line of thinking from ANT that helps to disorder scale's habitual associations. John Law's (2004) concept of the 'baroque' describes a way of thinking without overview or synthesis. A baroque perspective looks 'down' into the detail of local instances, rather than 'up' for the global picture. It concentrates on things that are specific, heterogeneous and do not necessarily extrapolate from one site to another. A baroque vision makes small sites substantial – with the limitless complexity evident in anything if we look with the right kind of equipment – refusing to conflate size with importance. For Law, size is a specific accomplishment, not something that can be extrapolated as a value in itself.

Law (2004, p.24) points to the difficulties a baroque approach encounters in the context of academic scholarship, where an attention to specifics that resists an overview comes across as 'confused and unclear'. Tsing too highlights a bias to scalability in economic research which demands a type of standardised data that enables the research frame to seamlessly expand without rethinking its premises. The effect is that other forms of knowledge – such as the wealth of ethnographic studies on the diversity of economic niches – are kept outside the 'big stories' of the global economy (Tsing, 2012 p.522)[55].

Scale in practice

The debates and perspectives outlined above are informative but they bring with them their own impenetrability. When put on the spot by the 'does it scale?' question, calling in 'flat ontologies' or 'the baroque' is not going to move the conversation with the business advisor or the parental team along. It might be more fruitful to read the question between the lines: what is it trying to say?

Human geographer Adam Moore (2008) marks a distinction between scale as a category of analysis employed by social scientists, and scale as a category of practice, deeply ingrained in everyday experience: the crystallisation of feelings that accrue to different scales, whereby local initiatives are read as 'authentic' and global ones as 'dynamic'. Gibson-Graham (2002) draw attention to the

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[55] These observations are instructive for the connections they make between scale as the subject of analysis (in research) and scale as the means of production (the research environment), something I return to in Chapter 5.

performativity of scale: that size would equate to power is as much an emotional commitment as a rational calculation. A performative reading provides the opportunity to concentrate less on the mechanics of scale than on its affect. To turn the 'does it scale?' question around: if scale is a stand-in for power, agency and consequence, but also perhaps viability – the ability of a business or livelihood to survive and thrive in the long run – what mechanisms *other than scale* might produce these transformative effects[56]?

A consideration of that question – both in relation to the businesses the Feral MBA is working with and to the scale of the Feral MBA itself, the quality of change it offers – extends across this research. It is evident in the design of its practices (Chapter 3), the tenor of its findings (Chapter 4) and the contents of its conclusions (Chapter 5): in particular through the discussions of coaching, habit, 'magic' and a 'feral' way of being that emerge as elemental to this work.

There are also some practical starting points to be found in theory. In organisation studies, Parker (2017) questions the association of business size with the capacity for action: co-operation between small enterprises can also result in large-scale activity (Pearson and Parker, 2016). Diverse economies theory suggests replacing a politics of scale with one of ubiquity (Gibson-Graham 2006b): economic practices considered as local (such as housework or intra-family lending) are already 'everywhere – they are local *and* global' at the same time (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski, 2020 p.18)[57]. There are other economic traditions from outside Western knowledge systems that think without scale. Anthropologist and Indigenous scholar Tyson Yunkaporta who belongs to the Apalech Clan in far north Queensland, counters the prospect of 'degrowth' with the Indigenous concept of 'increase' that refers to growing the complexity of relations within a system rather than its size (Green Dreamer, 2020).

The quandary of scale can also be approached *through* practice. For *Feral Trade*, the expectation is that the business will behave like an organism, waxing and waning its activities in response to changes in its environment rather than seeking opportunities for growth. While *Feral Trade* is

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[56]   The story of scale might be full of holes but its effects are material: thinking through scalability has underwritten the expansion of capitalist systems, in Tsing's (2012) terms.

[57]   Gibson-Graham (2006b, p.xxvii) take as their example the global effects of second-wave feminism, distributed not through the scale effects of coordinated movements or institution-building but as a vast set of dispersed practices 'grounded in persons yet (therefore) potentially ubiquitous'. To 'start where we are' involves a vision of global transformation through changing our own environments, with the accretion of small acts in place (Gibson-Graham, 2006b p.196).

decidedly not a model for anything in a business sense, it points to an extra capacity that art can contribute to the scale question. Artists bring in scales of practice and scales of influence that are largely detached from the bigger-equals-better equation (the question 'does it scale?' is not usually applied to art). The final section of this review turns to art as a substantial context for the Feral MBA research.

Context 2.4 – Art for Economists

The final task for this review is to situate the Feral MBA in relation to art – its starting place and source of much of its tactics. Art brings in ways of thinking with materials, performance, experiments, paradox and practice that are substantially different to those of the diverse economists and the critical business school. It also brings in specific approaches to scale and performativity that are instructive. What follows is the view from inside a practice, tracing a path through my own art history and the peers and influences that I bring to the Feral MBA.

The Feral MBA broadly belongs to a post-object art tradition. Cultural theorist Matthew Fuller (2005) describes the relocation of art and artists out of the commercial gallery system and into ways of making art that incorporate lived practices, explicit ties to social movements and other non-art elements such as music and food. Art in this context is understood as a mode of activity rather than just through its outputs. Artist and philosopher Erin Manning defines it as a 'way' or a 'manner', where the art is located not in a finished object but in a process in which 'making is a means of thinking in its own right and conceptualisation a practice in its own right' (Manning, 2015).

The artists and practices that form a closer context for the Feral MBA share a critical response to the promises of modernism, individualism and progress, together with collective ways of working and a non-market economic stance. Many of them are working with infrastructure, and with the infrastructure of business in particular, with attention to staging and myth-making. They also share a DIY orientation and a real-world practice that is less making art 'about' things in the world than making art with them. Many of these artists and groups occupy the margins of art, yet as their presentation here aims to demonstrate, the art mainstream is only one visible segment of many parallel art worlds (Böhm and Szreder, 2020a), making a geometry of the centre and the margins unsure.

Tactical Media

In the 1990s I was working as part of the Bureau of Inverse Technology (B.I.T.)[58], an art collective describing itself as an 'information agency servicing the Information Age' (B.I.T., 2004). The Bureau produced an array of critical and experimental technological devices and informational videos, including Suicide Box[59] (1996), a suicide detector installed in range of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco and 'Bit Plane' (1999) a miniature spy plane launched on a covert aerial survey of California's Silicon Valley.[60]. I am not trained as an artist, but through the Bureau, found myself part of the temporary convergence of tactical media art (Kluitenberg, 2011) whose practitioners were working in and with a shifting space of rapid technological change and the new forms of corporate power that accompanied them.

Tactical media is networked and collective in its production and its outputs. Averse to digital property regimes it instead takes up traditions of remix and re-use, from culture jamming (which re-appropriates elements of commercial culture to subvert its messages) to the open code ethos of Free/libre and Open Source Software (FLOSS) that emphasises transparent procedures and shared access to knowledge. Tactical media practices are explicitly activist and interventionist, exemplified by the artist-as-amateur making incursions into corporate space, using art as an instrument to amplify their actions. Among its better known practitioners, the Yes Men gained notoriety for their media stunts, infiltrating conferences and impersonating industry spokespeople to advocate for the return of slavery or ways to profit from climate collapse, to absurd and sometimes confronting effect. Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) utilised the infrastructure of the art museum as a platform for citizen science, operating a mobile biotech lab where people could test organic-labelled food for genetically modified organisms[61].

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[58]   The Bureau of Inverse Technology, http://bureauit.org. With artist and engineer, Natalie Jeremijenko. Last accessed 22/06/22.
[59]   Jeremijenko, N. *Database Politics and Social Simulations.* http://tech90s.walkerart.org/nj/transcript/nj_11.html. Last accessed 22/06/22.
[60]   Rhizome *Net Art Anthology: Bit Plane.* https://anthology.rhizome.org/bit-plane. Last accessed 22/06/22.
[61]   Pentecost, C. *CAE Defense Fund: Background on CAE.* http://critical-art.net/defense/background.html. Last accessed 22/06/22.

Media theorists David Garcia and Geert Lovink (1997) who were instrumental in framing tactical media as a field, cite philosopher Michel de Certeau's opposition between tactics – a way of working that is nomadic and opportunist – and strategy, that seeks power through institutional authority or territorial reach. The itinerant character of tactical media extends to the institutional forms it took on: flamboyant forms of self-invented organisation with more the quality of a facade or performance than of actual functioning logistics. For art theorist Gregory Sholette (2007 p.12) it was 'a form of imaginative resistance' that mirrors the neoliberal entrepreneurial culture it was contesting, with its profusion of start-up ventures and specialist labs.

While Sholette suggests these institutional facades might be 'romantically anti-capitalist, perhaps even to the point of collectively mourning an unspecified aesthetic wholeness' my experience with the Bureau was the reverse. We were learning to operate in and report from the fragmented reality we were encountering, amongst the incoming effects of new technologies and networked corporate structures and the large-scale social changes these forms heralded. We were inventing hybrid roles for ourselves in this unstable space, as 'artist-engineers', and remixing and repurposing existing media and electronic devices with a committed aesthetics of the cut-up[62]. B.I.T's work celebrated glitches, errors, interruptions, it was not seeking a path back to solid ground. Instead, the guise of a bureau of anonymous agents was channelling the kind of world-making agency and diffused corporate accountability in which information technologies are usually produced. It made for a collective mythology – like being in a band, but one where the instruments were less easy to identify than drums, bass and guitar.

Figure 13: The Bureau of Inverse Technology (B.I.T.)

Video still from You are Here, B.I.T., 1991.

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[62]   In this the Bureau's style was inspired by other contemporaries such as the pioneering found footage documentary-fiction montage of filmmaker Craig Baldwin, one of the Bureau's early supporters

Figure 14: Bitplane video stills

Image credit: Bureau of Inverse Technology (B.I.T.) 1999.

A similar quality of mythopoesis or myth-making accompanies the self-made institutions of tactical media. Mythopoesis is a kind of storytelling that blurs the lines between reality and fiction[63] and opens the possibility of other worlds, however fleetingly, in the present (O'Sullivan, 2017). Its storytelling goes beyond words to work its effects through other elements: materials, presentation and staging. For the Yes Men, a corporate-looking repertoire of official-looking websites and charity-shop suits enabled the barely-resourced artist partnership to engage with adversaries in other dimensions, delivering keynote presentations and press conferences on behalf of the World Trade Organisation or Dow Chemicals. The sensational nature of the Yes Men's carefully staged actions, with their mix of controversy and comedy, point to the scale-hopping effects that artists can sometimes access.

Socially engaged art

While motivated by social and political ends, tactical media artists were not presenting their activities as ethical but as something more recalcitrant and oblique. Their actions are not to be confused with art's 'social turn': the expanded field of social, relational and participatory practices that has moved into global art attention since the 1990s (Bishop, 2012; Thompson, 2015; Sholette,

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[63]   The Luther Blisset Project in the 1990s exemplifies this approach: artists and activists from across Europe took on the collective identity of 'Luther Blisset' to author diverse acts of cultural activism, from media hoaxes to performance art. The group name challenged a liberal formatting of individual authorship, and formed its own amplifying mythology (De Donno, 2014).

2017). Art theorist Claire Bishop (2012) marks out a tension between socially-engaged art's ethical criteria of 'social good' (taking art into the field of everyday life with the purpose of empowering people through the experience of participating in art) and the kind of artwork that might throw value systems into question. In the former category, there is art collective Superflex, installing an internet-based TV station for the elderly residents of a tower block in Liverpool (2000–). Or there is the set of art practices assembled by curator Nicolas Bourriard under the banner of Relational Aesthetics, taking social relations as its primary content through the production of social interaction (Bourriard, 1998). Relational Aesthetics is often represented in the work of artist Rikrit Tiravanija, installing of the makings of a meal at the Venice Bienniale for visitors to prepare and eat. Relational Aesthetics was widely criticised for its convivial, 'feel-good' orientation, and fuzzy political orientation[64] and for not really acknowledging the levels of local and invisible labour that supported the art (Bishop, 2012; Martin, 2007).

Complicating the social

A substantially different approach to social engagement is demonstrated in CAE's '*Public Misery Message: A Temporary Monument to Global Economic Inequality*'[65]. In a commission for documenta 13[66] in 2012, CAE hired a helicopter to take documenta visitors to the aerial height of 225m, representing the uppermost echelon of global wealth (the 'one percent'). You could purchase a low-cost scratch card with a mediocre 50:1 odds of winning a ride or secure immediate VIP access by paying €200. The incessant racket of the helicopter taking off and landing cast an oppressive pall over the documenta exhibition grounds, a striking piece of theatre of intractable circumstances. In a similar critical spirit, there is net (internet) artist Heath Bunting's *Skint – Internet Beggar* (1996) which engineers a collision between the street and the 'info supa high way' by dumping the patter of curbside hustle 'Excuse me mister! could you spare a dollar ?' into an online credit card payment form (Bunting, 2013). I also think of Yomango[67] ('I steal' in Spanish), whose carnivalesque public

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[64] Read by Bourriard, its artworks produced new, if temporary utopian ways of living, disengaged from those of capitalist exchange. Interpreted by his critics, it is a naive process of aestheticisation which produced its own commodity forms as (high-status) art world activities . Whereas Bourriard considered the exchanges it set up as trading outside capitalist economic structures this fails to acknowledge the art museum's substantial embeddedness in capitalist systems (Martin, 2007).

[65] Critical Art Ensemble, *A Public Misery Message: A Temporary Monument to Global Economic Inequality, 2012* http://critical-art.net/a-public-misery-message-a-temporary-monument-to-global-inequality-2012. Last accessed 22/06/22.

[66] One of Europe's major art events, staged every five years in Kassel, Germany.

[67] Sholette, G. *Dark Matter, Las Agencias, and the Aesthetics of Tactical Embarrassment* http://www.joaap.org/1/yomango/index.html

actions against unsustainable consumer lifestyles involved actual shoplifting in high-street stores (Thompson, 2004). These examples are also 'art with people' yet do not offer benign versions of participation, rather they open contradictions, dilemmas, inequalities, stumbling blocks and new associations that admit art's capacity for critical negation, as well as its enabling potential.

Figure 15: Critical Art Ensemble: Lucky d13 scratch card

There is a further, submerged element to many of these tactical media practices: that a spectacular kind of action forms their artistic currency yet in the process, risks overstepping what might be viable for their practitioners, financially, legally or energetically. The extraordinary events of the CAE bioterrorism trial (CAE co-founder, artist Steve Kurtz, was accused of terrorism under the USA Patriot Act for the possession of CAE lab materials, a charge that carried the threat of 20 years in jail)[68] stand as an extreme example. But more generally there is a skew to audacious political actions that might not be sustainable at a micro-political level, in the way these activities play out on bodies and lives[69]. This affective toll might be considered in light of another set of practices that also engage art toward political ends, yet turn away from the grand artistic gesture and into modes of activity that are more negotiated and embedded.

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[68]   See CAE Defense Fund, http://caedefensefund.org. Last accessed 22/06/22.
[69]   The Yes Men for example speak candidly in their feature film *The Yes Men are Revolting* of the energetic and emotional resources needed to maintain their high-impact collaboration.

Maintenance art

The label of maintenance art is associated with a single artist, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who took on a role of artist in residence with the New York Sanitation Department over 39 years. Rather than treat the world of cleaning and maintaining as a foreign domain, Ukeles instead claims the full scope and itinerary of her own identity and practice, including the mundane tasks of housework and motherhood as art. In *Touch Sanitation,* (1979–80), Ukeles undertook to shake the hand of every sanitation worker ('sanman') in New York City, an 11-month project. In her work, maintenance becomes a form of performance, from doing the laundry at home to washing the steps of the art museum (Figure 10). In mapping and documenting these actions, Ukeles brings unaccustomed elements of formalism and staging into the quotidian work of cleaning and disposing, a juxtaposition captured in images of the tall blonde artist posed amidst the garbage trucks. She also weaves herself into the daily routines of the sanitation workers through a systematic programme of interviewing and listening to their complaints, a work of support and maintenance in itself (Steinhauer, 2017).

Figure 16: Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Maintenance Art

Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Inside, 1973. Image credit: Mierle Laderman Ukeles.

Ukeles' work interrogates the solo, heroic, masculinist ideal of creative autonomy and innovation that still frames the mythology of the working artist. Her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* (1969, p.1) sets out the concept of 'two basic systems' in art, 'development', and 'maintenance' . The first is 'pure individual creation; the new; change; progress; advance; excitement', the latter the 'boring' work that holds things together: 'keep the dust off the pure individual creation; preserve the new; sustain the change; protect progress; defend and prolong the advance; renew the excitement'. Ukeles' manifesto places what is usually conceived and received as art side by side with the hidden labours that sustain it, while at the same time, extending the scope of maintenance to the philosophical and emotional work that most janitorial job descriptions fail to capture.

Art theorist Ines Kleesattel (2021) links Ukeles' work to that of feminist art collective Constant in Brussels, who draw their philosophical and practical influences from feminist thinking and Free/libre and Open Source Software (FLOSS). Constant's programme, organised around the collective research structure of the 'worksession'[70], fits somewhere between art, design, research and organisational practice. Its members apply a critical and curious attention to the materials of their trade, from writing codes of conduct for collective practice (Constant, 2020) to the software that facilitates discussions and the event catering. It is practice played out predominantly 'backstage', in the spaces of organisation and conversation, in contrast to tactical media's concentration on the mediagenic public spectacle. Kleesattel (2021 p.188) identifies the confluence between Ukeles and Constant's work as a 'situated aesthetics' that engages art in matters of social complexity and the ongoing trouble of negotiating difference. This stands in contrast both to Relational Aesthetics' consensus view of social relations, contained in the foreshortened sociality of the art event, and to the more oppositional performance style of tactical media. For Kleesattel, Ukeles' work is a form of feminist institutional critique that considers entanglement in antithetical systems not as grounds for despair, but as a place for engagement where making hidden infrastructures visible is already a step to their transformation. This idea intersects with diverse economies thinking, in refusing an oppositional stance for one of inhabitation, and forms an important point of reference for the Feral MBA.

Ukeles' work was an organising reference for Casco Art Institute in Utrecht, in their four-year research programme *Site for Unlearning (Art Organization)* with artist Annette Krauss. As part of a process of 'unlearning organisation', Casco's artistic and management team transposed Ukeles' performance of scrubbing the stairs of the art museum into the fabric of their own operations, where cleaning the gallery and office spaces had become a point of contention (Choi, Krauss and Von der Heide, 2018). The project took the form of a weekly collective cleaning session, in which the accompanying discussion over who cleans broke free of its usual destination of internal meeting minutes to become part of Casco's published output[71].

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[70] A series of intensive transdisciplinary research labs where different types of expertise are brought into contact with each other over open-ended research questions. Examples include the 'Bureaucracksy' worksession (Constant, 2020) that investigated the governance of techno-social systems through the prism of bureaucracy. See Constant *Worksessions* https://constantvzw.org/wefts/worksessions.en.html; and Constant *Open Call: Bureaucracksy* https://constantvzw.org/site/Open-Call-Bureaucracksy.html. Last accessed 22/06/22.

[71] See Cleaning Together', in Choi, Krauss and Von der Heide (2018). Casco's 2018 publication 'Unlearning Exercises' includes a series of curated conversations around the relationship between Casco's artistic vision and its administrative ethos.

Figure 17: Casco common cleaning exercise

Common cleaning exercise as part of 'Site for Unlearning (Art Organization)', a project by Annette Krauss and Casco staff, (2014–). Image credit: Annette Krauss.

Art at a 1:1 scale

While Ukeles' stair-washing works to symbolic effect, Casco's cleaning regime is changing the routines and conversations inside the art institution directly. Art theorist Stephen Wright puts forward a category of '1:1 scale' art practice, 'not scaled-down models or artworld-assisted prototypes of potentially useful things, [but] full-scale practices, coterminous with whatever they happen to be grappling' (Wright, 2013 p.3). For Wright, these practices occupy a '"double ontology", simultaneously and inseparably what they are and artistic propositions for what they are' (Wright, 2013 p.6). Rather than making art 'about' things, it is art 'with' them, working both at the level of representation and that of utility. 1:1 art practice is coextensive with everyday life, in ways that exceed the limited interactions that relational art suggests (contained as art experiences or demonstrations). Wright's concept stands as a good description of *Feral Trade*, with its double location in business and art that adds capacity to each – a capacity I will return to below.

Wright's reference to 'useful things', along with his suggestion that art as a distinct domain of activity would become redundant as it merged with real world activities, invokes a larger debate

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between art's utility as an agent of social change, and a defence of its essential 'uselessness' that stands as an exception to the markers of quality and functionality expected of most commodities and activities (Hewitt, Beech and Jordan, 2014). Yet the opportunity presented in Wright's double ontology is not one of opposition but of simultaneity. The 'redundancy' of 1:1 practices, 'inasmuch as they fulfil a function, as art, which they already fulfil as whatever it is they are' does not make art superfluous, rather it removes its status as a protected domain. Its practices make forays into the world not clad or contained as art, but performing existing activities 'with an entirely different self-understanding' (Wright, 2013 p.55). The potential of this doubling of the symbolic and the functional is not a cancelling out but a composite – and Wright's idea is intrinsic to the Feral MBA approach, which engages with business not through modes of representation but as an occupation.

Sholette (2017 p.109) cautions that art that operates in the real world is also 'subject to all of the legal, economic, and practical consequences of any other real-world activity', for which artists, 'trained to deal with the representations of things, but not things themselves' might be ill-equipped. To take this statement at face value is to assume an uncanny division of labour between representation and consequence: that someone else would deal with the intractabilities of a real world that art must come into contact with eventually. This expectation does not speak well for art as a social practice – nor for its training – however there are many examples of art and artists that run counter to such assumptions.

The Artist Placement Group (APG)

A significant example of art practice where real-world dealings are integral to the action is the Artist Placement Group (APG). Founded by artists John Latham and Barbara Steveni, the APG negotiated placements for artists in business, industry and government agencies in the 1960s and 70s, including British Steel, and the UK Department of Health and Social Security, under the motto ‘disrupting business as usual'[72].The placements were underwritten by an 'open brief' that refused to commit the artist to concrete outcomes, such as producing an artwork. Their remit was instead to act as an 'Incidental Person' (in the APG's terminology) who would simply make 'some kind of difference [that] may result from little more than their presence in this context ' (Bradfield, 2020a p.22).

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[72]   Along with the APG's better-known motto, ‘Context is half the work’.

While the APG were known (and critiqued) for their 'joyless bureaucratic aesthetic' (Bishop, 2012 p.177), it is notable that the actual work of bureaucracy that formed the backbone of the project received scant critical attention. The discourse around their work is focused on Latham's conceptual writing and on the artworks produced in the placements. The negotiations that made these activities possible were largely the work of Steveni, who undertook the substantial task of corresponding with hundreds of potential placement sites and sponsors, managing the APG office and maintaining the conceptual integrity of the open brief (Henning and Jordan, 2016). The APG are instructive for the Feral MBA both for their administrative emphasis and in their dealings with business, which did not assume a combative class politics as was prevalent at the time. Some of its placed artists chose to work within the ranks of management, not on the shop floor – an approach for which they were also widely critiqued (Bishop, 2012).

A maintenance orientation swivels attention from exploits and stunts to more enduring practices. Next to the exploits of the tactical media artists, the drawn-out processual work of Ukeles, Constant, Casco and the APG could appear modest, opaque, even boring. Artist and educator Marsha Bradfield (who worked with Steveni in a subsequent iteration of the APG) speculates that the common critique of the group's bureaucratic fixation might in fact reflect the inability of art critics to recognise the actual work involved in enabling the more heroic placement activities of the (exclusively male) artists. 'Mountains of paperwork aren't necessarily evidence of an obsession with administration. They may just be mountains of paperwork'. (Bradfield, 2020a p.20). The punch line of Ukeles' manifesto is to push these two lines of production – the philosophical-creative and the administrative-support labours, normally held in a clear hierarchy of visibility and importance – onto the same plane.

Infrastructure art

An engagement with infrastructure is something that most of the practices examined here have in common. It appears in the Yes Men's spectacular infiltrations of TV news bulletins and in the more prolonged engagements of the APG artists on container ships and in government ministries. It applies to Ukeles' work in waste services and to Constant's expansive study of the digital infrastructures that snake through the work of art and education: the 'cables and servers, social environments, laws and regulations, licenses and relations between human beings and other beings' (Westenberg, 2021). It also characterises my investigations into the formative technologies of internet culture with the Bureau of Inverse Technology (B.I.T.), and the grocery operations of *Feral Trade* – more on which below.

Art curator Nato Thompson (2015) draws attention to the materiality of infrastructures, such as newspapers, social networks, schools and museums, that shape our collective perception of the world and through which its meanings and possibilities might be changed. Rather than infrastructure in its classic bridge and tunnel sense, these are sociologist Eric Klinenberg's (2018) 'social infrastructure': the background structures and systems that facilitate social, economic, cultural, and political life. Thompson highlights the importance of holding physical space, from barbers' shops to community gardens and arts venues, as 'sites of becoming', where alternative subjectivities to those operationalised by capitalist value systems might take root. He also emphasises the effort involved in maintaining these spaces:

> … producing physical locations requires logistics—rent, loans, cleaning, fixing, locking, paying bills, and on and on. The sheer bureaucracy terrifies those of us who enjoy patting ourselves on the back for simply showing up to a demonstration or reading a book. (Thompson, 2015).

Like Sholette, Thompson contrasts the viability of working with real-world infrastructure to the project-based economy that predominates in art. He puts forward artist Rick Lowe's *Project Row Houses* as an outlier that perhaps proves the rule. The project began with the purchase of several houses in a low-income Houston neighbourhood. Initially designated for art residencies, its remit expanded over several decades of operation to include other functions, such as childcare provision

and housing. For an artist, the prospect of taking on such a complex, socially-negotiated, open-ended undertaking is potentially 'economic suicide', in Thompson's (2010 p.5) words, raising questions of what commitments and durations are credible within the normal incentives of an art career. For Thompson, going into infrastructure means moving from the tactical to the strategic.

> ...from the hit and run techniques of the gesture, we've seen the emergence of more projects that had to replicate organizational structures in order to operate over time, which marks a very different aesthetic/political style than individual performances or hijinks (Thompson, 2015).

Projects to platforms

For my own trajectory, the turn of the millennium marked a conscious shift from projects to platforms where something more continuous and enduring might be built. I took up a number of self-invented occupations – as a grocery importer with *Feral Trade* (2003–), as system administrator of the Irational.org collective art server[73] (2010–), as a cola manufacturer/distributor with *Cube Cola* (2004–), and in various roles as bar manager, venue hire coordinator and accounts team member at the *Cube Microplex* (2001–). In the process, I have picked up a UK Economic Operators Registration and Identification (EORI) number[74] for importing goods, a Food Hygiene certificate[75] for manufacturing cola, a Personal Licence[76] to operate a bar, a BSc in business and economics and accreditation as a life coach[77] (a practice that became central to the Feral MBA and to which I return in the next chapter). I also became a UK citizen: a full-scale feat of administration of the kind generally relegated outside the meanings produced in art, yet elemental in keeping the practice going.

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[73] A physical computer,. The labours of administration include buying the machine, installing and maintaining the system software, driving the machine to Cheltenham to install it in a server farm, managing the background micro-crises of software upgrades, hardware failures, spam storms, server farm relations,network outages, user relations and paying invoices.

[74] See Gov.uk *Import Goods Into the UK: Step by Step.* https://www.gov.uk/import-goods-into-uk. Last accessed 22/06/22.

[75] Food Standards Agency, *Food Hygiene Ratings: Cube Cola.* https://ratings.food.gov.uk/business/en-GB/310369/*Cube Cola*-Bristol. Last accessed 22/06/22.

[76] Bristol.gov.uk *Personal Licence for Selling Alcohol.* https://www.bristol.gov.uk/licences-permits/personal-licence-for-selling-alcohol. Last accessed 22/06/22.

[77] Relational Dynamics 1st, *The RD1st Coaching Course (accredited)* https://relationaldynamics1st.co.uk/courses/the-relational-dynamics-coaching-course. Last accessed 22/06/22.

Figure 18: Certificate gallery

Clockwise from top left) Business Management certificate; Coaching certificate of accreditation; Personal licence; Bachelor of Science (BSc) certificate; Naturalisation certificate.

How I became a grocery trader

More specifically, the way I got from art to business is via *Feral Trade* (p.17), an art practice and grocery business that, like the practices introduced above, is also concerned with myth-making, infrastructure, staging, resourcing and maintaining. In taking on the form of a business, the founding interest of *Feral Trade* was to exchange the project-based economy of art – where the artist's currency is tied to producing a stream of new projects – for something more enduring and resource-filled. The backbone of its distribution system of couriers, waypoints and depots is a cultural economy of speaking engagements, workshops and exhibitions, and the train tickets, hotel rooms and airport transfers that these activities generate. Along with a rolodex of commercial relations with food suppliers, freight agents and cargo operators, these elements combine to produce their own infrastructural wealth and weight, no less substantial for not being formally managed or owned. The sole physical asset involved in *Feral Trade* is the web server, co-owned and operated with the Irational.org art collective (I am an Irational member and also a system administrator of the server). The server hosts the *Feral Trade Courier* database (Feral Trade, 2022), built and maintained as an effortful, exploratory, DIY software endeavour[78] and labour of love. Part display case, partly a critical utility for tracking and managing an unruly inventory, the database marks an imbrication of protocols and worlds: trade, art, code, logistics, business and social interaction.

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[78] It is open source in ethics, if not as a specific practice, to borrow Sholettes description of the Bureau of Inverse Technology's work (Carpenter, 2010).

Figure 19: Feral Trade Courier database

For me, going into business was a move to leave tactical media's high-profile stunt work behind and take up a position in the infrastructure. It is moving from tactical media's primary mode of trespass (Thompson, 2004) to one of inhabitation: literally occupation. The grocery storehouse is my own flat, the couriers, suppliers and customers are my extended social networks with shipments coordinated along lines of encounter rather than efficiency. While spectacular one-off deliveries do occur[79], *Feral Trade* is primarily an endurance act, built on repeat transactions and designed to

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[79] For example Feral Trade Shipment FER-2098, Cube Cola to New York https://www.feraltrade.org/shipment/FER-2098.html.

thrive in the background of other events. It is moving into the janitorial yet bringing shards of the tactical with it, with an eye for staging and spectacle at the micro-resolution of the individual grocery delivery. It shifts the performance of art into the shopkeeper's trade: the banal and usually unseen actions of weighing things out, writing labels, organising, filing, deliveries and invoicing. In the process, the backstage labours that Thompson and Sholette skirt around (from financial and legal obligations to the paperwork) figure less as impediments than the substance and intention of the work.

Mixing in business

The ancestors, precursors and allies introduced here help to contextualise the Feral MBA within art practice. I now turn to some locations where art and business already cross paths, as a working context. While art and business are the motivators and magnets of this research, my interest is less in either domain than in the spaces and transfers between them: what art can do for (and with) business, and vice versa. I will start with what Feral MBA is explicitly *not* doing – creativity reframed as entrepreneurship, a familiar trope in creative industries discourse and in higher education – then move to a closer context of artists who are taking up business in all its complexity, in varied ways. While the first category might represent the antithesis of the Feral MBA, it is an essential part of its context.

What the Feral MBA is not

The business school has long considered engaging art in its curriculum. In 2011, a new Carnegie Foundation report, *Rethinking Undergraduate Business Education* made a widely-read call for revitalising the business school through an injection of liberal forms of learning from the arts and humanities. This is not a transdisciplinary proposal but one geared towards enrolling skills from the arts (such as dealing with ambiguity and uncertainty), to enhance the capabilities of business students toward existing outcomes of innovation and better decision-making (Sullivan, Ehrlich and Colby, 2016). The Central St Martins Birbeck MBA in London (2017–), an institutional collaboration between Central Saint Martins art school and Birbeck business school, could stand as

an example of this approach[80] where the potential of a more exploratory curriculum is put to work towards achieving business success, without challenging its direction (Beyes, Parker and Steyaert, 2016).

From an arts perspective, cultural theorist Angela McRobbie (2018) provides an incisive critique of an instrumentalised mode of creativity in higher education, geared to producing an individualistic, competitive, entrepreneurial workforce. McRobbie traces this phenomenon to the UK New Labour government in the 1990s and the writings of Charles Leadbetter, that hitched the heroic figure of the American entrepreneur to a British conception of social good. For McRobbie, the effects are to transfer public goals of social inclusion onto the agency of small business, while shrinking the social obligations of the state. Hard boundaries between living and working are dissolved, but in ways that subsume creativity into the imperative of economic survival. In the process a pervasive societal trend toward insecure self-employment and project-based work is personified in the figure of the artist as cultural entrepreneur: a figure for whom 'passion' is both a cliché and a prerequisite. McRobbie points to the art school as a powerful incubator for this way of thinking, its curriculum infiltrated by 'business school' models, entrepreneurship toolkit and modes of self-expression centred on endless opportunistic networking and the upbeat demeanour of the pitch.

These tendencies are amplified in the contemporary discourse of the creative industries, resting on the rationale that knowledge and creativity can be mobilised for economic ends. In the UK, an art and technology sector presents its activities in a language of cutting-edge innovation, global competitiveness, jobs and economic growth, commensurate with that of the start-up business sphere (Creative Industries Clusters Programme, 2022). In relation to the arts more widely, art theorist Andrea Phillips (2015) notes a policy agenda of 'cultural industrial entrepreneurialism' whereby arts organisations are tasked with taking on responsibility for shoring up their own financial sustainability as a condition of receiving public funds. This approach is reflected in a prevalence of business models in the arts that embed the language and processes of commercial enterprise, overwriting what was previously a far more heterogeneous field of organisational shapes: a trend to

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[80] Its curriculum features a core of traditional MBA disciplines, including strategy, marketing, finance and management, with a focus on cultural entrepreneurship, co-production, positive change, sustainability, design thinking and creative problem-solving. It is offered as an accredited MBA and an art degree (students attend both campuses) that multiplies the networks and knowledges of each domain. Yet despite its transdisciplinary leanings, its presentation is fundamentally that of a management course 'bringing ethics into making profit' (Central Saint Martins, 2021) that does not exit the 'business school' paradigm.Central Saint Martins, *Why Study Business at an Art School.* https://www.arts.ac.uk/colleges/central-saint-martins/stories/why-study-business-at-an-art-school. Last accessed 22/06/22.

structural homogeneity that contradicts the kind of diversity, imagination and risk-taking the arts sector claims as its values: see for example Arts Council England (2020).

Disrupting business

Despite this tendency, art continues to harbour a diversity of approaches to business practice. Media theorists Geoff Cox and Tatiana Bazzichelli's book *Disrupting Business* is focused on the interactions between artists and a capitalist economy. Cox and Bazzichelli (2013 p.7) describe their subject as artists 'doing things with business – a play on Austin's (1962) 'do[ing] things with words'. They draw on the concept of 'disruptive innovation' associated with Harvard Business School, and on economist Joseph Schumpeter's (1942) concept of 'creative destruction': upturning the market in ways that generate novel forms of market value. For Cox and Bazzichelli (2013 p.8), art presents a source of mutual interference that 'disrupts business but at the same time is disrupted by it'.

Cox and Bazzichelli take aim at the innovation juggernaut of the creative industries that positions artists at the vanguard of value creation while in practice leaving artists in its wake. Yet rather than concentrate on formulating critique (as McRobbie for example does), they make a case for taking up business in all its complexity, as material for artistic reinvention. The art–business practices they feature come in shapes and orientations that are variously critical, celebratory, pragmatic, biopolitical, behavioural, interventionist, parodic, art-world-oriented, grass-roots, speculative and/or actually doing business. Many of these have roots in tactical media (my own work with *Feral Trade* is included). Askance to Manos' design perspective that speculates on business as a medium to build desirable worlds, Cox and Bazzichellli (2013 p.18) focus on what artists might do with the performative power of business language and operations, in ways that admit its complexities and contradictions. They propose 'the occupation of the institution of business to better understand its inherent grammar': to play with its signification in ways that might alter its effects.

Art with business

The discussion above provides some context for what the Feral MBA does not want to do – reframe art and artists in the language and agenda of a market-driven entrepreneurship – and what it *is*

attempting – to reframe artists' thinking about the materials and methods of business in ways that explodes possibilities in both domains. The performative agenda of the Feral MBA follows Cox and Bazzichelli outside and against the notion of a results-based, measurable, means-end efficacy that a 'business school' performativity promotes (Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman, 2009), to work instead at substantially different levels of subjectivity, signification and affect.

I now turn to a number of artists who are 'doing things' with business already. The examples that follow escape an orderly matrix: in various combinations they can be considered as art 'as' business, art 'about' business or art 'with' it. Some are art-world facing, others trade predominantly outside that realm.

Market relations

The art market might be the most prominent meeting place of art and business, where practitioners like Damian Hirst make headline news for their inflationary auction revenues (art 'as' business). Hirst's financial success is atypical[81]: the overwhelming majority of artists occupy the far end of the money-making spectrum. Sholette's (2007) concept of artistic 'dark matter' brings to visibility the multitude of arts livelihoods (makeshift, amateur and informal) that are structurally invisible to the critics and curators of mainstream art, yet essential to its social and cultural energy (art 'without' business, perhaps). At the same time, the persistent existence of this 'failed' artistic mass suggests that the mainstream art world is only one of many economies that artists occupy.

Outside the commercial realm of art fairs and auctions, art's opposition to 'business' is often an unspoken default. In tactical media, the exploits of The Yes Men, CAE and Yomango take business as their foil, to be investigated, parodied, infiltrated and resisted (art 'against' business). These artists play with corporate form, yet structurally they are art collectives, resourced through a mix of activism, day jobs – commonly academic teaching posts – and public and philanthropic funding, rather than through sales.

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[81] In the US for example, only 10% of art graduates make a living working in arts fields – see Artists Report Back, BFAMFAPhD (2014).

There is a further tradition in art that takes on the form of a business but within the containing environment of an art commission. In Michael Rakowitz's *Return* (2006)*,* the artist constructed a functioning Iraqi grocery store and parcel depot in Brooklyn during the Gulf War. Rakowitz used his exhibition budget to provide free shipping for a US-Iraqi diaspora to send parcels back home. He also imported one tonne of Iraqi dates to the US, the first grocery item in over 25 years to appear on US shelves with an Iraqi label of origin. While it is an impressive feat of trade in action, the project appears to end when the exhibition does and would be hard to repeat without that kind of funding and attention: Rakowitz (2006) describes it as 'bad business with good art' .

The artist as shopkeeper

Rakowitz's store joins an array of artist-run shops in different shapes. Some appear primarily as scene-makers and social hubs, such as the brief and headline-grabbing life of *The Shop* by UK artists Sarah Lucas and Tracey Emin. Open for 6 months in 1993, *The Shop* sold a range of low-priced artworks to passers-by, although its enduring effect was to boost the art-market value of the artists and the scene around them[82].

An early precursor to the artist-run shop that illuminates some of the fault lines between art and other economies, is *FOOD*, a restaurant run in the not-yet gentrified SoHo neighbourhood of New York by dancer/photographer Carol Goodden, artist Gordon Matta Clark and other collaborators (1971-3)[83]. The project was self-funded, partly from Godden's inheritance and in part through its trading activities: a mixed bag of financing not unlike that of many art–business start-ups[84]. Art critic Lori Waxman describes *FOOD* as a social scene but also a wider artists' amenity: a place for experimentation and collaboration, a place for artists to eat or make an income waiting tables. Waxman (2008 p.27) positions *FOOD* within an emerging trend, 'part mimicry, part invention', for appropriating existing commercial forms in a wider DIY movement that was engaging with basic social and political structures by remaking them[85]. In contrast to tactical media's resistant stance of

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[82]   Als, H., Coles, S., Daly, P. Emin, T., Lucas, S., Muir, G. and Wyn Evans, C. *Remembering Tracey Emin and Sarah Lucas's 'The Shop'.* https://www.frieze.com/article/tracey-emin-and-sarah-lucas-shop. Last accessed 22/06/22.

[83]   The business itself continued till the early 1980s but the founding artists had long since left.

[84]   See for example Bristol and Bath by Design's survey of 155 design businesses which found that one third of these considered self-funding by the business operator as one of their main sources of funding. (Parraman et al, 2016 p.93).

[85]   For Waxman (2008 p.27), *FOOD's* DIY ethos 'offered a broad, workaday echo of various activist paradigms of the time: the black power movement, the women's movement, and the gay liberation movement all provided

institutional parody/simulation, this involved taking on institutions not as something 'other' but as a shell to be occupied, played with and improved (see also Bradfield, 2020b)[86]. For *FOOD*, social and aesthetic considerations trumped efficient operations, from sourcing supplies to employment practices. Yet despite its unorthodox business methods, Waxman notes that *FOOD's* status as a bona fide business was not challenged - instead it was largely overlooked by contemporaries and critics as art[87]. In attending to subsistence as much as aesthetics, it failed to fit even the generous definition of art at the time.

Far from the struggle for mainstream art recognition there is another, grassroots tradition of artist-run enterprises that leverage business for their own creative and economic ends. Bristol's Here Shop*,* trading printed artworks, cards and zines,[88] is one example. My own business partnership *Cube Cola* sells cola concentrate through its online shop and via trade distribution to bars and venues (while occasionally hosted at art events, art is the least of our business interests). My other business alma mater the *Cube Microplex* has survived for over 20 years on ticket, bar and merchandise[89] sales and the efforts of an all-volunteer workforce.

Applying a 'resource lens' – who pays? – is one way to parse these disparate shopkeeping endeavours. *Return* was staged within the bounds of an art commission. *The Shop* was run on a shoe-string but ultimately looked to a different economy, in building market value for the artists involved. For the Here Shop and the *Cube,* dug in for the long haul, it is a question of subsistence: the trade of goods and services are core to their operations.

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meaningful examples for rethinking the most basic social and political systems not through rhetoric but through action'.

[86] I connect this tactics also to diverse economies theory, and a vision of economy that is not rejected or attacked but reframed as something that we are already constitutive of and can take up and rework.

[87] *FOOD* appears in art history almost solely in connection to Matta-Clark's name, as the only member of its sprawling collective to retrospectively achieve art world attention (Waxman, 2008).

[88] See Here Gallery / Bookshop, http://heregallery.co.uk. Last accessed 22/0/6/22

[89] See Cube Cinema Shop https://shop.cubecinema.com. Last accessed 22/0/6/22.

Feral Trade: the ecology of supply

> **Turning a resource eye to *Feral Trade***: that business runs on a mixed economy of artist
> speaking fees, grocery trading, alongside diverse forms of social value that are harder to
> measure. The founding intention was for a background project that could operate over time,
> in and amongst other sources of livelihood. For *Feral Trade*, the many forms of subsidy
> (financial, social, energetic) that keep the venture going are not a sign of compromise: rather
> they are the infrastructure on which the venture stands, a diverse economy in miniature.

McRobbie (2018) imagines the larger potential of the artist-run neighbourhood shop, in relation to
the struggles of sustaining arts livelihoods. The shop would act as the interface between creative
production and public display, whereby artists could play a part in urban neighbourhoods as
community activists (receiving parcels, offering photocopying services and so on), rather than as
gentrifiers. It is an appealing idea – although lest we get carried away the radical potential of the
shopkeeper's trade, critical theorist Marina Vishmidt (2013) connects a lively UK scene of self-
organised DIY, post-punk cultural production to former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's
ideological legacy of small property ownership as 'the best way to secure material and ideological
independence from the social compacts state cultural funding was meant to secure'. (Vishmidt, 2013
p.43)[90]. From this angle, the intractable problems of a capitalist economy pile back in to the cracks
of possibility that the artist-run shop opens up.

The artist as entrepreneur

Vishmidt (2013) further problematises an explicitly entrepreneurial trend in socially-engaged art
that harnesses the outsized resources and attention of the art world to produce value for the
communities it operates in. Vishmidt takes as her example Chicago artist Theaster Gates, who
strategically funnels arts budgets into community redevelopment projects – as *Project Row Houses*
did, but at substantially larger scales of funding and art world attention. Gates' strategy relies on the
local community to carry out the bulk of the work, for which the artist gains artistic capital. In

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[90]   A position echoed in McRobbie's (2018) creative industries critique (p.83).

Vishmidt's reading, it is a classical entrepreneurial manoeuvre that does not address the structural conditions of social deprivation, gentrification and development that provide its rationale. It is also the kind of work that lives and dies with the capital that art injects.

Vishmidt's suspicion of an entrepreneurial agenda reflects a persistent line of thinking in art that treats business as an antithetical space, the detail and diversity of which are often not seriously examined[91]. For cultural theorist Franco Berardi (2013 p.24), 'business' is ' the most despicable word in the vocabulary', synonymous with the subjugation of people in meaningless work and the empty production of 'busyness'. Berardi's stance is polemical, but a lack of a nuanced consideration of business also appears in Bishop's (2012 p.26) contention that '(t)hrough the discourse of creativity, the elitist activity of art is democratised, although today this leads to business rather than to Beuys'. That 20th century art star Joseph Beuys would be considered poles apart from the pragmatic space of business is not in question. It marks a prevailing shorthand in art that casts business as something 'other', a characterisation that the Feral MBA contests.

Art with economics

As a further means to position the Feral MBA, I close this collection with a number of projects that take the economy, rather than business, as their focus. These include Amy Feneck and Ruth Beale's *Alternative School of Economics*[92], instituted by the artists as a programme to study economics with their local community. There is Natalia Linares and Caroline Woolard's *Art-coop*[93] a solidarity platform organised around the economy of art and arts workers more specifically. There is media arts collective Furtherfield's curatorial programme, investigating the potential of artists working with blockchain (Catlow et al, 2017). And there is artist Kathrin Böhm who with art curator Kuba Szreder has instituted the *Centre for Plausible Economies*[94], a platform for mapping and reimagining economic systems from an arts perspective[95] (Centre for Plausible Economies, 2022).

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[91] Harking back to the narrow chacterisation of 'business' introduced in Chapter 2.1 (p. 46) .

[92] See Rabbits Road Institute *Alternative School of Economics*, https://www.alternativeschoolofeconomics.org/rabbits-road-institute. Last accessed 22/6/22.

[93] For a related piece of writing see Linares, N. and Woolard, C., *The Art Worlds We Want: Solidarity Art Economies* https://nonprofitquarterly.org/the-art-worlds-we-want-solidarity-art-economies. Last accessed 22/6/22.

[94] See Centre for Plausible Economies c/o Company Drinks. http://companydrinks.info/whats-on/economy. Last accessed 22/6/22.

[95] Writing on the economy of contemporary art, Szreder (2021) contrasts an individualistic, competitive system in which endless mobility is demanded and romanticised, with a vastly different image of local institutions and co-operative relationships that most artists and organisations actually rely on – family background and citizenship

These projects are all close to the Feral MBA's working ecosystem – Furtherfield, Woolard, Böhm and Szreder have all worked with *Feral Trade*, and the latter three are fellow CERN members (more on which below). Yet the focus of these projects also helps to distinguish what is specific to the Feral MBA, where investigations of the economy at large and the economy of art in particular are secondary to an approach that is habit-level, non-art-world-oriented and takes business, in all its materiality, as its staging ground. The interest of the Feral MBA is not in the art economy as such, but in artists as small business entities that are both representative of (and continuous with) a larger field of livelihood and enterprise practices, and carry with them a particular set of capacities with the potential to catalyse new business thinking outside the art realm[96].

An exemplar of this approach can be found in another of Böhm's initiatives, *Company Drinks* (2014–) 'art in the shape of a community drinks enterprise'[97]. Located in a post-industrial area on London's outer edge, *Company Drinks*' activities span from community gleaning trips to gather ingredients for drinks production to running flavour workshops with kids to selling bottled drinks at London's Frieze Art fair[98]. Böhm considers their annual cycle of drinks production as a new form of public space: one that connects a community with common resources (nature, infrastructure, sociality) that enable larger conversations about economic possibilities to be brokered (Böhm and Szreder, 2020a). While the logistics of bottling and distributing drinks are stacked against the micro-scale producer –*Company Drinks* can at best break even – the drinks build resources by other means. '[E]ach single bottled drink becomes an embodiment, representation and demonstration of a new collectivity, productivity and identity in a so-called "economically deprived" neighbourhood' (Böhm and Szreder, 2020a p.527).

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protections included. Szreder puts forward 'The Interdependence', an idea developed within CERN, as an alternative signifier to displace the myth of the independent artist, one that would represent a significant shift in values from individual to ecosystem.

[96] The difference between business and economy as the subject of attention is important in this context, underlined by artist and theorist Marsha Bradfield (in conversation): 'Business is bizarrely under-attended to. Why are people gravitating to economy as a space for agency where it is actually the most disabling space where you are trying to model the whole system? Two reasons – that business has historically been so dirty – if you are an artist in business you have sold out – it is a very compelling recurrent and recalcitrant myth that needs to be busted. And [on the theory side], queer theory for example has this abundant, heterogeneous, theoretical dimension to it, however what theorists don't get is the practices and processes. You have to do the stuff then you find out what happens, it's not from thinking about it. It's such a crucial distinction' (Bradfield, 2020c).

[97] See also artist and cultural organiser Joon Lynn Goh (2021) on artist-led businesses. Goh, J.L. *What if...? Artist-led business as a practice of worldbuilding.* https://www.sexwithcancer.com/learn/what-if. Last accessed 22/06/22.

[98] *Company Drinks* sell their bottled drinks for one price at the local library and for double that at the art fair.

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Diverse economies theory is built in to the business operations of *Company Drinks*, where extending an idea of economy beyond the financial performs a vital means of validating the project to the community involved in its productions. '[A]s soon as the non-monetary enters the equation the possibilities become tangible again', in Böhm and Szreder's (2020a p.533) words. Measured in relationships and experiences, rather than in output and profits, its operations no longer looks small.

Figure 20: Company Drinks
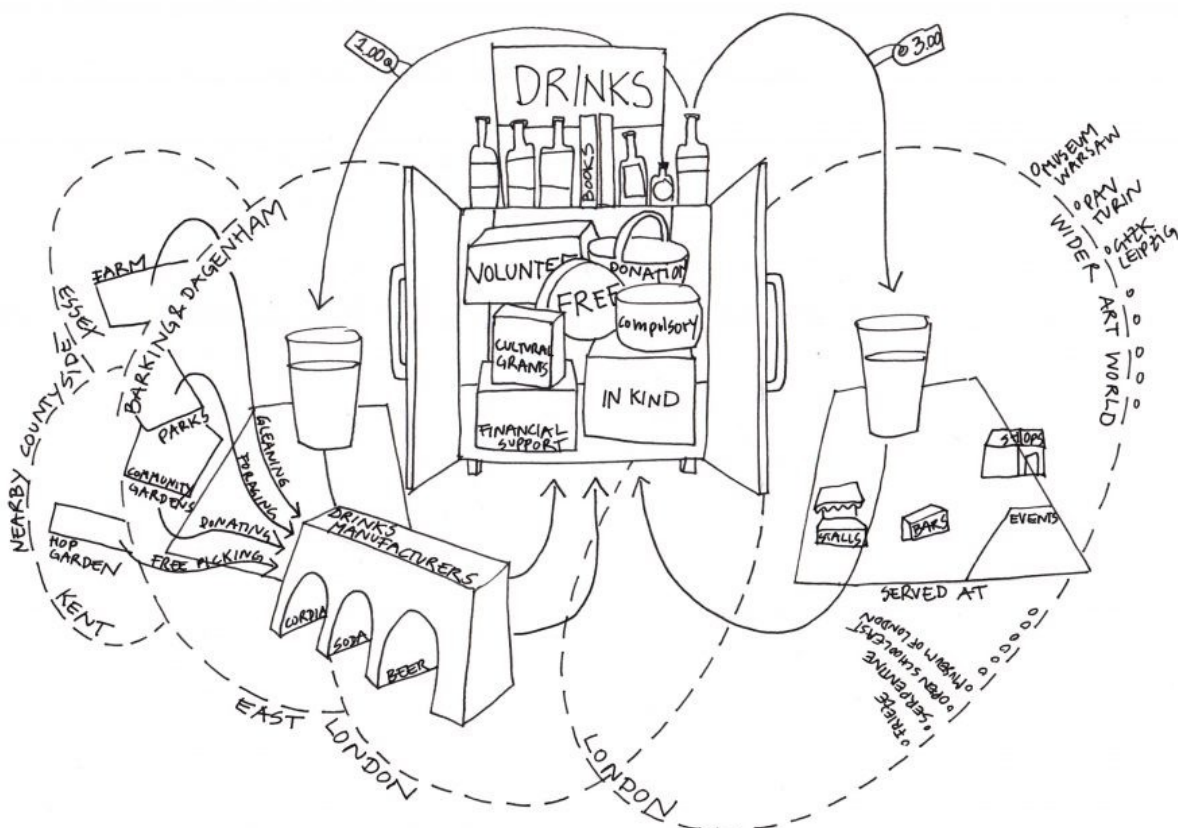
The economy as a drinks cabinet. Image credit: Company Drinks.

FOOD was a DIY initiative by artists that traversed out of a recognised art space and eventually dissipated as a commercial venture. *Company Drinks* is a product of a different era in which social and relational art are well-established art forms. A self-described '1:1 scale' practice[99], *Company Drinks* stakes out a position across art and social realms: it is a community project that leverages art world attention as part of its operating currency. For the Feral MBA, the resources (and demands) of a mainstream art world are not so clearly relevant or appealing. Instead it is a manner and approach

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[99]   See Böhm and Szreder, (2020a) p.531.

to practice, learned through tactical media, maintenance art, FLOSS and DIY culture, that is art's primary contribution to the project.

The CERN artists

Böhm and Szreder are fellow members of the Community Economies Research Network (CERN), part of a small but active contingent of CERN artists who occupy a double role in the diverse economies space, many of whom are building diverse livelihoods practices as well as studying them. As CERN member and co-founder of the Brave New Alps design collective Bianca Elzenbaumer (2019) describes the connfluence:

> As CERN artists, we are developing making practices and design experiments (including full-scale businesses) which complement the observational writing practices of the diverse economies scholars… As practitioners we are inhabiting, designing and testing the case studies; we are also doing the grant applications and the PhDs.

There is sustained interest amongst the CERN scholars as to how methods from art and design could contribute to the diverse economies project. There are also latent misunderstandings: for example that artists would be doing the illustrations, or contributing novel facilitation methods to enhance the communicative reach of an academic enquiry. One of the CERN geographers wryly described her perception of what artists do as 'being magicians': a throwaway remark, yet one that opens a resonant line of thinking that I return to in Chapter 5 of this research. The breadth of work the CERN artists are doing is under-represented in diverse economies literature[100] – understandably in that artists are largely immersed in practices other than academic writing. These activities, from exhibitions and artists' books to neighbourhood markets[101], forest schools[102] and drinks collaborations[103] suggest an array of different forms in which diverse economies thinking might materialise – and there is a generative conversation underway among the CERN artists over how to

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[100] For example the 2020 *Handbook of Diverse Economies* produced by the CERN network contains just one text from artists, which Kathrin Böhm and Kuba Szreder (2020a) supply.

[101] For example Kruglanski, A. and and Corumina, A. *3 Stages of Succession,* http://communityeconomies.org/people/aviv-kruglanski. Last accessed 22/06/22.

[102] See Elzenbaumer, B. *Sottoboxco,* http://communityeconomies.org/people/bianca-elzenbaumer. Last accessed 22/06/22.

[103] Materialised in *Cube Cola*'s drinks-making collaborations with Böhm's *Company Drinks* and the Italian drinks collective *Comunità Frizzante* which Elzenbaumer co-initiated. See *Comunità Frizzante is Bottling a Model for Hyperlocal Food Ecologies in the Italian Alp*s https://thisismold.com/object/drinkware/comunita-frizzante-is-bottling-a-model-for-hyperlocal-food-ecologies-in-the-italian-alps. Last accessed 22/0 6/22.

contribute to the diverse economies space other than by writing about what we do. Considering the examples of *Company Drinks* and *Feral Trade* (amongst others), the contention of this research is that business might provide one vehicle and vantage point for doing this.

Restaging art and business

The Feral MBA takes the composite of art and business out of its familiar articulation in the creative industries and into a more uncertain assemblage. In this configuration, art is not a resource for business or a sphere to be aggressively economised. Nor is it a precious space to be protected from the tentacles of business. Instead it is a parallel yet interlocking world. It is applying the artist's specialisms of staging, props, improvisation and invention to the very prospect of business, to open its conduct to new possibilities and experimental ends.

The art practices collected in this chapter are experimenting and intervening in the everyday fabric and action of doing business. Some of these cross into real-world operations in their infrastructure relations, durations, and resourcing. This '1:1' quality, being both art *and* enterprise, brings in certain logistical constraints. Yet it also supplies an extra carrying power, going beyond representation to take up a position in the world. Viewed through Wright's (2013) 'double ontology' (see p.75), this does not mean merging art out of the picture. On the contrary, it is considering the co-habitation of art and business as a composite of resources and potentials that prevents confining their activities to a single realm. The extra capacities of artists engaged in the arena of everyday life yields what Sholette (2015 p.98) describes as 'a plus rather than a surplus': it is art's advantage over things that submit to the hard labour of being only 'what they are' (Wright, 2013 p.6). For *Feral Trade* to be 'just' a grocery business – the venture would be considerably lessened. At the same time, the 'plus' of business supplies substantial extra communicative and operational power to the art.

1:1 scale, weak theory and art with business

FOOD, *Project Row Houses, Company Drinks* and *Feral Trade* all exemplify the kind of 1:1 scale orientation that Wright discussed. Wright's text does not provide examples of practice – a shortcoming – but his concept formed an organising device for Szreder's exhibition, *Making Use:*

Life in Postartistic Times, co-initiated with Sebastian Cichocki at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Warsaw (2016)[104] for which *Feral Trade* provided the gallery coffee. The exhibition assembled an extensive catalogue of artists and collectives with links to tactical media, DIY, design and social practice – *Company Drinks* included – who are practising in and around the saturated market space of art with an anti-market stance.

The 1:1 practice of art with business is about living the livelihoods the art is enacting, even as these things are enmeshed and colliding with other markets and forces. An important marker of the approach the Feral MBA is taking is to consider these art–business practices for their potential, rather than assume their inevitable co-option. Cox and Bazzichelli (2013) point to the danger of attempting to disrupt the workings of a capitalist market: that any alternative conceptions of business could be easily recuperated back into the service of an unobstructed market logic. A weak theory approach concentrates instead on maintaining an appreciative attention to the detail of what is going on. Rather than judge these experiments (with their multiple inputs from grants to volunteer labour) as unviable on business terms, the interest is to 'study their strategies of survival' (Gibson-Graham, 2008 p.628). In this understanding, the many dependencies on other systems are not a sign of failure but the scene of operations.

Bringing in the resources

The resource implications for artists operating 'in the real' (Wright, 2013 p.3) also go unexamined in Wright's text[105] - and limit his argument. For Wright, art is not an attribute particular to things named as art, but a gradient or coefficient that is present in a variety of things in different intensities. This notion has the democratising effect of relocating art from a specialised territory to a dispersed competency. Yet the function of art also has a tradeable value that Wright does not address – with concrete implications for the status and survival of the art practitioner.

Resources – with all their material demands of sourcing, transacting, transporting and storing – are something that practice, whether making art or running a business (most activities in fact, other than theorising) make vivid. An attention to resourcing, logistics and administration is another important

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[104] Wright is credited as 'shadow' curator.
[105] Except for its opening pages, which include a series of sponsor logos and acknowledgement of funding support from the European Commission.

marker of the Feral MBA research. These activities are integral to art-making but are commonly considered outside what is valued as art – as critical reactions to *FOOD* and the APG suggest. The feminist perspectives of Ukeles and Gibson-Graham work to flush these support acts– with their 'lousy status' (Ukeles, 1969 p.2) – onto centre stage. It means surfacing the grunt work of managing and maintaining, while extending the frame of these activities to include their affective, relational and communicative dimensions. It is pushing the artistic and the administrative onto the same plane, not to exceptionalise the admin as 'also art', but to keep these activities open to be informed and transformed by one other - as the activities of *radmin,* which I introduce in the next chapter, play out.

Assembling the Feral MBA

This review brings together thinking from a number of fields around the (un)common interest of business. One thing it illuminates is that outside of specific contexts of business practice and theory, the subject can present a blindspot for critical and creative thinking. While Tsing's (2015) ethnographic attention and Cox and Bazzichelli's (2013) artistic approach take on business in all its variety and interiority, they stand as exceptions to a general tendency to lapse into a limited imagination of what 'business' could mean. This consolidating effect is part of the potency of business, and as such forms a vital element of the Feral MBA's mise en scène.

The gap that Bateson (1972) identifies, between an ecological understanding of the world and how to actually inhabit this in daily life, is another important component. The two tasks that Bateson marks out – of philosophical and habit-level change – each call for their own techniques and technologies. For the Feral MBA, diverse economies theory provides the discursive tools to reframe the economy as a web of relations and a space for action, while art supplies a set of examples, materials and means to test out this prospect in practice. Performativity, staging and a nuanced approach to scale are integral to this undertaking, as the next chapter will relate.

Bishop (2012) locates the power of the APG in their belief that art can cause both business and art to re-evaluate their priorities. Whereas the remit of the APG involved artists going into industry as curious outsiders, the interest of the Feral MBA is artists going into business for themselves. The structures and materials assembled to support this proposition are the subject of the next chapter.

Figure 21: Feral MBA working conditions

Feral MBA – Inception – opening weekend workshop. Still life with Code of Conduct (Counter-Materials Ring Binder p.4C).

Chapter 3. Practices

How do we actually go about performing new economies—what are some techniques and technologies of performance? (Gibson-Graham, 2008 p.614).

This research stages an encounter between the theoretical underpinnings of diverse economies theory, and practices and understandings from art and business, manifested in the experimental programme of the Feral MBA. Bringing these disparate forms of knowledge together seeks to unsettle and displace the perspectives and activities assumed for business and open up space for other possibilities. The Feral MBA enacts the performativity that diverse economies theory articulates, through a mode of performance that starts 'where we are', in our own business and livelihoods. This chapter examines the practices assembled to do this. The chapter is accompanied by the *Counter-materials Ring Binder*, the contents of which interleave with and supplement this written account and should be kept on hand as a cross-reference as you read[106].

The concepts of performance and performativity can be hard to untangle. Butler (2016; 1995) contrasts a performativity that is situated in the world (and relies on reiterating existing conventions for its binding effects) with the one-off acts of theatrical performance, taking place in the seclusion of a theatre space, 'outside' life. At the same time, performance is recognised as a ubiquitous part of everyday living, making this distinction less clear. What I am taking up as useful for this research is to think of performance as trading on the artist's specialisms of staging, fabrication, improvisation and invention, while performativity extends an element of real change into the world. The Feral MBA mixes elements of each.

The PhD practice takes the form of the business counter-materials: artworks that also act '1:1' in the world, as ways of doing business and business training. At their centre is the two month-long pilot programmes of the *Feral MBA – Inception* and *Succession* – the first in Hobart, conducted in person, the second in Plymouth, online[107]. The pilots worked simultaneously as evidence collection, training space and art practice, a layering of functions and intentions that is reflected in the mixed modes of writing in this chapter, where reporting on the fieldwork is intercut with texts that

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[106] A table would also be in order as the ring binder brings in its own heft. A photo archive of the ring binder materials will be available for viewing online, following the PhD examination period.
[107] In February and November 2020 respectively.

represent the artworks. A similar mixed agenda can be read in the detailed presentation of *feral business coaching* later on in the chapter, as a technology that became integral to the Feral MBA across all three dimensions (research, training and practice).

While the juxtaposition of a 'feral' approach with that of the MBA is one of extremes, it is intrinsic to the communicative tactics of a project that seeks to destabilise and de-centre a dominant form of business knowledge. The pilots provided some tools, routines, a cohort, and a context in which to do this. I will begin with details of recruitment, structure, locations and staging, and continue with the approach to evidence and analysis (and how the latter changed through the process of research).

Feral MBA – Inception

Feral MBA – Inception took place over five weekends in and around Hobart, capital of the island state of lutruwita/Tasmania,[108] Australia, in February 2020. Hobart supplied a suitable location with its small scale and close social networks[109]. It is also home to MONA, a privately-run art museum with an entrepreneurial ethos that provided the venue for the *Thorny Conversation*, the Feral MBA's public-facing event (p.150). The *Inception* pilot was organised without a central host or funder, working instead with an array of art and business venues: a council-operated arts centre, a start-up farm, an artists' studio complex, a recycling co-operative and an artist-run gallery. Access to these spaces was individually negotiated in a series of trades and exchanges, as the event budget records (*Counter-materials Ring Binder* p.6B). The range of spaces enrolled and the public budget (more on this below) manifest the research approach in foregrounding a diversity of resources and relations.

Participants were recruited to the programme by open call[110], distributed through the social media channels of the workshop venues and those of Contemporary Art Tasmania, a local hub for contemporary and experimental arts. Of the 30 who applied to the course, a group of 21 was selected (three of whom dropped out before the programme commenced, and one mid-way). Applicants were asked to provide a written statement about their own practice and why they might wish to join a course on 'feral business.' There was no attendance fee but participants were asked to

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[108]   lutruwita is the name for Tasmania in the reconstructed language of the Palawa kani Indigenous people and is used as a convention to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the island.
[109]   The choice of location was largely circumstantial, but I had visited Hobart in 2018 and gauged a good level of interest for the project through my art-based connections there (contacted through friends of friends).
[110]   https://fo.am/events/feral-mba-inception

commit to the full run of weekly workshops, and pay a $50 deposit to secure a place. These funds formed part of the programme dramaturgy, as the Money and Resources experiment in the next chapter (p.151) will relate.

The call for applications was directed toward 'artists and others' and emphasised the programme's experimental approach, as a means to screen out those seeking more proven forms of business training. The selection procedure sought to include people and projects from in and beyond the arts and at different life stages. It specifically favoured those who specified an interest in engaging with and learning from a community of peers, rather than receiving a package of skills. The group selected included 13 people who identified as artists – a painter, a potter, a blacksmith, a writer, a screen printer and several photographers, musicians and visual artists. The remaining five described themselves as non-artists: a herbalist, a farmer, a textile worker and a music label producer[111]. The age range was mid-20s to early 50s. Almost all lived in or near Hobart except two who flew in for the programme from out of state. 7 people brought with them an existing business endeavour, from sole traderships to incorporated entities, while most of the others brought business ideas at different stages of cultivation. One of the group, artist and farmer 'GG'[112] was engaged in advance as Feral MBA Assistant and was involved in the programme in the dual role of co-organiser and participant. The *Inception* programme closed on February 29th 2020, one day before the first case of COVID-19 was recorded in Tasmania.

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[111] Most participants also occupied significant additional jobs and identities outside these roles.

[112] GG (Grace Gamage) was recruited as programme assistant in September 2019 and worked on the programme until the end of the closing weekend in March 2020. Assistant activities included distributing the application call (GG's social networks were instrumental in bringing in some of the non-artist 'others'), negotiating with prospective venues, collaborating on participant selection, organising workshop equipment and refreshments and sharing insights and observations at the weekly debriefs. This was a paid role, I offered GG the AUD equivalent of one month of my PhD stipend, approximately GBP £1,500.

Feral MBA – Succession

The second pilot, *Feral MBA – Succession* was held in Plymouth, UK over four weeks of November 2020 under the substantially altered conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic[113]. Originally planned as a physical gathering, the course was redesigned for remote delivery with the option for limited gatherings in physical space, at 37 Looe Street[114], a newly established arts venue. In the end, the *Succession* pilot coincided with a month-long, UK-wide COVID-19 lockdown, announced just days before its opening event, necessitating a fully online programme (although 37 Looe Street still served as a notional hub). Plymouth was chosen as location largely on the basis of this hosting relationship: the venue's co-founder is a long-time collaborator and also attended the *Succession* pilot as a participant.

The recruitment procedure was comparable to that of *Inception*, with the call for applications circulated through local arts network Contemporary Art Membership Plymouth (CAMP), and via my own networks. Attendees were asked to commit to the full programme with a nominal fee of £50 to secure a place – in this instance the income formed a contribution to the project running costs. 16 people were selected from 19 applicants, one of these dropped out before the programme commenced, and another part-way through. While most participants were Plymouth-based, four joined the programme from Bristol, one from Exeter and two from Cornwall. The age range was mid-20s to early 60s. As with the *Inception* programme, the group encompassed a mixture of livelihood practices at different stages: a painter, a sound artist, a film-maker, a fashion designer, a publisher, a performance artist, several educators, community artists, a tech entrepreneur, a creative business manager, the director of a social enterprise borrowing library, a mushroom farmer and a personal trainer. In practice (as with the *Inception* group) most people's biographies blurred these categories.

Many elements of structure and content were retained from the first pilot, including enrolling a local assistant (artist and CAMP member 'CW'[115]). The significant change was the switch to remote

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[113]   I was still in Tasmania and ran the course from there – see Chapter 1.

[114]   The venue was offered as support in kind. The *Succession* pilot was also undertaken without a central funder (aside from the PhD stipend that supported my work.

[115]   CW (Carmen Wong) was recruited as programme assistant in August 2020 and worked on the programme until the end of the closing weekend in November 2020. Assistant activities included collaborating on recruitment, liaising with host venue 37 Looe Street and preparing and distributing the print materials. This role was unpaid but at the end of the programme the £500 remaining from the project budget was transferred to CW as 'seed' funding for a new enterprise, I also continued a series of coaching/business advice sessions with CW over subsequent months.

delivery, overcoming my initial bias against an online programme[116]. Rather than weekly workshops with the full participant group, the primary format was the 30-90 minute video-call[117] with participants engaging with the programme and each other through a weekly schedule of small-group encounters. Each participant was emailed a weekly *Algorithmic Dance Card* (more on which below) enabling them to circulate through the full participant group over the four weeks of the course. The group came together as a whole only once and only briefly, at the end of the closing event. This structure was motivated by my observations of the small group processes in the *Inception* pilot as a valuable format to engage with and learn from the business concerns of others. It was also a reaction to the 'business-like' structure and grid-formed aesthetics of the Zoom group meeting – a mode of assembly that had become ubiquitous during the pandemic – as a default that could be staged differently. The emphasis was on remote delivery rather than a single platform and combined video-conferencing, phone, email and printed communications.

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[116] An email exchange at the time records this with precision. *On Thu, 27 Feb 2020, [Subject: future plans for fMBA? online?] [REDACTED] wrote: Hi, just came across the feral MBA. will this be something that can be participated in online in the future? Date: Thu, 5 Mar 2020 03:53:17 +0000 (GMT) From: kate rich To: [REDACTED [Subject: Re: future plans for fMBA? online?] hi. thanks for your interest, the feral MBA is very much about working in/with the presence of others, so i think that's very unlikely. best regards, kate.*

[117] We used a mix of platforms: Jitsi, Zoom and Whereby.

Figure 22: Feral MBA pilot schedules, Hobart and Plymouth

Feral MBA - Inception - Hobart

Ingress coaching 1:1
Hobart library and assorted venues

Week 0

2-day workshop
Moonah Arts Centre

Week 1

Week 2

Half-day workshop
Broom & Brine farm

Week 3

Half-day workshop
Studio 65

Evening public event
The Thorny Question of Art & Economy
Museum of Old and New Art (MONA)

Week 4

Half-day workshop
Resource Tip Shop

Week 5

2-day workshop
Good Grief art gallery

Egress coaching 1:1
Hobart library, assorted venues
and phone.

Evaluations via email

Feral MBA - Succession - Plymouth

Week 0

Ingress coaching 1:1
11 hour time difference
Jitsi video call

Opening Seminar
Zoom experiment in 4 rooms.

Keynote	Venue
Phys-Ed	Chillout

Weeks 1-4

Active Listening pairs,
2-3 sessions/week,
Jitsi/phone

Theory triads,
1 session/week
Jitsi

Phys-ed,
10 mins/week,
Youtube, solo

Feral Business Clinics,
1-2 sessions/week
groups of 4
Jitsi

Emailing
Algorithmic Dance Cards weekly
& Occasional
drop-in to Clinics.

Week 5

Closing Seminar
Exit party, in Zoom
4 rooms + en massse
.

Egress coaching 1:1 .
Jitsi /phone.
.

Evaluations via email

KEY:

Researcher present.

Meetings Algorithm and Algorithmic Dance Cards

The *Meetings Algorithm* *(Counter-materials Ring Binder* p.1) is a technology developed with colleagues from the Institute for Experiments with Business (Ibex) to broker a basic hospitality conundrum in the *Succession* staging: how to facilitate small-group relations within a larger gathering. Its task was to provide each participant with gradual exposure to the full group of others in a weekly schedule of meetings in twos, threes and fours. This circuit of encounters was both randomised and carefully orchestrated, so that for example, people would not be put in the same pair twice. A seemingly simple function that as soon as it was applied to the variety of life, turned into its own vertigo-inducing mathematical puzzle, as a mathematician's response to our algorithmic struggles confirms (Times Up, 2021). The mix of group sizes involved, along with the contingencies of life (peoples' schedules differed, odd numbers and the occasional no-show needed to be catered for), stretched the nascent intelligence of the *Meetings Algorithm* to its limits, keeping its human counterpart chained to the office desk for all-day scheduling marathons, cross-checking and adjusting for where the algorithm failed.

The *Meetings Algorithm* appeared in *Succession* activities in the medium of the *Algorithmic Dance Cards*, a personalised meetings schedule, emailed to each participant at the start of each programme week. The inevitable system glitches (occasional cut and paste errors meant that a few people were sent the wrong meeting assignment) added to the general air of beneficial destabilisation that the programme was cultivating.

Figure 23: Algorithmic Dance Card

```
Date: Sun, 15 Nov 2020 07:26:39 +0000 (GMT)
From: kate rich <kate@irational.org>
To: ████████  <████████████████████>
Subject: Feral MBA Algorithmic Dance Card - WEEK 3

dear ██████████

::: the following is your Algorithmic Dance card for WEEK 3 (w/c
Nov 16) :::

DIY Scheduling -
Active Listening

PAIR 1 ████████    PAIR 2 ████████████

TRIAD ████████, ███ (DIY scheduled)

Scheduled Session -
Weds 18th 700-830PM

CLINIC ███, ████████, ███ LOCATION https://meet.jit.si/feralmba3

this week the clinic host will be chosen by DICE roll (from those
who didn't already host a clinic in week 1). be prepared. bring a
dice.
```

A sample Algorithmic Dance Card for Feral MBA – Succession (redacted).

The effortful work of translating an embodied event into a remote programme (coupled with the 11-hour time difference between Tasmania and Devon) had the significant outcome of my own near removal from the scene. I engaged with each participant one-to-one in the ingress and egress sessions (more on this in the section on coaching below), sent a lot of emails and appeared at the opening and closing Zoom events. Beyond that, I effectively wrote myself out of the process as training 'leader'. This disappearing act effectively transferred the business expertise to the materials, the processes and the group: a beneficial effect that I return to in Chapter 5.

Course Materials

In both pilots, the course materials were provided as a series of laser-printed Zines (*Counter-materials Ring Binder* p.11), handed out to *Inception* participants and dispatched by weekly post to the *Succession* group.

Feral MBA Zines

> **The Feral MBA Zines** (laser-printed on double-sided, black and white A4, and containing course theory, examples of business practice, instructions and logistics) were assembled, printed and issued week-by-week as the programme unfolded. The format leverages the 'brochure' function in Libre Office Writer that converts a text document into instant brochure form, with an anti-design aesthetic familiar to low-cost, DIY culture. Producing the Zines involved an element of counter-efficiency, in the weekly demands of print, fold and distribution: a mode of working that is alien to the efficiency tropes of the business school yet entirely familiar to the actual practice of doing business. The Zines are designed to be read in situ as part of the Feral MBA programme, not for general circulation, and are not available in digital form.

Another piece of instructive friction was introduced through a reliance on FLOSS tools and platforms, both in the programme activities and in the administrative layer[118]. While signalling an affiliation with the FLOSS movement's open data ethos, this decision owed more to the way that these software tools, novel to most participants, forced a close attention to the kind of infrastructure that becomes invisible through habitual use, at the level of gesture that Bateson (1972) marks out. FLOSS has a particular salience in art, activism and education, where a reliance on proprietary software platforms with governance principles often entirely at odds with the work they are being taken up to do, is still the norm (Kleesattel, 2021; Invisible Committee, 2014). These incompatibilities regularly go unquestioned in the arts, despite a small yet significant history of art collectives that adhere to and demonstrate FLOSS practices and values (Dillon, 2017)[119].

In activist circles, there is ongoing debate around a tendency to delegate technical matters to commercial platforms, driven by time efficiencies and desires to increase reach, yet backed by a

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[118] FLOSS manifestations included server hosting on self-managed Linux servers, engaging the Etherpad as a collective note-taking tool and Pretix, an open source ticketing platform used for the *Inception* public event. At another level, the undertaking of the PhD project as a whole required contracting with the University that all material and knowledge related to the research would be kept open source – see *Counter-materials Ring Binder* p.4B).

[119] A FLOSS orientation is common in tactical media. It is also central to the work of a number of the Feral MBA's peers and contemporaries, including Constant's (2013) detailed research into digital technologies1, and the Do It With Others (DIWO) ethos of London art collective Furtherfield. At the *Cube Microplex*, FLOSS is designed into the project as a background effect, part of the collective/administrative culture. and is also an organising feature of the *Cube Cola* open source recipe.

problematic blend of 'expectations of a seamless service combined with inattentiveness to how the relationship is framed' (Aouragh et al, 2015 p.223). Adopting FLOSS tools, even as an experiment, demands a slowing down and scaling back of software-supported efficiencies that is an anathema to the day-to-day working of many grassroots projects.[120] It applies an element of friction to expected trajectories of scaling things up or rolling them out – 'Oh, lets first get things done!' as Aouragh et al (2015 p.209) put it. It also challenges that strong motivator across many areas of administrative practice: making the administration go away (Piccini and Rich, 2020). Instead it engages Kleesattel's concept of 'situated aesthetics', where the frictions of negotiating different ways of doing things is part of the interest of doing them.

For the Feral MBA the background dilemmas that FLOSS draws in are (critically) part of the foreground concerns. Rather than consider the instruments and processes that support the programme as a category apart from its content, it works with their enmeshment: 'It matters what ideas we use to think other ideas (with)', in Haraway's (2016 p.12) (non-software-specific) mantra.

Radmin

The business counter-materials presented here are functional devices that materialise thinking in their own way. Many of these are filed as '*radmin*': an organising shorthand for the routines and habits, both ever-urgent and commonplace, that sit at the interface between any project and its operating habitat. In art, administration is an everyday practice yet is generally considered outside the meanings produced by art (Rich, 2022; Piccini and Rich, 2020). In the context of the Feral MBA, the idea of *radmin* is in keeping with the programme's wider interest to dislodge the abstraction of 'the economy' from the centre of attention and concentrate instead on the everyday routines and materials of business. *Radmin* was produced as a seam of the Feral MBA research, appearing as a festival[121] and two allied readers[122].

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[120] It speaks to a hidden budget of energy, effort and maintenance and the uncounted expense involved in *not* using these tools – effectively hiding the labour elsewhere.

[121] Rich, K. *RADMIN Reflections*, https://fo.am/blog/2019/05/01/radmin-reflections. Last accessed 22/6/22.

[122] The RADMIN Readers are available online at https://fo.am/publications.radmin-reader-2019; and https://fo.am/publications.radmin-reader-2019.

RADMIN A Festival of Administration

> **RADMIN A Festival of Administration** (*Counter-materials Ring Binder* p.8) was hosted by the *Cube Microplex* in Bristol in 2019, produced in collaboration with Chiz Williams, the Feral Business Research Network (an informal assembly of peers I gathered at the start of the Feral MBA research) and the Institute for Experiments with Business (Ibex). A three-day public event with over 100 delegates, *RADMIN* was formatted as conference/festival event in which the details of the event's own administration – from the funding, catering and staffing to the material properties of the delegate lanyards – took centre stage.

Figure 24: RADMIN – The Incidental Unit, Workshop on the Open Brief.

Image credit: Marsha Bradfield.

RADMIN Readers[123]

> **The RADMIN Reader 2019** is a compilation of some of the informing ideas behind the festival event, while the **RADMIN Reader 2020** is a collection of commissioned writing from RADMIN festival contributors (Counter-materials Ring Binder p.9A and 9B). Together the readers could be considered as a different take on the context review presented in Chapter 2 of this thesis. The readers were produced as PDFs for DIY laser print distribution, and included in the reading materials for the Feral MBA pilots.

Figure 25: RADMIN Reader 2020

RADMIN Reader 2020. Cover art: Lilani Vane Last

The *RADMIN* festival was book-ended by two monetary experiments that recast the infrastructural dramas of how to fund our work as the main event. These experiments form part of a series of plays on the dilemma of administrating money that I return to in the next chapter (pp.151-2).

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[123] Co-edited with Angela Piccini.

Monetary Experiment I[124]

> ***The Shares, A Meal*** was the headline event at the *RADMIN* festival. The Viriconium Palace, the artists hosting the opening gala dinner, placed the £780 cash allocated to cover the catering in a bucket in the venue toilets, with an announcement to festival delegates to add, subtract or do with it as they wished. The money largely disappeared over the evening's proceedings, and reactions, some of them strong, ran a pervasive seam of charge and disturbance through the three-day gathering (The Viriconium Palace, 2020).

Monetary Experiment II[125]

> The ***Business Experiment Raffle*** *(Counter-materials Ring Binder* p.8A*)* at the close of festival proceedings produced a substantially different feeling of a celebratory congregation. Raffle tickets were sold for £1, one ticket per *RADMIN* delegation, with the chance to win a GBP £2,500 prize. While no adjudication was involved (selection was made by random draw), entrants were tasked with delivering a 30-second outline of a plan, brief or dream for a business experiment that they might undertake with the money, should they be the winner. After the full round of announcements had been performed to the assembled auditorium, the winning ticket was drawn from a hat, and the £2,500 prize issued without any reporting or accounting conditions beyond the receipt of an invoice.

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[124] For the artists' reflections on the experiment, seeViriconium Palace (2020), included in RADMIN Reader 2020, p.12 (*Counter-materials Ring Binder* p.9B).
[125] For a more detailed raffle writeup, see *RADMIN Reader 2020* p.60 (as above)

Figure 26: RADMIN raffle ticket

 RADMIN r*affle ticket art: Ticket art: David Hopkinson*

In messing with money, these experiments aim to destabilise expectations and routines around funding and create conditions in which other ways of thinking could take root. They take the kind of open, improvisatory stance that diverse economies theory articulates at a theoretical level, to the realm of staging and materials.

Thinking with materials

Emulsification

> **The material practice of emulsification** exemplifies what thinking with materials might add to a theory-formed knowledge. Emulsification was introduced in the Feral MBA as an explanatory metaphor: a physical analogy for breaking down a problematic mass – such as the congealed expectations of an overwhelmingly capitalist economy – into a more navigable, even fruitful state.
>
> My relationship with emulsification comes through experience, as part of the *Cube Cola* manufacturing partnership that has been producing cola from an open source recipe since 2004. The flavour oils that give cola its distinctive taste are hydrophobic: they repel water. Unaddressed, they would float on top of your drink in an oily slick. Yet adding an emulsification agent (gum arabic) and applying sufficient rotary force (a power drill with a kitchen whisk attached) produces an oil-in-water suspension where the oil is dispersed as tiny droplets. In the process, nothing is substantively changed, except the agency of a bunch of essential oils to act together and be transacted contra the world's most iconic commodity drink. *Cube Cola* is produced in our Bristol kitchen/lab and distributed worldwide in concentrate form through our online shop (Cube Cola, 2022).
>
> What material practices inevitably do is bring their own resource agendas and relations (equipment lists, labour practices, supply chains, stains and cleaning-up requirements) into the room. The transformative effects of *Cube Cola* are disseminated across disparate sites and scales – from olfactory effects on passers-by, up the food chain to the major soft drink players, out into Bristol City Council's food hygiene regulatory mechanisms, and in global distribution to a dedicated audience of diabetics, anti-slavers, rum-lovers, bar managers, kids, computer geeks and allied drinks collectives (Cube Cola, 2019).

Figure 27: Emulsification
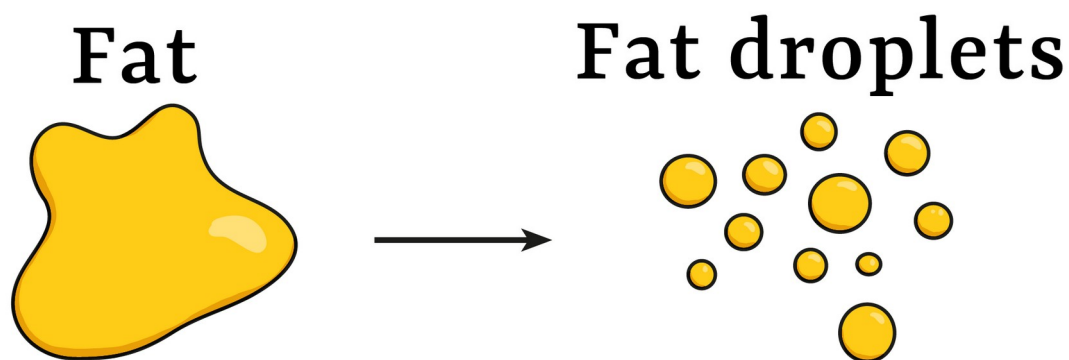
Emulsification can be operationalised without being industrialised. While it looks like a merger it is not: in an oil-in-water suspension, the substances remain discrete, they agree to differ. Image credit: Theun Karelse

Unlike other representational strategies that reorder or dissolve economic categories – the diverse economies iceberg (pp.39-40) or Miller's (2019) 'fog bank' (p.46) – emulsification entered the study space of the Feral MBA in material form. In the *Inception* workshops, the agency of emulsification to act on congealed expectations of the economic status quo was backed by the presence of actual *Cube Cola* concentrate in the room (see *Counter-materials Ring Binder* p.5). The concentrate was mixed with a sugar syrup and sparkling water and consumed at the end of the second week's workshop. It also performed in a further dimension as 'merch' as several participants purchased a bottle of concentrate (AUD $20) to take home[126]. This extra-explanatory power of material practice to traverse between registers – its 1:1 scale attribute – is at the essence of what the Feral MBA is working to do. I will return this potential in the Chapter 5 (Conclusions).

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[126]   As merchandise, *Cube Cola* is traded across a mixture of gift economies, online sales, venue supplies, collaborations with other artist-drink-makers and start-up businesses that formed around our recipe.

Figure 28: Cube Cola service Feral MBA – Inception

The Feral Business Budget

While lacking the energetic fix or giant-toppling factor of *Cube Cola,* the budget surfaced as another site of interest, where breaking down the roles and routines of business was played out.

The **Feral Business Budget** (*Counter-materials Ring Binder* pp.6A-6E) was installed across Feral MBA events as a featured artwork and item of merchandise. Unlike other accounting technologies that include non-monetary value, such as triple bottom line or asset-mapping methods, the *Feral Business Budget* presents financial and non-financial project elements in all their differences, on the same page. The asymmetry of this layout calls into question the trick of separation in double-entry bookkeeping – the contemporary accounting standard in which a credit in one column is cancelled out by a debit in another (Carruthers and Espeland, 1991) – that things would ever balance out to zero. The *Feral Business Budget* scrambles that schematic for one in which indeterminacy might be a feature, abandoning the reliability of the auditor's overview for a polyvocal or multi-channel accounting, that carries with it its own uncertainties, including what any item actually is or where it starts or ends.

Economic sociologist Michel Callon (1998) draws attention to framing and overflowing as an issue regularly unseen by accountants. The frame establishes a boundary within which certain interactions are featured and others dispelled. By itemising childcare, pre-production meeting lunch items, gut bacteria, cultural expertise (and so on) in the column on the right (*Counter-materials Ring Binder* pp.6C), the *Feral Business Budget* brings in a swarm of supporting acts and relations that open onto other worlds. In the process, it ventures the budget as a gateway to the dizzying interdependence of a relational ecology.

Critically, the presentation of the *Feral Business Budget* is not about transparency (the idea that if procedures are open to scrutiny they would then be open to improvement (Strathern, 2000)) or completeness (that providing more information would produce more truth). Nor is it about assigning a monetary value to previously unmetered project elements, such as the many forms of institutional cross-subsidy that are endemic to art. Instead it is the reverse: to drag the whole budget out of a purely calculative frame. If anything the intention is to unbalance – both the contents of the budget and its position in the whole creative project – by bringing the minutiae of resourcing, logistics and accounting to the centre of attention.

The *Feral Business Budget* was launched at the *RADMIN* festival, with further iterations through the Inception events (*Counter-materials Ring Binder* p.6A-C). As an artwork, it loops back on its own form, itemising its printing costs while self-funding its own existence through sales[127]. As a communication it has been folded, taken away and posted on office walls as conversation piece. As an actual working document it has been employed in project management and project acquittal (Counter-materials Ring Binder pp.6D) .

Figure 29: Feral MBA – Inception budget
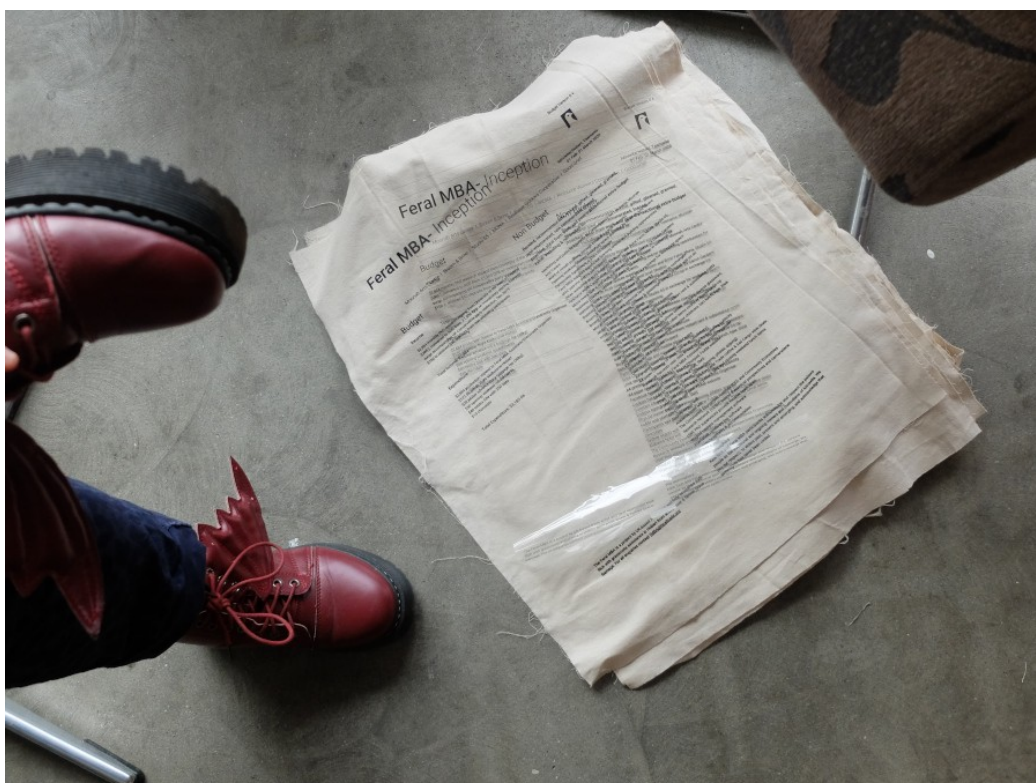
Budget screen-printed on cloth, at Inception closing weekend workshop.

Since its early iterations, production methods for the *Feral Business Budget* have shifted from a solo budget administrator handing the output of a spreadsheet to a graphic designer with the latest version of Adobe InDesign, to the more haphazard styling and participatory design of the *Feral Budget Generator.*

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[127] The budgets were printed on gold paper or cloth and sold for GBP £5 at RADMIN and for AUD $10 at *Inception* events.

The Feral Budget Generator

The **Feral Budget Generator** is a multi-user online interface that compiles and publishes a budget directly to a webpage or print-ready PDF. Budget users are assigned a log-in and can enter their own budget items as income or expenditure, financial or non-financial. After adding your items, you can go to view the budget as a whole, or return to amend your own contributions for as long as the budget remains in play. A budget can be assembled in the party-like atmosphere of a one-hour budgeting event, or strung out over weeks or months of durational project management. An example of the latter is the FoAM Anarchive budget (*Counter-material Ring Binder* p.6D), installed to accompany the 18-month production process of the FoAM Anarchive (2022), a 20-year anniversary publication for the FoAM network. There are around 30 people involved in that project (with 12 direct budget users) each with their own budgetary situations and needs. At a different scale of operations, the *Budget Generator* has been employed to assemble a portrait of the resources and relations underwriting this PhD (*Counter-material Ring Binder* p.6E).

The design of the *Generator* mitigates against a single budget controller. While all users can view the whole budget as it takes shape, each can only edit details of their own contributions. Anyone can retract or revise their own entries at any time until the budget closes, adding to the instability. In actual deployment, the *Feral Budget Generator* has been embraced and resisted by users in equal parts, tapping into the deep-seated reluctance that admin inspires, and the assumption that budgeting would be relegated to a dedicated administrative zone and operator. Coded into the user interface is a degree of unease of use, requiring some concentration from the user to get the hang of navigating. It is a politics of production marked by ambivalence to the seamless user experience. The interest instead is in administration as a multi-agent venture, where everyone is involved to an extent in the managing and thinking.

Figure 30: The Feral Budget Generator

feral budget generator

Instructions

Enter your budget requests & contributions. You can return to edit your entries at any time. Blank lines will not appear in the budget, so to remove an entry, delete all its contents.

budget name: **The Feral MBA**

your name: kate rich

enter expenditure

monetary outgoings (be sure to select a category or your entry wil not show up in the budget)
(check the box if the expenditure has already gone out)

#	£	category		item
1.	33600	misc	☐ item	Living Life, 3.5 years
2.	1200	fee	☐ item	Feral MBA - Inception Assistant
3.	500	materials	☐ item	Feral MBA - Succession Assistant: feral business investment
4.	9000	materials	☐ item	Caravan purchase plus rennovatoin
5.	4248	materials	☐ item	Waldies membership, 24 months
6.	800	fee	☐ item	PhD editor
7.	450	materials	☐ item	Public transport, 3-year estimate
8.	73.52	materials	☐ item	Printing - Succession
9.	2000	materials	☐ item	Flights, trains Bristol-Melbourne-Sydney-Hobart-Mlebourne-Bristol
10.	87.26	materials	☐ item	85m ethernet cable, router
11.	25.12	materials	☐ item	Postage - Sucession
12.	187.8	materials	☐ item	Mixed production costs - Succession
13.	100	materials	☐ item	Venue costs - Succession

Feral Budget Generator online interface (detail).

Analysing the evidence

As artwork and fieldwork, the Feral MBA pilots formed my primary means to test the concepts behind this research with others. The methods I used to process these observations were not settled from the outset but arrived at through the process of research.

In the *Inception* pilot, information was collected from an array of sources, including session notes, feedback forms and researcher observations. Group discussions were recorded in typed and hand-written notes and on the 'Etherpad,' an online tool for collective writing to which the group contributed. Other observations and reflections were sourced from weekly debrief meetings with *Inception* assistant 'GG' that provided an important contribution to an ongoing process of meaning-making as the course unfolded. I also trialled a novel means of gathering information in an

experimental reworking of the semi-structured interview in the form of a one-to-one coaching session. These were undertaken with each participant on arrival and departure from the programme and were audio-recorded and transcribed. I will examine this process in detail further below.

In the materially different context of the *Succession* pilot, my interaction with participants was limited to dropping in on some of the online small-group meetings each week[128]. This provided some fragmentary observations, but it is the individual coaching sessions, again conducted with each participant at the start and end of the course[129], that were the main source of information. While partly a factor of running the second pilot remotely, the decision to focus evidence collection on the egress sessions was mainly informed by my experience in *Inception*, where despite a wide array of information sources it was the coaching session transcripts, particularly those at exit, that provided the most valuable insights.

To start to make sense of the extensive array of interviews, notes and observations gathered in the *Inception* pilot, I began by working with thematic analysis, a qualitative research method used in the social sciences – and in practice-based research in art (Lin, 2019) – that searches for patterns within research data through a process of coding and identifying themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The themes selected through this process represent areas of repetition and moments where a greater depth of articulation was evident[130]. The themes appear in different scopes and intensities, in a way that does not necessarily indicate a hierarchy of significance but rather reflects the recursive design of the *Inception* curriculum, shaped as the programme unfolded to incorporate research observations and participant concerns[131]. My role as both researcher and programme leader was constitutive in this process, in the close coupling between matters of concern raised by participants and those that the Feral MBA was leading or guiding[132].

These crossovers are reflective of feminist and action research traditions in which knowledge is produced as an ongoing process of mutual interpretation (Coleman, 2013; Haraway, 1988). Miller

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[128] I was running the Plymouth programme from Tasmania, which involved negotiating an 11-hour time difference.

[129] I conducted a total of 35 'ingress' and 31 'egress' sessions across the two pilots, each session lasting 30–45 minutes. For the *Inception* programme these were face-to-face, for *Succession* they were conducted via Jitsi video call or on the phone, all sessions were audio-recorded with rapid note-taking and all the 'egress' sessions were transcribed,

[130] Choosing to incorporate both kinds of information goes against Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommendation of internal consistency in thematic analysis, such that the 'keyness' of a theme should be determined either by its prevalence or its emphasis in the research data.

[131] Initial themes gathered through this process included: 'models to experiments', 'art and business', 'changing the way we think', 'openness and vulnerability' and 'busyness and time'.

[132] In this way, the process of analysis both fitted and shaped the production of the Feral MBA.

(2019 p.xxii)) invokes a kind of fieldwork that does not conspire to keep participant input clear of 'distortion' from the research context, but considers its potential as a mutually transformative encounter, in which research informants are 'collaborators and co-thinkers in multi-layered, non-innocent conversations'. Such entanglements are intrinsic to artistic research, depicted by artist and philosopher Erin Manning as a messy and experiential prospect in which the artist 'takes a stand' in the midst of the action, as if 'barefoot in a pile of grapes, assisting them in their fermentation' (Manning, 2015 p.199).

Whereas the *Inception* pilot was testing out a process with a group of people for the first time, the *Succession* events incorporated and consolidated what had been learnt the programme's first run. The difference in phase and intention is reflected in the way the analysis changed. My attempts to apply thematic analysis to the *Succession* evidence found that much of the significant material refused to 'lie flat' in categories and instead slipped across or fell outside the themes I had identified. After first trying to adjust the thematic design to accommodate these anomalies, their obstinate presence resulted in a change in method to a non-rule-based process of picking up curious objects and singular moments of insight, particularly those at the seams of thinking where participants struggled for words. The result (in the findings presented in Chapter 4) is a hybrid process, combining the thematic approach from *Inception* (apparent in the sections 'Collective effects', 'Artists and others', 'From models to experiments', 'Changing the way we think' and 'Vulnerability') with the more intuitive process followed in *Succession*, focused on singular insights.

Feral business coaching

The next part of this chapter turns to *feral business coaching,* a practice I am experimenting with that became a central technology in the Feral MBA. In general terms, coaching is a practice that works to help people to maximise their potential in work and life (Kohli, 2016; Whitmore, 1992). In the Feral MBA, coaching was designed into the research as a means of collecting evidence, and became part of the programme fabric as a peer-to-peer, DIY training resource. I also worked with coaching as a mode of performance, outside the pilot events. This section provides a context for the coaching practice, and examines each of these applications – coaching as a research method, as collective training and as a performance experiment – in turn.

I came to the practice of coaching in 2017, through a training course for artists with UK training provider Relational Dynamics 1st. At the time, I was starting preliminary research for the Feral MBA and knew little about coaching, but was looking for a technique to engage with people on the delicate topic of their business and livelihood concerns. I have since been working with the idea of *feral business coaching* as an extended practice.

Coaching is commonly encountered as life coaching, focused on individual fulfilment, or as executive and workplace coaching in business and managerial contexts. In general it is solution-focused, future-oriented and goal-directed (Grant, 2005). The style of coaching I am trained in aims to facilitate a space for people to deal with 'stuckness', negotiate change and materialise plans (Whitmore, 1992). The coach takes the role of skilled listener who thinks alongside the 'coachee', rather than offering advice, expertise, instructions or solutions. It is a non-directive, non-judgemental process resting on techniques of 'active listening' and 'effective questioning'. In active listening, the listener's role is to pay careful attention, reflect and summarise. Effective questioning concentrates on formulating open questions that might open up new lines of thinking for their recipient, not to gather information for the questioner (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2001). My interest with the Feral MBA research is how coaching techniques might provide novel forms of engagement with business.

Coaching as a research methodology

The first experiment involved installing coaching in the research process. Participants entered the Feral MBA pilots through individual 'ingress' coaching sessions[133], with a follow-up 'egress' session upon exit. The sessions unfolded through an open-ended set of questions and prompts, designed to encourage detailed thinking to emerge. The ingress sessions were charged with a dual purpose: to gather in-depth information on individual motivations and interests, and to establish a candid and reflective mode of engagement for the programme to follow. The coaching at egress also carried a dual intent: to extend my understanding of how the programme had worked, and to open up new thinking for people at the juncture of its ending.[134]

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[133] These sessions were formulated as an alternative approach to the one-on-one business development session typical of artists' business training.

[134] The ingress sessions opened with the question 'What would you like to get out of this opportunity of a training course in feral business?'. The egress sessions asked participants, 'What might have changed or shifted for you over the process of the course?'.

While the semi-structured interview is a common format in qualitative research, a coaching approach introduces a distinctive dynamic. The sessions were foremost an expansive space for participants to think out loud, at length, in company, and along unfamiliar trajectories[135]. The process adhered to coaching protocols that follow the coachee's thinking (rather than unearthing specific information for the coach). In research terms it makes for a potentially awkward limitation in not asking for the kinds of clarifications or missing information that an interviewer would normally follow up on. However what this also does is relinquish any claim to completeness of knowledge, inscribing the research process with a commitment to a partial perspective (Haraway, 1988) from the outset.

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[135] Arguably all research interviews hold this potential but as a by-product of the process, to which the researcher may not be paying explicit attention.

Ethics tango

Mixing coaching with research brings the ethics of these practices into direct encounter. On the one hand there is the academic requirement for research ethics procedures, designed to make research shareable while providing participants with accountable data procedures for how their contributions will be reported and used (UWE, 2022). On the other there is coaching's core ethics of confidentiality, widely considered as key to its efficacy (Rekalde, Landeta and Albizu, 2015): what happens in a session remains strictly contained between coachee and coach.

From a coaching perspective, considering the contents of a coaching session as 'evidence' challenges an underlying assumption that the knowledge produced in coaching is purely a private resource for the individual. On the research side, it raises questions of what might be valuably made common and where to draw the line. In the Feral MBA, the administrative space of the research ethics review, materialised in the *Business Development Participant Information Brief* that negotiates informed consent for recording the ingress and egress coaching sessions of the Feral MBA (*Counter-materials Ring Binder* p.4A) became a preliminary site where this overlay of protocols could be negotiated.

I am interested to consider how coaching-as-research might contribute to the plurality of methods engaged in diverse economies scholarship. The idea of reading research methods 'against the grain' (Gibson-Graham, 2020 p.482) – see p.43 of this thesis – opens the prospect of their wayward adoption. It means shifting attention from business coaching's normal association with a results-based performativity to the nuanced accounts and ways of relating that the practice can foster: a reorientation that changes the practice in turn. While the roots of business coaching in sports psychology (Gallwey, 1974) and executive management (Grant, 2013) appear far from the philosophical space of diverse economies theory, there are significant points of connection. Like diverse economies theory, coaching is also strengths-based, attuned to capacities and possibilities. It plies its trade through bringing things into articulation and inviting new perspectives on the present. As a different kind of thinking

practice, it shares an understanding with diverse economies scholarship that 'to change our understanding is to change the world' (Gibson-Graham, 2008 p.615).

One observation from experimenting with coaching as a research method in the pilots is the way that the mixed role of coach/researcher involved maintaining a dual attention to potentially disparate processes and outcomes. As coach, I was working to produce an effect in the moment. As researcher, the concentration was on gathering information for later analysis[136]. This doubled agenda brings into focus a question of who the research is 'for'. The sessions were staged as an implicit or de facto trade of insight and attention, shifting the process of evidence collection from a potentially extractive encounter[137] to something closer to a two-way deal. The trade this plays out is distinct from other structures of research participation, such as the democratic processes built into participatory action research (Reason, 2002) or the commitments to advocacy and reciprocity that underwrite critical and collaborative ethnography (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). By contrast, the deal struck in coaching-as-research can stand as a single transaction, in the shape of a one-off coaching session. At the same time, it is distinct from other research arrangements, such as paying people to participate in health or psychology studies. The research and the coaching are not discrete commodities being traded, rather they are two aspects of the same activity, a hybrid form in which different agendas coincide[138].

A further particularity of coaching in a research context is the way that it concentrates attention in the moment and process of gathering information. In the Feral MBA pilots, the egress coaching transcripts form a detailed record of peoples' thinking in action, including what they were planning to do next. Yet in coaching it is recognised that to return to a coaching conversation a week or a month later, the coachee's focus may be different, even contradictory (Kohli, 2016). Such turnarounds do not invalidate what was said earlier: on the contrary they highlight the non-linear, complex and ongoing process of grappling with change. While the evidence gathered in this manner might appear inconclusive from a research perspective (if conclusions require cross-referencing to strong patterns or definitive

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[136]   In practical terms this meant taking rapid notes to respond to the coachee/interviewee's train of thought in the moment while also recording audio for subsequent transcription/analysis.

[137]   In the way that academic research ethics are designed to guard against.

[138]   From a coaching perspective, the deal is also distinctive. Coaching is usually a professional, monetised service: the coach provides specialist skills, the client pays to gain new perspectives on their own situation as a form of self-investment (Laske, 2004). Coaching-as-research assumes a more imbricated knowledge exchange.

outcomes) it is not inconsequential. What it does provide is *evidence of process,* of what people knew in the moment that the evidence was produced[139].

Coaching as training

The second enactment of coaching, as a peer-to-peer training practice, came to occupy a central role in the Feral MBA. This started as an experiment on the opening weekend of the *Inception* pilot and was revisited in subsequent sessions, following positive feedback from the group. This emergent body of practices was then translated to a set of routines and written instructions that moved to the centre of the *Succession* course, as the constraints of remote delivery also provided the opportunity to formalise some of the processes established in the programme's first run[140].

Engaging coaching in the programme as a central technology and DIY resource aims to rework assumptions of professional expertise, both in business advice and in coaching. It starts from the premise that business knowledge would be drawn not from business literature, invited experts or the course leader. but from the collected life experience of the group, with the Feral MBA providing a stage, a structure and some facilitation practices. In practice this meant swiftly training up a coaching community of peers to 'good-enough' effect.

The coaching training took two forms: active listening exercises and *Feral Business Clinics*. For the active listening exercises, participants were given some basic instructions and moved into pairs for a confidential session in which one would speak for five minutes on the topic of their business or livelihood, after which speaker and listener would swap roles. A mix of active listening and effective questioning was practised in the experimental format of the *Feral Business Clinic* (*Zine 4, Counter-materials Ring Binder* p.11), a small group exercise to

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[139]   As evidence, this takes a substantially different turn from the academic field of 'evidence-based coaching', formed in response to the significant expansion of the coaching sector since the 1990s. Positioned against a coaching literature concentrated in pop psychology and self-improvement genres, evidence-based coaching seeks to resituate coaching in the rigour of the behavioural and social sciences (Laske, 2004; Grant, 2005). It combines research into the effectiveness of coaching with research from other disciplinary fields, including psychology, philosophy, ethics and critical thinking. Its empirical studies employ a range of qualitative and quantitative methodologies with evidence collected through semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, research diaries and participant observation – but rarely (if ever) evidence produced in or as the coaching practice itself.

[140]   While the value of socialising in presence was missed in *Succession*, the remote staging brought with it a mixture of focus and ready intimacy that was conducive to the coaching formats.

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which one person or organisation (the Host) brings a current or urgent question for their own business or livelihood to be examined by the group[141].The others take up roles of Enquirers, Observers and Scribes. These activities were designed to work in a number of capacities: to cultivate an atmosphere of disclosure between people around difficult topics of business and livelihood (within strict lines of confidentiality[142]), to provide participants with some practical, transportable protocols and skills, and to introduce a foreign way of relating that might per se, intervene in rote reactions and open up fresh perspectives.

While techniques of close listening and peer coaching regularly appear in management processes, installing these practices in the fabric of the Feral MBA worked to delink them from their common associations with an optimising mindset – a means-end performativity in Lyotard's (1984) terms, focused on human capital, productivity and progress. Instead, the interest in the Feral MBA was to undo habitual modes of relating in business. Following Bateson's (1972) example of reaching for a glass of water, the coaching training operated at the level of habit and unconscious ways of thinking that are deeply ingrained, and take bodily attention and reiterated practice, not just conceptual knowledge, to undo. Distinct from training's connotations as a function of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1984) the process was peer-to-peer and experimental, responsive to participant input and working through small gestures, 'reps' and routines. The intention was to provide a means to engage with the continuous effort, the maintenance work, of undoing a strong ideology of business.

For cultural theorist Mark Fisher (2018), the contemporary embrace of therapeutic practises in policy, education and popular culture reflects and reinforces a highly individualistic ideology. The story it propagates – that social problems can be solved through the hard work of personal self-transformation – rests on a central tenet of economic liberalism that promotes self-reliance and self-improvement over a collective politics. Fisher cites radical psychotherapist David Smail's contention that what therapy considers as 'interiority' is instead a folding-in of a culturally determined social field. It is not that individuals 'cannot or do not change, it is simply that significant change comes about as the result of shifts in

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[141] The idea of the clinic has been co-produced with CERN artist Bianca Elzenbaumer from the *ProAction Cafe* model used in social innovation contexts, The clinics were first practised at a CERN gathering in the Italian Alps, 2019.

[142] A specific agreement of confidentiality was established for the active listening sessions and Clinics,such that any content discussed in these sessions would not be shared outside them, unless with the explicit agreement of the speaker.

environmental influences, not because of the individual's personal wishes or efforts.' (Smail, 2005 p.47). While individual therapy may provide a degree of support and solidarity, beyond that it is 'ordinary humanity rather than a technology of change' (Smail, 2005 p.80).

Fisher's prescription is a return to collective processes of solidarity, such as the feminist practice of consciousness-raising that brings hidden vectors of power into shared attention. The coaching-as-training in the Feral MBA takes a different ('weak') turn, as a listening practice trained on registering the complexities of others' lived experience, rather than unearthing the workings of power. It might be considered through Bruno Latour's (2004 p.205) idea of 'learning to be affected': a collective, embodied process of becoming receptive to one's surroundings as a precondition for responding to them (Cameron, Manhood and Pomfrett, 2011).

In relation to the modes of isolation in which we regularly tend to our own business and livelihood conditions, facilitating the support and solidarity of an 'ordinary humanity' represents significant change in itself. The coaching-as-training approach positions the problems of business as at least in part as problems of our own thinking, yet considers thinking less as an individual capacity than a collective one. In doing so, it links habit and habitat as an extended field: drawing attention to the habits we are returning to and the wider discursive habitat of business thinking that codes in these behaviours and reiterates them (as the evidence collected in the next chapter suggests).

To rework coaching with an explicitly feminist, ecological agenda raises potential contradictions for a practice that draws its legitimacy from the 'neutral' or non-aligned stance of the coach. Yet the practice of coaching also comes pre-loaded with its own implicit set of values, from individual fulfilment and career advancement to workplace productivity. Techniques I am trialling to engage with this disjunction include collectivising and amateurising the coaching practice, dramatising its performance, and randomising, reifying and gamifying the process – as illustrated in the coaching-as-performance experiments described below. These techniques are not making claims for 'best practice', or even innovation: in the most part they are adapting and remixing existing forms. On the contrary

they are cultivating messy practice environments in which to approximate ideas, make do, practice trial and error, listen, lapse into other conversations and reflect on the whole process.

Coaching as performance

The coaching formats I am experimenting with operate to different degrees on the juxtaposition of potentially incompatible elements in the same activity – for example in the way that coaching-as-research functions as evidence-gathering and coaching provision at the same time. This quality is amplified in the coaching-as-performance experiments, a kind of occupational montage that intercuts an artist's presentation and a business coaching session: a mode of encounter that would ordinarily occupy a different domain[143].

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[143]   With rare exceptions, see for example the performance work of artist Joshua Sofaer. Sofaer, J. Object of Love. https://www.joshuasofaer.com/2013/07/objectoflove. Last accessed 22/06/22.

Coaching-as-performance

A format juxtaposing business coaching with the seemingly incompatible activity of the artist's presentation, trialled at Making Matters Symposium (2020), presenting practices in which 'thinking and making are entangled'. My contribution took the form of 20 online pre-booked one-to-one coaching sessions, each lasting 20 minutes with a short break in between, conducted in three blocks of approximately three hours each. The idea was to bring the business advice session inside the intellectual project of the conference event. For me, it was also an energetic experiment in presenting, with the idea that a durational series of one-to-one engagements might be more generative and communicative than a standard conference presentation.

The sessions took place online, without an audience and within the bounds of coaching confidentiality, in the 'Enter' video-conferencing platform provided by Het Nieuwe Instituut (NL). Participants (including students, other artists and the conference organisers) were tasked to bring with them a current or urgent question regarding their own business or livelihood. I opened each session with a brief preamble in which the mechanics of the process were laid out: that this was an iterative experiment, a hybrid format and a co-thinking process but one underwritten with the intention that people might leave with an item, idea or directions with potential application to their business lives. I then commenced a coaching session, structured around the participant's question. At an appropriate juncture I would segue to present an item from my artist's presentation – selected from a prepared rotation of slides, in direct or oblique response to the coachee's dilemma – then return to the topic at hand. The slides include my own work, but also examples of other peoples' practices that might be instructive (such as the *Charismatic Examples,* p.32)

Figure 31: Coaching performance at the Making Matters Symposium.
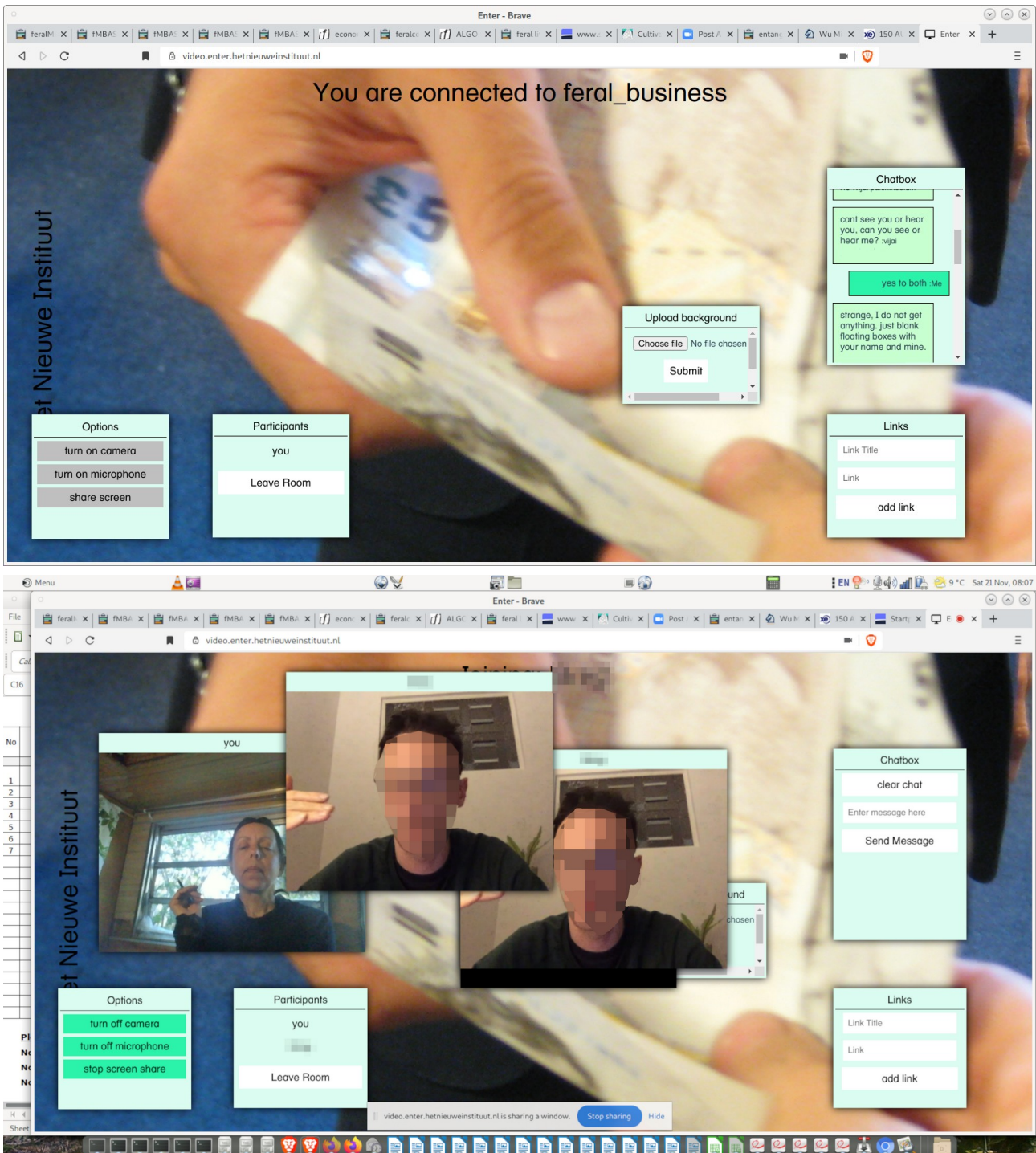
Scenes from Feral Business Coaching at Making Matters Sympium, using the Enter software provided by Het Nieuwe Instituut.

For the ethos of coaching I am trained in, to bring in the coach's own affairs is wildly inappropriate: the first rule of coaching is to 'keep yourself out' of the picture. Yet rather than introduce my own experience, advice or expertise, the interventions were pitched at the level of allegory, as a kind of alien insight, projected into the spaces where the coachee might feel stuck. My interest is in how the fantastical yet grounded nature of 'facts' from art practice might become a conduit for the kinds of perspective shifts that coaching also works towards. For example, bringing in the alchemising potential of emulsification (p.111) in response to a coachee's question ' How to still have a practice in a capitalistic society that is able to earn money while doing what you want?'.

In relation to the artist's talk, it is cultivating a form of interruption – as the *Jumpcut Seminar* presented in the next chapter (p.142) also does – rather than a coherent narrative presentation. It is a relational approach that considers that the meanings we glean from others are partial, situated and filtered through our own interests and concerns. As such, a fragment of art practice, conducted through the intimacy and reciprocity of a coaching close encounter, might carry at least as much communicative power as an extensive keynote presentation.

While changing perspective is the bread-and-butter of coaching, bringing art's allegorical capacity into the space of a one-on-one coaching session offers a shift of thinking on a different plane. Art brings with it a wild array of examples and ways of thinking, while coaching can act as a delivery mechanism to cut openings between these imaginaries and the quotidian space of everyday life. It reflects the larger performance of the Feral MBA: that art might serve as a source of powerful symbols, stories and lived practices to counter the incessant drone that 'the economy', with all its unassailable certainties, puts out.

Following its appearance at Making Matters, the performance element of feral business coaching coaching took on a material dimension as a deck of cards.

Coaching by Numbers

Coaching by Numbers (*Counter-materials Ring Binder* p.3) is a deck of 64 cards for use in business coaching that doubles as an artist's presentation slide set, and shuffles together my artist's presentation with those of peers. In amongst the image cards are others bearing short coaching phrases, prompts or questions, any of which might be used to move a coaching session along. The cards are released with minimal instructions, to see how they work in practice.

The purpose of the cards is to routinise and demystify the practice of coaching as something that anyone might do. They are designed for use by the experienced coach, or as a workshop resource to support the installation of an instant coaching practice in a group. For the coach, the general idea is that of a prop, where the phrases and images might perform as a cheat sheet or randomising device to lighten or scramble the weight of the coaching practice as the product of individual expertise. For the coachee, the option to work with a stock set of words and images can help disinter a coaching dilemma from an individual life quandary or sense of personal failing, and re-link it to a collective knowledge field (as tarot does).

In their double application as an artist's slide set, the cards are power-failure ready and trans-individual (providing the option to merge one's own projects with those of others) and commit their presenter to a level of one-to-one or small-group interaction, over monologues and lecterns. The cards are produced in an initial edition of 50 packs, to be further modified through use.

Figure 32: Coaching by Numbers

Coaching by Numbers cards print test: inkjet on Biotop 300 GSM paper. Image credit: Maja Kuzmanovic.

The three modes of coaching detailed above – coaching-as-research, coaching-as-training and coaching-as-performance – offer routes between inner and outer worlds, and between habit and habitat. The practice of coaching is also a means of engaging incrementally with how difficult change is, and I return to its effects in the next chapter, where people are both reporting on the coaching practices, and reporting *through* the medium of coaching. While these processes are exploratory in their form and direction, I am sticking with the guise of 'business coaching' for its Trojan horse potential, as a practice that can be wheeled into otherwise antithetical contexts. Gibson-Graham (2006a p.xxi) describe taking up 'economy' in

their work, as a means to break radically with its normative implications while also leveraging its effects: 'people pay attention when we start playing around with it.'. While Miller (2019) points out the risks that this strategy runs (of importing the hegemonic associations of the term – its normative effects – into the new situation), it is in this kind of double agency that the Feral MBA is in its element.

Processes and (counter-)materials

The practices collected in the Feral MBA bring conceptual tools from feminist, ecological thinking and processes from art and coaching – each of which work to disaggregate forgone conclusions and shift mental maps – into sometimes novel encounter. The results appear as a long piece of writing and a series of unkempt experiments. The most substantial of these is the formative programme of the Feral MBA which brings a new space of activity into being. It is a temporary habitat, not a physical space, but a kind of infrastructure in which different business subjectivities can be formulated and tested. The activation of business coaching in the Feral MBA as a peer-run, experimental practice read 'against the grain', became central to this undertaking, delinking business coaching from its expected associations and ends and activating new ones.

Sociologists John Law and John Urry (2004 p.396) suggest that in a performative world, to make knowledge claims for a different reality is to help to make the prevailing reality 'less real'. To genuinely inhabit a feminist, ecological perspective in business means making a rational-instrumental business mindset 'seriously unthinkable: not available to think with', in Haraway's (2016 p.30) terms. In practice, such a substantial reorientation can also be the hardest thing to do, as Bateson (1972) observes. The staging of the Feral MBA opens up a lab space to work with this predicament with others who might have similar concerns.

The next chapter assembles observations from the pilot programmes to consider how these processes worked in practice.

Chapter 4. Findings

This research establishes the Feral MBA as a lab for experiments that de-centre and destabilise the norms of business training, and provide a holding space for other kinds of subjectivities in business to emerge. The project unfolded through a series of objects, protocols and experiments, central to which are the two month-long pilot programmes of the Feral MBA. The pilots were designed to engage with the initial research questions:

1. What could it mean to approach business as a medium for artistic enquiry?
2. What formats, experiments or interventions could be designed to test this proposal?
3. How might these experiments contribute to and challenge current thinking about how we do business?

It is important to underline that the function of the Feral MBA as 'fieldwork' in this context is necessarily entwined with its substance as art. As a making process, its production involved following hunches, finding things and collaborating with others in often intangible and unstructured ways. As researcher, I am working to provoke a certain state of affairs, not just observe it, so the 'makings' and 'findings' are not easily disengaged from one another[144].

Before turning to what happened in the pilots I would like to provide some context for two elements of the programme that were formative to its effects, in experimentation and juxtaposition. Each represents an attention to staging, that was another feature of the project approach. In the spaces where business training is generally carried out, the staging (in terms of décor, dramaturgy, performance, but also as the platform on which the whole show is built) is usually taken as default, or considered as background to the 'main event' of programme content (theory, activities, tools and examples). In the Feral MBA this order of attention is substantially reversed.

Experimentation

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[144]   This interpolation goes against the conventions of the academic thesis where methods and results are clearly delineated hence the 'string bag' approach, where different elements are allowed to collide.

An important element of the programme was applying the open-ended experiment, a mode of practice familiar to art, to the less-accustomed context of business. The experiments of the Feral MBA appear in the business counter-materials that were trialled throughout the project (and include the Feral MBA itself as an altered form of business training), and in the invitation to participants to consider their own livelihood practices as experimental material.

The idea of the experiment in the Feral MBA stands fundamentally counter to a scientific approach that is calibrated, calculative and seeks to establish general, transferable principles. Such an approach is exemplified in controlled trials designed to establish how innovation works in culture entrepreneurship (Nesta, 2022). The business experiment also appears in the celebrated 'fail fast fail often' ethos of start-up entrepreneurship, in which existing practices are creatively overturned in the name of new, innovative forms of profit. The approach to experimentation in the Feral MBA has roots instead in artistic traditions where the experiment is 'not... to be later judged in terms of success or failure, but simply as an act the outcome of which is unknown', in the words of artist and musician John Cage (1961 p.13)[145]. While this represents a familiar way of working for artists, the leap for the Feral MBA research is to take *business* as the experimental medium and material.

Juxtaposition

Another element of staging that appears across the project is that of juxtaposition, engaged within the lab space of the Feral MBA as a form of spectacle and a means to de-centre and destabilise expected practices. Juxtaposition is a common practice in art, from the visual collage that mixes heterogeneous materials into a single composition (Vaughan, 2005), to the cinematic practice of superimposition that brings disparate elements together in the same frame (Youngblood, 1970). Critic and writer Susan Sontag remarks on the effect of juxtaposition in Surrealist art in introducing comedy, satire or shock, as well as its educative or therapeutic capacities, in 'destroying conventional meanings, and creating new meanings or counter-meanings' (Sontag, 1966 p.7). The Situationist International art movement used the term 'détournement' to describe a practice of juxtaposing familiar elements from mainstream culture, in ways that upend their significance. Situationist artist Guy Debord (1956) refers to

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[145]   Artists take up an array of approaches but the ones I am interested in represent a fundamental departure from the science/social sciences experiment that is calibrated, calculative, reproducible and seeks to establish general, transferable principles.

détournement's power of 'double meaning, from the enrichment of most of the terms by the coexistence within them of their old and new senses.' For Debord, détournement is the inverse of recuperation: the way that a dominant system neutralises acts of resistance by absorbing them back as new commodities. However it is also possible to rethink this dynamic from a stance that does not assume the inevitability of a dominant power. For the contemporary détournements of graffiti artists who overwrite the built environment with their own designs for example, 'power plays and means of exchange between street artists, authorities and commerce are discursive, sometimes inverted and rarely linear' (McGaw, 2008 p.223).

Strategies of juxtaposition in art regularly spill beyond a two-dimensional frame. In Gustavo Artigas' (2001) *The Rules of the Game,* a 90-minute American school basketball game and Mexican school football match are played out on the same court, at the same time, in the US-Mexico border city of Tijuana (2001–2). China Miéville's (2009) novel '*City and the City'* manifests a similar spirit of radical interpolation, set across two fictional metropolises that co-occupy the same geographical site with entirely different languages, legal systems and populations. In each of these examples, disparate elements overlap, interrupt each other, and run different protocols simultaneously. Rather than resolve into new compounds, they maintain a separation that fuels their effect: a doubling, rather than a power struggle or merger.

Design theorist Guy Julier (2013) suggests another mechanism for bringing together seemingly dissimilar materials and associations in his concept of 'co-articulation': connecting different elements in ways that can trigger new understandings. Co-articulation is not configured in terms of hierarchy or opposition, instead it involves 'the marrying up of concerns or practices in a way that strengthens both' through a superimposition of aesthetics, usages, properties and contexts (Julier, 2013 p.227). It can make for a self-reinforcing coherency, for example in the way that the design of an iPhone steers its user toward a culture and marketplace of Apple products. Julier's interest is instead in the activist potential of co-articulations that activate new connections – such as the way 'home improvement' (which aligns design culture with real estate asset creation) could be actively repurposed to align the home with other concerns such as climate change[146].

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[146] As a form of juxtaposition, co-articulation is purposefully rearranging materials from one order in the context of another, in a way that opens up possibilities.

Group effects

A final explanatory note before turning to what happened in the programme is the decision to take the group as the unit of analysis. Other than the two assistants 'GG' and 'CW', individuals are not identified in the quoted evidence[147]. While providing some degree of anonymity, the main commitment is to an ecological perspective that regards the multiplicity of ongoing interactions, rather than the individual, as the entity that learns (Bateson, 1972). The overall effect is of a compound or hybrid voice, a collaborating entity of sorts, yet one composed of diverse singularities. It produces less a consensus meaning than a 'polyvocal' one (Clifford, 1986 p.104) that retains its internal contradictions and differences.

The observations gathered here include the preconceptions of business that people were arriving with and the effects of the programme in destabilising some of these assumptions.

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[147]"The evidence presented here compiles observations from a number of participants: 22 are quoted directly in this text, 13 people from *Inception* and 9 from *Succession*. CW and GG are only identified in the findings when their statements reflect their role as co-organisers. I have also not distinguished here between the two pilots, unless the location had a material bearing on what was being said.

Figure 33: Inception opening weekend, Moonah Arts Centre
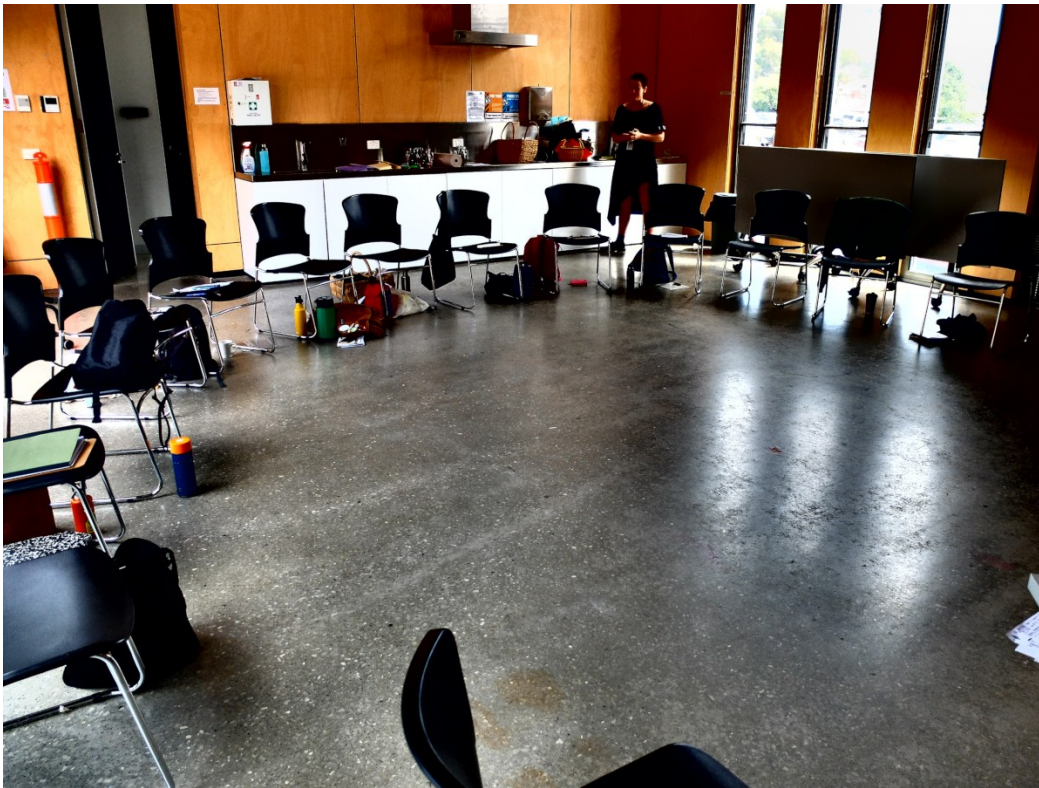
Arrivals

As the opening 'act' of the Feral MBA, the programme title set the scene by colliding disparate concepts and contexts of art and business. One participant described its attraction as 'the humour of doing an MBA together – in a month'. In the ingress coaching sessions, a sense of excitement mingled with a set of largely negative associations around business:

> ...finding yourself in a pretty standard business format' / as an arts practitioner being burnt out from the amount of work to keep the practice going / how to say no to the hard-edged model of 'deliver this and this is the exchange' / how to actually manage a business without being a business person all the time./ having spent a long time being angry at business [while] not knowing what it was.

A common apprehension was of art and business as categories with disparate, incompatible values and processes. Many people associated business with working practices that are rigid and

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demanding while also being alien and opaque. While some spoke of crossovers between art, business, work and life, it was predominantly in terms of art and life co-opted into the service of business. One participant described 'want[ing] to pursue the creative side but the business side keeps dragging it back.'.

A largely unfavourable perception of business extended to its meaning in social enterprise. One participant reflected on her day job:

> There's really strong values and it's a progressive business, but it's still like "business comes first". I want a business where business doesn't come first! That values come first, before business success, or that is success for me … community, sustainability, caring for ourselves ... not this thing of oh yeah, we will look after the staff or the environment as long as it doesn't impact our business too much.

The difficulties of bridging between theory and practice – and between ones own values and those of the wider business environment – were raised by another participant in her written application to the programme:

> Is it really possible to survive well together and to craft meaningful, regenerative work whilst operating small businesses under late state capitalism? Can I make my current work more life-supporting, and collaborative, or do I need to drop it for something else? Theory on diverse economies speaks straight to my heart … But how to apply it, within the strictures of caring work, balance sheets, Centrelink[148] obligations, 'the market', a limited amount of time and energy?

Another expressed a frustration with a limited set of tools at hand to address these dilemmas:

> I'm looking for some kind of direction that feels authentic – I've done some business training and hated every second of it…The business advice and support paths lead to men in suits saying "just work harder", it doesn't feel possible or relatable... What I'm looking for is the potential to reframe the question, instead of shaping myself into a model that doesn't fit.

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[148]   The Australian Government social security programme.

Staging effects

I will magnify a detail from the start of each Feral MBA pilot, to show how the staging worked. The first is a pivotal moment in the *Inception* programme in the introduction of diverse economies theory to the group. The second responds to the scheduling experiments undertaken in the *Succession* course.

The opening weekend of the *Inception* pilot featured a 'crash-introduction' to neoclassical economics, designed to prepare the ground for the session on diverse economies theory to follow The format for each session was a brief presentation of key concepts, followed by small-group discussions. The day commenced with an exercise in which participants were invited to contribute their own definition of 'economy'. These included:

> ...an abstracted form of value to enable circulation of resources for the benefit of select humans / a system created by humans controlled by the people it serves and based on colonial and capitalist systems of exploitation / a gauge of measurement of a society's fabricated wealth specifically money-based off of goods, trade, production.

An unanticipated effect of starting with a summary of mainstream economic thinking was the substantially negative energy it brought to the room, which continued into the lunch break. In a debrief conversation after the event, *Inception* assistant GG reflected:

> The economy' hit everyone hard with a sense of negativity and overwhelm. People were saying, we've been reading and having these conversations for more than 20 years already: there was a lot of weight and emotion in the room.

In the words of another participant:

> Discussions about abstract constructs of societal traps can be depressing and evoke hopelessness as well as action. At times it was difficult to not fall into the dark space of disempowerment when talking about neo-liberal economics, consumerism, environmental impacts...It's the same conversations I've been having since I was a teenager.

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In the afternoon, I attempted to counterweigh this pervasive plunge in spirits by presenting diverse economies theory as an antidote, a 'red pill/blue pill' moment or leap of faith (which I acted out literally by leaping), with the potential to reset thinking. The substantial effect observed in the group was a shift in attention, reported by GG as 'the relief after lunch when diverse economies was offered with conviction.' The collective effect was to dispel a general sense of incapacitating inertia in the face of such abstractions as 'economy' and 'capitalism' – while remaining mindful of their persistence – and to open up space to consider business with agency.

This affective transfer is what diverse economy theory is positioned to do: its performative agenda. At the same time, my observation in this instance was that the effect came less (or perhaps not at all) from the theory, to which people were paying cursory attention[149]. Instead it was the mode of its communication, as an embodied invitation backed by an introduction to the *Charismatic Examples* of 'non-model' art–business practice (p.32) and myself in the role of trader, its promissory agent. The effect of this performance was to manifest a different configuration of economic possibility in the room. While the shift in mood this produced was not a done deal – elements of variance, exception[150], struggle and reversion to a critical position[151] persisted throughout the course – the sense of possibility and energy it generated amounted to a tangible change of scene.

My second example comes from the substantially different staging of the *Succession* pilot. The opening workshop took the form of a two-hour Zoom session that was part-seminar, part-performance.

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[149] In the sessions and informal conversations that followed, people did not refer to diverse economies theory directly, and from speaking to people after the event I get a strong sense that they do not recall it specifically.

[150] From the two pilots there was one participant who might serve as a valuable 'control', whose position on business and economy seemed untouched by the experience and who remained a polite yet cynical presence throughout.

[151] *Inception* Assistant GG commented on an adherence to criticality as a fallback mode of engagement for some in the group, in a way that made for tensions in the workshops. *'This idea that being critical is intelligence. Problematising, picking apart, that really flattens the exercises. People were more interested in critiquing the text than what can we do with it.'*

Jumpcut Seminar

A Zoom session in four breakout rooms and no map. Rather than assemble the group in a single Zoom grid, participants were shuffled between the four spaces (*Keynote Presentation*, *Venue*, *Chillout* and *Phys-ed*) by the Zoom host for the duration of the two-hour event. Each room ran a continuous programme that represented an aspect of the course to come, with attendees appearing and disappearing seemingly at random. This choreography aimed to introduce participants to each other and to the programme concepts, while unseating from the outset any expectations of business training to deliver an experience of continuity or wholeness. My own contribution, a kind of endurance keynote that presented some of the course's core concepts, ran for the full two hours, carousel-style with occasional breaks to chat as people arrived, departed and returned. The *Phys-ed* room – led by GG and GL, more on which below (p.159) – amplified the disorientation, as people were transported from one room to another without ceremony, sometimes while standing on one leg.

Figure 34: Succession opening weekend Jumpcut Seminar: Revolving Keynote and Phys-ed
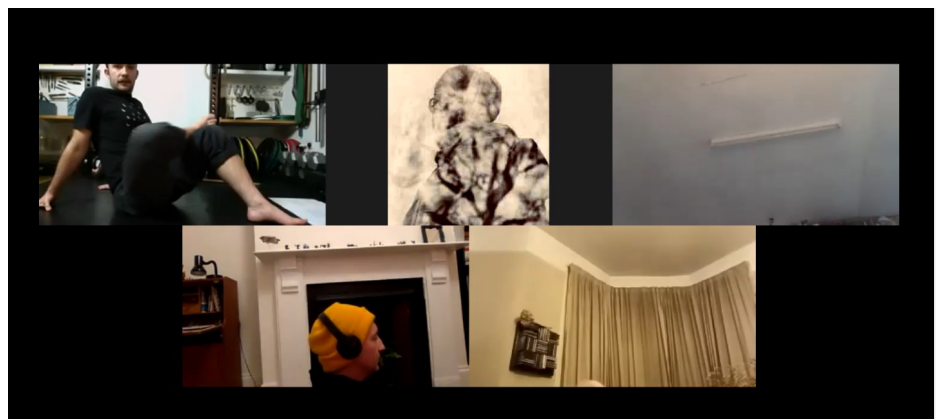
One person at egress reflected on:

> ...having half a conversation then jumping into someone else's conversation – that sort of set – I don't know if I can give words to this – but it somehow set the right tone for me... I guess it made me more open to the experience – and to being comfortable that I didn't know what was to come. You could say the sudden juxtaposition of the different strands, just opened more possibilities for connections in my brain, and between conversations and between what was happening.

He went on to comment on another featured device of the *Succession* programme staging, the *Algorithmic Dance Card* (p.103) that configured participants into their weekly small group meetings:

> The weekly dance card and algorithm … the sort of air of mysticism that was – that I understood from the idea of this algorithm –like it's a thing that works on its own – that dictates what's happening without anyone knowing what's going on.

I am interested to mark the way that attention to staging reconfigured these banal, normally background, infrastructural acts of scheduling – the rote work of filing people into workshop groups – to hint at a mystical dimension, 'a special kind of power' in another participant's words. I return to this idea in a discussion of 'magic' in Chapter 5.

Collective process

As well as the conceptual shifts outlined above, at a more pragmatic level, participants in both pilots spoke of the activating effects of thinking about their own business and livelihoods with a group. One person remarked:

> My work is often in collaborations but I do a lot of the business thinking alone. For the business part of the thinking to be collaborative is an exciting prospect.

The motivating effects of a group process ('the gang aspect' in another participant's words) might be expected in any group gathering. Yet at the same time, the kind of commonality between participants resisted easy definition. One person described his business as one that slips between conventional categories of business support:

> I felt I was in a position where I didn't really associate with any of the normal signifiers or pigeon holes. ... there's a lot of people out there doing community business but some people come along and call it community business and slap grant funding on it, and put metrics and measurements on it and it becomes this whole other thing which I didn't associate with. Then you've got social enterprise... but I'm just growing mushrooms. I don't know what my social purpose is necessarily – I want to do it ethically[152] but also there's no such thing as ethical consumption under capitalism. Neither did I see myself as like an entrepreneur or start-up type. So it was like what am I, what am I doing exactly? I sit in between all of these things.

While most participants represented small or 'micro' enterprises of some kind, these spanned non-profits, commercial undertakings, sole traderships, art projects, informal collectives and incorporated organisations. They also ranged from established projects to notional ones. What was common might be best expressed in terms of inclination, what people were striving towards (or away from). For one person:

> I guess in some way we were all working towards a common aim, a common goal. We were each trying to find ways forward for wherever we were in whatever project, but in doing so [seeking] an understanding of what it means to consider to set up or run [sic] a business in this expanded sense that we've been talking about.

The blurry particularity *of* this 'expanded sense' of business – described variously as 'uncommon business', being 'different' or sitting 'in between' categories – could be illustrated in contrast to the Women of Wearables (WoW) webinar[153]. A business support programme for women in emerging technologies, WoW was attended by one participant in parallel to the Feral MBA events. Comparing the two environments she reflected:

> I thought, gosh what an interesting set of people [in the Feral MBA] who were just getting on and doing it without lots of blah blah blah, and they were really well

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[152] The appearance of 'ethical' here represents a rare occurrence, it was a term I and the participants generally avoided.
[153] *Women of Wearables*, https://www.womenofwearables.com. Last accessed 22/06/22.

grounded. All of them were based in a deep understanding, I think, of what they needed to do. The tech start-up lot was just basically like – well – how can we get someone to give us a million pounds by telling them a story? There were so many stories – honestly, the stories you hear – and you're like – it's all front!.

At the same time, she singled out the network as a missed opportunity in the Feral MBA:

> What I felt like in a sense was that the Feral MBA was a network of people but it was treated like a lot of individuals. And actually we could have made that group of people a network that had strengths in itself. What Women [of] Wearables does is empowers women ... it basically says we're creating fem-tech – potentially a massive new market... the networking bit was just part of building your business. Although we sort of naturally had it in the Feral MBA, we didn't sort of make that a thing in itself.

The network is the built-in promise of the MBA: a value-laden package of cohort, alumni and industry contacts. An instrumental approach to networks is also common in creative industries discourse. Art curator Charles Esche identifies the network with the absence of collectivity. 'There isn't, for example, a community or collectivity in the "Creative Industries"... It's to do with the network and with being individually connected, but that's nothing to do with collectivity' (Esche, 2010, p.305)[154]. In place of the kind of networking designed to build social capital, the Feral MBA offers a messy and contingent rendition of community through an exploratory coming together in practice.

This togetherness was also often located in uncertainty or negative states, rather than upbeat declarations: the opportunity to consider troubles in common. One person reported 'gaining a lot from the [Feral Business] clinic process, with others who struggle'.

Another related:

> If someone says I'm struggling with this – then it's like oh me too – it then enables us to create confidence, because it's not just me. And projects that I think are doing amazingly – it was, I didn't know that you struggled with things like that - it looks like everything is fine, you are doing awesome! It's getting behind the scenes with people, the struggles

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[154] By contrast, Lovink and Rossiter (2018) distinguish a lot more nuance in social networks, from the self-organised, informally structured networks of art (such as the way tactical media was organised) and those in activism that come together around a specific action.

that we don't see but if we did see them – One of the examples I most liked was about [Premium Cola – one of the Charismatic Examples] – they publish their mistakes. I thought, that's brilliant! Because we see just the success, and not the run-up to the successful stories.

Artists and others

A feature of the kind of collectivity brokered through the Feral MBA is the way it deals with difference. The participant demographic in both pilots was broadly homogenous: predominantly white, tertiary-educated, local and female (with some exceptions to each of these categories). The profile partly reflects the regions in which the programmes were held and the limitations of the local arts networks through which much of the recruitment was organised. While constraining the scope of the findings from a social sciences perspective, it provides an opportunity to consider difference in other ways that are more difficult to establish yet are significant for the work the Feral MBA is doing. I will approach this through the mixture of artists and others that was integral to the pilots, and through the effects of the coaching approach that formed one of its central technologies.

An expanded attention to 'artists and others' was a feature of the recruitment process and of the kinds of business examples presented in the course materials. The mix of art and non-art livelihood practices represented in the pilots, from visual artists to farmers (see pp.100-101), helped sidestep a narrow fixation on art-specific issues such as arts funding, to concentrate instead on what capacities artists might bring to an alternative business agenda. In the words of one (non-artist):

> Having some people that were artists but also having people who were like – I'm not an artist, I just have this, like, not or uncommon business ... it felt so beneficial to have that diversity in the group. Everyone helped someone else out in some way, in terms of what they do, their project or research is going to flick a light onto something that is different and not what you are used to in your mode of [working].

Another (artist) reflected on the particular capacities of artists 'having already been trained to consider, value, assess things, not just objects and actions, in a different way'.

Beyond the strategic mix of participants that 'artists and others' engineered, the programme's coaching focus was used as a tactic to draw out other areas of difference: in orientation, experience, expectations and subjectivities. The practices of close listening and supportive enquiry that were repeated across both pilots encouraged singularities to surface, including the kinds of difference that might otherwise go unacknowledged yet can be found with attention, even within a homogenous-seeming group. Sharing what are normally private concerns of business and livelihood triggered reflections on both the commonality and diversity of experience. People remarked on both 'the cross-overs and echoes' and 'the variety of the participant group made me realise there are so many ways of living your life'.

The way these approaches might diverge from a conventional understanding of business diversity could be illustrated through a comment from *Succession* Assistant CW. CW commented on the 'clash' between the concepts the Feral MBA is playing with and:

> ...how a good migrant entrepreneur would do things. Which is kind of funny, because when we were recruiting for the Feral MBA, there was an incubator for people of colour here in Plymouth and I was told [by a local arts organisation] it would be really good to think about trying to recruit some people from there. But because when I looked at their programmes and their website, it's just so earnest and serious – it's almost like you don't want to play with someone's livelihood – it's like when you are secure and business is somehow not related to whether or not you can stay in the country- then you can take more risks and you can barter and have alternative economies – and not to – how to say this – it's also because all these alternative economies are already in everyday lives... and so I found myself in this really interesting conundrum. This is the negative part I suppose, there's this nervousness as to how you set up a business that is not very playful.

CW's reflection points to a baseline set of conditions that should be met before the provocations of the Feral MBA could even be considered, secure residency status being just one of many legal, cultural and social factors. It is a useful reminder that the project is situated in its own space of possibility that is partial and contingent. At the same time, the idea of who might be subject to security or precarity, play or necessity, might be questioned. My observations from the pilots attest to the complexity: lines of privilege and precarity appear multiple and shifting, people may identify with neither or both, and what we assume about others' realities is often our own work of fiction. How the approach to difference in the Feral MBA could apply to facets of social diversity that are

more easily recruited for – race, gender, age, ability – escapes the frame of this research, but it is a question for the next steps for the Feral MBA, which I return to in the closing chapter.

From models to experiments

> It took a long time for me to get away from thinking—when are we going to get the models? (*Inception* participant, egress interview).

> At first the idea of being experimental with money or business, at first, it was, like woah, woah, you don't experiment with that shit! (*Inception* participant, egress interview).

The prospect of experimenting with business is written into the design of the Feral MBA. The experiment is engaged through traditions from art that are collective, material and open-ended, rather than positivist or results-based. While such a mode of activity is familiar to artists, the cognitive leap of applying it to business was central to the investigation of the two pilots.

On arrival to the Feral MBA, there was an expectation amongst many participants that alternative business models and 'solutions' would be presented, a direction that the programme resisted. This resistance was acknowledged by some participants, who recognised the potentially incongruous fit that these shapes of knowledge make with their knowledge of practice. One described:

> … being caught by the endgame scenario: knowing that the practice is messy and indeterminate but wanting solutions when it comes to the business or economic side.

The expectation for solutions reflects a broad emphasis in both commercial and non-profit business support, on the kind of knowledge that can be formatted as models, templates and tools. A participant reflected:

> In co-operativism, in grant funding... you tend to get signposted, you tend to get help and facilitation around the money. But not around – what do you want out of life? Or what does it mean to live a good life, how do you organise in your community. A lot of the time it's just – OK there's a community over here, they just need business support to be effective business people, I think that's all backwards, all wrong, a lot of the time… f

you're not really sure of what you're doing and you're not sure of your identity, that then butts up against the system and the world outside.

While perhaps a simplification, the comment points to a general tenet of business discourse, the idea that business could be considered apart from the life and everyday practices of its operators or its wider ecosystem. From a feminist and ecological perspective these things are inextricable.

Rather than offer up alternative models or toolkits, the Feral MBA provided an invitation to experiment, through collective processes that drew the wider context of making livelihoods into the room. By way of illustration I offer up two further monetary experiments that were staged within the Inception programme.

The thorny question of money

Figure 35: The Thorny Question of Art and Economy

Image credit: Morag Porteous

Monetary Experiment III

> **The Thorny Question of Art and Economy** was an event held at Museum of New and Old Art (MONA) in Tasmania during the *Inception* pilot. The event unfolded over three acts, before an audience of Feral MBA participants, friends and an art-going public. The final section of the programme, *Ouijic Outcomes,* took the form of a monetary experiment designed to determine the disposal of a collective investment, the event ticket takings. The total (AUD $670) was exhibited in cash in a beer glass on a plinth throughout the evening's proceedings. The ticket-holding public were invited to each prepare a proposal for disposing of 'The Money', within certain constraints: the proposal should be an action in and for the collective benefit, executable within a fortnight and one that could be articulated in under 30 seconds. A circle was formed and the microphone handed to the first proposer. When the circuit of ideas had run its course, a spinning swarm of automated balls, extracted from domestic robotic mops, were released from a postal sack. These were the 'Ouijic Agents', their task to single out a winning proposal without fear or favour. The balls rolled around the circle, tagging people as they went until a shortlist of 5 audience members was identified. From this number a winner was selected with the aid of a blindly-drawn tarot card, and the winning proposition declared to the room:'to acknowledge the cleaners who will clean up after the event and give the money to them.' The bagged-up cash was handed over to a MONA cleaning employee shortly thereafter.

The swift act of summoning, adjudicating and disseminating funding performed in the *Ouijic Outcomes* stirred up as many issues as those it acquitted, as even the winner expressed mixed feelings about their choice of how to disburse it (Mauro-Flude and Rich, 2023). Together, the series of monetary experiments that traversed the Feral MBA research (see also p.110) do not propose an alternative best practice but instead, stage and surface spiky issues in the processes of handling money and allocating funds. *The Money and the Resources* exercise (below) threaded these dilemmas through the core of the *Inception* programme.

Monetary Experiment IV

'The Money and the Resources' gathered AUD $50 from each *Inception* participant, described as a place-holding deposit to be returned at the opening weekend. Rather than reimbursement, the group was presented on day one of the programme with a cloth bag, containing the accumulated $900 in cash, and asked to contribute a matching set of 'resources' (written offers of non-financial things of potential value), housed in a second cloth bag. The group was then tasked with collectively disposing of these assets by the programme's end. Deliberations ran across the full span of workshops and came to occupy a substantial slice of session time.

The eleventh hour decision, designated by the participants as *Pigeon Coup*, was a collective commitment to deposit a further $50 per person per month over the next eighteen months to a shared bank account from which a monthly $900 would be allocated to each contributor in turn. The recipient would then have a month to spend the sum on anything they chose, with the condition to report back to the group on their experience at an end-of-month gathering at the pub. A participant reflected: 'collectively it's hard to know what to with the money but individually we can decide. If we continue to throw in $50/month to collective savings and let others know what we spend it on, we can continue the experiment and the conversation and resolve the collective problem… this is using money as a vehicle, not it using us'. A bank account in the name of *Pigeon Coup* was opened and the initial $900 deposited. However the immediate disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic (the first nationwide restrictions on movement were introduced on the same day the money was banked) threw the parameters of the experiment into fundamental disarray, placing an indefinite hold on the project.

Figure 36: The Money and the Resources

Image credit: Morag Porteous.

In the remotely convened *Succession* gathering, these plays with cash were not reprised, but the idea of experimenting informed elements of staging and dramaturgy from the jump-cut choreography of the opening Zoom session to the *Algorithmic Dance Cards* (pp.104).

In both pilots, a reorientation from models to experiments was made explicit in the presentation of *Charismatic Examples* of business practice (p.32), not as designs to adopt but as a wild array of outliers and exceptions that might (cumulatively) start to destabilise what might be expected of business, and open space for other ideas. As 'non-model' enterprises, their activities and strategies do not translate easily across contexts, but despite or perhaps because of this, they formed outsized and enduring references for people. And as living business instances, they offer tangible connections, as contexts that one might even join. One participant remarked:

> There was things there I thought might really work and I would really love to be part of. .. I thought if anything like that existed [here] I would just go along and be part of it, be with it.

Experiments with business

The notion of the experiment further informed the homework assignments, which asked participants to render their business plan in the materials and methods of their own practices. It produced an efflorescence of artefacts in an array of project-specific media.[155]

Figure 37: Inception homework presentations

(Clockwise from top left) Inception participants present their business plans in the form of a pirate map, a printing demonstration, a text viewed with the aid of an iron spear and mirror, a basket of herbs, a set of pottery bowls.

However the emphasis of the experiment in the Feral MBA is not as a thinking tool or representation, but its direct application to one's own business or livelihood, made active in the question threaded through the programme – 'what if this was an experiment?'

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[155] These examples are from *Inception,* the range of homework presentations was substantially reduced in *Succession* closing event, taking place on Zoom, where most people opted for a more conventional PowerPoint presentation or diagram, although elements of costumes, projections and embroidery did also appear.

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The invitation to experiment was received by people in different ways. For some, it opened new paths to action, 'putting it as an experiment; not getting into on the big abstract question of is it possible or not.' It was also welcomed as an alternative approach to the overwhelming prospect of 'reconfiguring the whole system, it's overwhelmingly giant.' For many, it offered ways of working that could bypass a tacit yet tenacious set of expectations around being in business, described variously as 'being perfect', getting it right' or 'having all the answers'. One person related:

> The biggest shift for me going through the course was the idea of the non-model model: experimenting, just doing things and seeing what works. I was hoping to find answers in the course and I've shifted from that thinking to lots of ideas and inspiration… I liked looking at the way other people were doing things, but not in the 'that's the answer I've been looking for' way but in a 'these are all the options and possibilities' way … the idea of experimenting was very big for me.

Some of these responses could appear to align with familiar entrepreneurial tropes of 'intelligent failure' and 'out-of-the-box' thinking. What is different is where the boundaries of the experiment in business are drawn: what might constitute a successful outcome. Participants voiced an interest in the potential to move beyond the pressures (and paradoxes) of a narrowly defined business 'success.' Several spoke of introducing elements of inconsistency, incompleteness or contradiction to their work, qualities not usually associated with business acumen. One reflected:

> It helps to move your thinking away from the quantitative game of - how do I keep this business afloat? Or in five years, what do I want my weekly income to be for me to deem it successful? It feels like it really gets rid of all of that quantitative reasoning around business. It's so helpful to be thinking about business without that.

Another contrasted the Feral MBA programme with his expectations of business support:

> ...chasing after grant funding and seed funding, hyping yourself up, marketing yourself and all of this. [The Feral MBA] wasn't sort of outcome-oriented in the same way.

These comments raise a fundamental point of interest for this research, which is how success in business could be configured differently. In entrepreneurship, the experimentation takes place within the end game (explicit or unspoken) of business competition and profitable growth. These

might not be the only parameters but they are the determining ones: the commercial 'realities' to which all other aspects of the endeavour are subject. In putting forward the nature and conduct of business *as a whole* as material to experiment with, the Feral MBA leaves the prospect of what business might be or do, its outcomes and its meaning, as an open question.

Changing the way we think

> Do you think the hardest work is in your change in thinking? (*Inception* participant, question to the group).

While a reorientation in thinking is part of the rationale of the Feral MBA, its appearance as an overt preoccupation for participants was unexpected. On the *Inception* opening weekend, people were referring to 'mental blocks', 'fuzziness', 'the brain skills we need to operate in this as-yet-unnamed degrowth space', 'the blocks we have that we can't see past or get around'. A gravitation to thinking processes was returned to and reiterated in session discussions, where it was described variously as a critical step, a struggle, or even a primary outcome of the programme. As a focus of attention, 'changing the way we think' risks evoking clichéd associations with positive thinking or life-hacking literature. At the same time, as considered and reiterated in peoples' own words ('breaking habits of thinking' / 'changing thought processes' /'changing mindset' / 'shifting thinking') it arose from the particular schema and circumstances of the *Inception* event. Its significance for this research lies in the way that people were making connections between a desire for wider economic changes and their own habits of mind. It marks a shift away from identifying the problems of business and economy as sheerly external, or conversely as individual affairs to be engaged with in our own private spaces of administration, rather than in collective or discursive ones.

The 'way we think' about business was identified by people with a range of outer influences including upbringing, schooling, language, media, business advice and the influence of peers: the mechanisms and conduits by which a dominant business ideology is delivered and reinforced. One person commented:

Being institutionalised, as a Brownie and an academic, to succeed comes with a particular way of doing and thinking. Changing the system has to come from changing these thought processes.

A focus on thinking shifts the ground of what a business training course might be engaged to do. It links back to Bateson's (1972) emphasis on learning new thinking, and the intention of this research to explore how this change could come about. It foregrounds the substantial task of unmaking an established business ideology. While reflecting a wider contemporary discourse that takes personal transformation as a critical precursors to social change (see for example Brown, 2017), more tangibly in the context of the Feral MBA, it responds to the programme's coaching approach (and was a determining idea behind it).

Coaching reflections

Active listening and the *Feral Business Clinics* (pp.124-5) were recurrent references in the feedback from the course, evidence for the potential of a peer-to-peer coaching approach. One participant reflected:

> ...how intimate talking about business and economy is – being able to talk about that straight away, it's radical to talk about that openly.

Another remarked:

> You start to realise how much emotional drive is behind what [people] do... When we talk about business and economy, it's such a structured, abstract, built, constructed thing. But when you put emotion into the mix, it's like that's the driver, seeing that in other people.

A third pointed to the juxtaposition of contexts and modes involved:

> It's like a mixture between – some sessions were so businessy but so tied to our own emotions that it was like half counselling, half business advice... it's not how we normally approach a business course.

One effect of the coaching approach was to exchange a narrow set of formats and dispositions assumed for business – in competitiveness, completeness, problem-solving and the upbeat declarations of the project pitch – for different subjectivities and ways of relating. One participant elaborated:

> It feels like anti-networking Where you are pitching, it's really stressful. This is the opposite – it's 'this is what I'm worried about'… it's a lot more honest.

As a group practice, the coaching-as-training shifted the burden of thinking about business from a solo or independent concern to a collective, interdependent one, and the focus of business advice from a client-service relationship to a DIY, peer-to-peer resource.

In the words of one participant:

> … having that space of empowered amateurs... people who are quite inexperienced with those questions themselves being able to ask those questions of you.

Others referred to a process of:

> … opening up / relinquishing / being carried by a lot of people / being taken care of' / these are things in your head but people are actually listening.

The coaching exercises also provided a means to broach the difficult gap between theory and practice. One person reported:

> Over the many weeks we were having the discussions, they were also abstract or separate from me, or things I was thinking about how they could materialise in the future. The reason the clinic had this effect on the last day – it was all the ideas we had been exploring and thinking about together being now reflected back on me, about what I wanted to do… Someone would say something like – why do you need a model? – and it was like yes – of course! – that's what we've been talking about all month! But when you have been thinking about a project for so long, you almost need someone else to reflect back all those ideas for it to apply to you. I think we – or I – still have that tendency to go back to the comfortable way of thinking. Or those pathways in your

brain are still so clear and well-marked, when you're thinking outside of that you still need someone to come and reflect that back to you.

This comment makes vital connections between gaining new perspectives and applying them, including the substantial obstacles of habit that Bateson (1972) marks out. An appreciation of this gap in practice is perhaps the most influential finding of the pilots, and supplies a new research question that will guide its conclusions:

How to begin to address the gap between a feminist, ecological conception of business and the practice of actually inhabiting that space?

A note to the reader: at this point in the reading undertaking you might want to get up and stretch. A 7-minute Phys-ed training break, drawn from *Succession* course materials, is provided on USB in the *Counter-materials Ring Binder* (p.10), or online here, https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLOx3-7mMOyJ22c3HO3efjS8C_3b8tFDVL

Phys-ed

A last-minute addition to the *Inception* programme in collaboration with Feral MBA assistant and boxing instructor GG, Phys-ed brought attention to an activity common to administration, education, research and often art, the material practice of sitting around. It appeared in the form of occasional short programme breaks where the group was roped into doing a round of physical exercises, led by GG and others in the group. In *Succession,* GG reprised the role as a remote collaboration with gym instructor and *Succession* participant GL. Here the practice worked to break up the grid-formed layout of the online sessions, particularly at the opening and closing Zoom events. In both pilots, the practice came to embody a physical analogy for the kind of training the Feral MBA was instituting, built on repetitions and starting again.

Figure 38: Succession opening weekend Jumpcut Seminar: Phys-ed
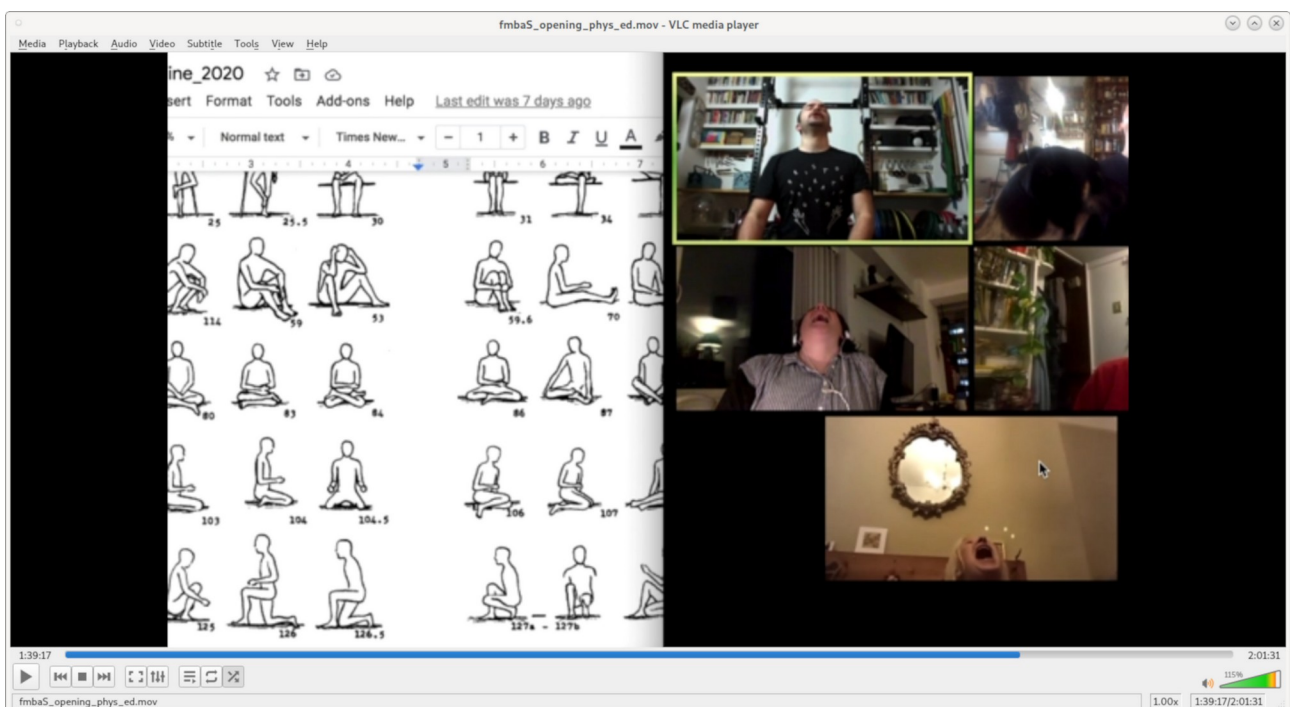
Vulnerability

> Key for me coming out of the whole Feral MBA is how important that vulnerability is
> and how to foster that – I was just amazed by that. A cliché! I sound like a dickhead. But
> it's true. (*Inception* participant, egress coaching session).

Vulnerability is not a term or a concept that I brought into the project but came up in

Inception conversations and became a recurring reference in both pilots. One participant

attributed it to the programme's experimental delivery style[156]:

> ...watching you work out the training as you went – the level of vulnerability you had to
> bring to that – it helped the group with their vulnerability. There was a fair bit of
> discomfort throughout, but that you were sharing that, in the mess with us, it really
> helped.

Others credited the coaching approach with cultivating an air of openness in the group, a 'fast-

forward state of intimacy' that enabled conditions for vulnerability to surface. One described:

> ...not looking for answers but opening up the project, which includes making ourselves
> vulnerable. That we are not knowing where to go from here, it's a real question…
> There's risk in being vulnerable to others but it's also exciting.

There was also the cumulative effect of witnessing openness in others. In reference to the Feral

Business Clinics, one person reflected:

> The question I brought to the business clinic on the opening weekend – how to involve
> people [in my business] and at the same time protect my home – I think the sense of
> fearfulness that governed that question—spending all that time making ourselves quite
> vulnerable in the company of a real mix of people, and that space to be held as safe – I
> feel like I can now engage with people in a way where I don't set myself up to lose
> anything.

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[156] For my own part, I would characterise this instead as 'weak' performance tactics of hesitance and not-knowing.

Another reported:

> I think being able to be vulnerable throughout the programme, and seeing other members doing the same thing actually, being vulnerable themselves, helped me with my confidence... I noticed that because we don't associate [business with] being vulnerable or slow or weaknesses – or anything but success success success. It's one way of thinking of success but we think of business as professionalised and everything – for me that creates a wall against asking for help. Because I should know how to do this … I should be stronger, I should be capable – where I could say, actually I don't know this, could you help me with it?

This last comment is instructive for the connections it makes (or unmakes) between vulnerability and success, something I return to in Chapter 5. The appearance of vulnerability as a valued state in the Feral MBA that opened up real possibilities for thinking and acting differently, reflects and supports its experimental design and staging, in particular the peer coaching practices, which supplied conditions for this state to emerge.

Limits to the evidence

The participant comments supplied above are characteristic in being substantially more positive than critical: something that is evident across the information collected in the coaching sessions, through group conversations in the workshops and in the written evaluations provided by participants at the end of the course. People in general did not supply negative viewpoints, such as those that might be gathered by a disinterested outside researcher. It is a factor of a research approach that is not collecting data on the programme's efficacy in a social sciences tradition, but rather exploring a proposition with others who are also invested in the process. It is noted here as an acknowledgement of how the research design shaped the outcomes, rather than a shortcoming.

Departures

The egress coaching sessions generated a slew of reflections on what might have changed for people over the course of the Feral MBA. Many of these comments are rooted in individual

experiences and projects in ways that are difficult to generalise across practices. What they do supply is evidence of a new form of business knowledge that is idiosyncratic and practice-based. One person described a new perspective on his business:

> It's kind of like considering the business outside of it being defined in terms of everything that goes to the tax department. Considering it in terms of the mood that I wake up in in the morning, and the energy I have for cooking lunch, stuff like that. All those feelings are an integral part [of it].

For another it was the new realisation that:

> ...what happens [in the business] *is* the project... So now we need to get to the point of not marketing it, but framing it as part of the artistic project. Seeing it in that way – so that they're not a series of things that need to be overcome so that something else can begin – something else has already begun and these are the activities within it. ... the busyness of mending windows and trying to organise plumbers who keep letting us down – all of that is part of the activity – we're having to accept that that's the centre of the business. Where the change has happened is more by being able to see that busyness as just a thing... at the heart of what we are doing… [and] from a sort of business therapy point of view, to be 'OK' with that ... It doesn't change the material conditions of work, but it allows me to not descend into the anxiety of overwhelm, but simply to name it, acknowledge its existence and get through it.

That business might extend into states of mind, mealtimes and negotiating with tradespeople might be common to all business practice. What people are reporting here is a new recognition of these things as central to the project, not background effects or interruptions. While the changes reported are cognitive ones, it is also a form of change that is already actual, rather than speculating on future outcomes, and as such provides evidence of a particular kind of process.

That a shift in perspective might itself be a material form of change allies the coaching practice of the Feral MBA with the performative approach to knowledge in diverse economies theory, that 'to change our understanding is to change the world' (Gibson-Graham, 2008 p.615). At the same time, the practice-orientation of the Feral MBA calls for a more-than theoretically-informed approach to change. One instance of how new thinking could manifest

in action comes from another participant who likened the experience of the Feral MBA to 'a process of coming out':

> That sense that you find a name for the thing that you feel and experience, you know how to express how that thing is different to what is conventional, and you also know that it's OK, that it's fine to feel like that, that there are other people in that boat. Not entirely persecuted or oppressed or whatever... Last week I got signed up to have this session with this business coach guy ….I wouldn't have signed up for that kind of session normally because I'd be like, I know what's going to come out of it at the end, I know we need to be a CIC legal structure and blah blah blah. But what was lovely about that was being able to say and express the things to this guy who would normally – maybe my assumption or my prejudice would be: you're not going to get or care about the things that we think are important, you're going to be looking at the financial projections for this business. And what was really nice was being able to leave that session where he was super-enthused, he was like – wow – what you are proposing is truly radical but it's also like a real thing. It's not imaginary, it's concrete and it's practical... I was like OK brilliant, yeah! I can do this, I can kind of give this the language that it needs and the language that facilitates the ideas as well as something that will translate to a more conventional conversation about what business is... it opens up the opportunity for us to operate with far more confidence.

What is illuminating in this statement is the way that a newfound capacity to articulate what is different about the business is identified with a confidence to engage with the business mainstream, rather than separate from it. It underlines that the 'outcomes' of the Feral MBA are not about establishing another kind of niche identity in business but about brokering relationships, including those that cross ideological lines. It also speaks to the feminist approach to naming things that then become apparent: being able to speak out.

Singular insights

While the majority of participants spoke of significant experiences of change, it is important not to overlook the differences. One person reflected on the way an ingrained understanding of business success persisted, despite the possibilities opened up through the programme:

I'd always imagined that I'd get up there – whatever there is – and think oh no this isn't what I want. But I've got the money now, so I can go and do what I want. I think that's from stories I've read as a teenager, magazines, what it feels like to get there – but then I had a really interesting chat in the business clinic, [another participant] was like – yes but where is there? When do you reward yourself, when do you know you've got to something? ... I think in reflection for where I was at the start of the course, that kind of thinking still hasn't shifted maybe for me – the stuff I'm interested in, passionate about, feels much much clearer, but the money, security, getting there thing is still very present.

This comment points to the cultural power of familiar narratives of business success. At the same time, it is a reminder of the many, often incommensurable values and directions within the participant group which is central to the politics the Feral MBA is cultivating: to bring these into new encounters, rather than to converge around a single shared direction.

Another participant provided a vivid image of exiting the protected space of the Feral MBA into the glare of everyday life, as a (literal) collision of worlds:

When this guy rear-ended my car [on the closing weekend of the *Inception* programme] – now I have to pay money in the real world - it made me think, how useful is this magical thinking?... How are these new and expanded tools and ways of thinking and being in the world actually going to have an effect? Which I am still obviously out for the count for thinking about.

My response to her questions looks to the coaching iterations that work at the micro-level of habit, rather than focus on large-scale transformation. It also returns to the kind of experiment that holds what 'success' might look like open to question. I return to these ideas in the closing chapter. For now, I will finish with an extended extract from the final *Succession* egress coaching session:

I think the programme …definitely has complicated how I view my art practice.… In some strange way I think the previous way I was used to working as an artist - I was quite good at creating a budget that would give me some kind of fee. And being quite alright at how that went, I was doing quite alright.... If I kind of pare down and figure out the anatomy of how work as an artist used to be, it was a lot of hustle .. I was spending a lot of time looking for opportunities, getting very competitive about that, you know like not wanting to share an opportunity that I had....If I'd kept on... being super-ambitious, efforting, being on my own feeling like I own every IP and copyright to every idea I put out – I could be maybe closer to showing that I've won awards...

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Because it was quite a ruthless way of working, you are just like on, it's like this individualism, like this being able to lead and manage a team. Whereas now it is a lot more vulnerable... relying on members within my community, and realising that is really how it begins. And maybe it doesn't need to – reach 100 members or I may never win a prize for it but there's something quite like nurturing about this...

I think the Feral MBA has added another dimension - and it was stuff I already knew – the more that I share and be more generous and be less in my own head – there was more benefit? And there was something about that – and again I would say it complicates it – because now there is an abundance of ways of being. And of how you get taken care of – and your offering coaching is such a great way of offering a way to care. And I'm trying to not take things that are hard personally. I found being in the Southwest [UK] hard. And how this has become complicated in the Feral MBA – this is so hard to explain – the experience of things being hard for me as a migrant in the Southwest has been somewhat again put into a technicolour focus, because of the Feral MBA: while it was hard, there are also very live opportunities for me to be taken care of.

Whether it's through – and sometimes it's still a struggle but I kind of realise the struggle is more within.... It's all about nurturing relationships and that interconnectivity that I knew about, sensed, but ... it gives it a particular liveness, because of the practice of being, knowing and actually contributing to part of [my project] – or engaging with other people with their projects... Did I tell you that [another participant] made some bags for my project? .... In the past, I would have put it as if I efforted all that, that I had made that happen because I had a project. And now it's like – no, no, you are only part of a lot of different thing.

I will pause on this comment as I find it both significant and significantly difficult to render in the context of this analysis. It is not self-contained and resists editing down into a more compact presentation. The way it strings together a trajectory of thinking points to a discord between emergent understandings and the surrounding systems in which these understandings come to light. For the speaker (a migrant in the UK), the disjunction is between the expected metrics of acheivement that prove the worth of an art career[157] and the experience of an art practice that is primarily social and collaborative. For me, the discord is the presentation requirements of this thesis that skew the evidence towards more compact and coherent communications[158].

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[157] With 'awards' refers the speaker was referring to the kind of evidence of artistic success required by the UK Government's 'Global Talent Visa', a potential immigration pathway for artists.

[158] These frictions further illustrate the rationale for my approach to analysing the pilots: to resist imposing an overarching interpretation and instead preserve the 'thinking voice' in which responses were phrased.

In my reading, the speaker is piecing into words a hesitant movement away from a professional art identity, in which collaborative work is treated as artistic capital on a competitive CV, to a sea of connections that is far harder to account for. Unlike networking, the 'interconnectivity' referred to here is not a product or technology that could be delivered by the Feral MBA, but a potential, revealed through its perspectives. It is akin to the idea of interdependence that underpins diverse economies thinking – a state of relations that is boundless, incomplete and perpetually in negotiation (Gibson-Graham, 2006b). Yet here is arrived at not through theory but in an effortful process of sifting through experience and thinking out loud.

As evidence, the way this comment jumps around, halts, backtracks and requires backfilling signals several things. It is part of an ongoing conversation that overflows the research frame. It is also an artefact of the coaching process that not only pays attention to but actively encourages a kind of rambling – a mode of speaking that demands a close reading. Attending to these relations and indeterminacies is at the heart of what the Feral MBA is doing, in dismantling a narrow understanding of being in business.

Its hesitancies also suggest that the space traced out in the Feral MBA goes beyond the limits of existing discourse. In contrast to the confident pronouncements expected in business, a framing vocabulary is not readily at hand. Yet this potentially unnerving dissolution of categories and certainties is less a shortfall than a feature of the space. People were bypassing business terminology (including that of social enterprise) and searching around instead in their own experience for 'the language that it needs'. At the same time, there was an equal and opposite tendency to bounce back into familiar business terms and tropes (such as networking, alumni and models). People were both returning to and resisting a prevailing business language, while adopting new ideas from the Feral MBA and injecting their own experience and vocabulary in between these things. The experience is one of changing thinking about business from inside it: a messy, hands-on process.

Coda

In his research into the competing priorities of 'environment', 'society' and 'economy' in rural Maine, Miller (2019 p.96) describes the contradictory presentations of his interviewees, most of them expert in one of those domains, who speak in 'hesitations and uncertainties expressed in spaces where confidence and mastery might be expected'. He also notes his own approach to the patchy material produced through these conversations:

> The larger picture of instability that emerges here is quite consciously fabricated from bits and pieces, from glimmers—an image provisionally and incompletely stitched together with scraps.

I recognise several elements in these statements. In the Feral MBA, people were sensing, managing and attempting to put into words their own lived experience – having been given permission and space to connect – through ways of talking about business that upturned existing certainties. And as researcher I am opportunistically spinning together an account (which is also what artists do), spliced together from the fragments of where people were, four weeks into that process. The story is filtered through an evidence-gathering process that cultivates certain ways of thinking and relating, and is by definition partial.

Closing remarks

> My business model is going into an area that's not about busyness. A strange space for me to operate with... but that's what's happening. (*Inception* participant, closing weekend, comment to the group).

The proposition of the Feral MBA – and its challenge – is to bring a feminist, ecological business imaginary into the day-to-day action of how we do business. The pilots involved a process of assembling (people, theory, questions and examples), destabilising and dismantling (expected kinds of business knowledge and how these would be communicated), and making or re-making (activities, scenography, props, experiments that cultivated conditions for

different subjectivities in business to emerge). The show opened with the disordering effects conjured by the programme name, and closed with habit-level thinking shifts to take back out into the world. It shifted the focus of engagement with business from looking outwards for models, theory or expert advice, to generating knowledge from the collective experience within a group. In doing so, it sidestepped business tropes of confidence and autonomy, enabling in their place an attention to hesitance and indeterminacy, where modes of vulnerability and interdependence could appear and be valued.

In the process, the programme was also transformed through its encounter with the participants, as its foundational ideas were bounced around and remixed. A significant understanding gleaned through this process is how much of the work of the Feral MBA project is to unpackage the fabric and delivery of business training and the business mindset. It is not formulating alternative business models and methods but finding ways to do without such certainties. It unfolds by thinking about (and through) practices that are inherently specific and situated in the enterprises people bring in with them. The collective of the group and the framing of the Feral MBA activate these practices as knowledge.

The interest then is not in 'best practice' but in practice in all its diversity, and in engaging with processes for experimenting, rather than in the results. The kind of business expertise it cultivates is grass-roots, enquiring and non-solution-focused in ways that go against many of the institutional foundations of business training. It dislodges the practice of business advice from a specialist activity to one that is invested in the group.

While the Feral MBA was unpackaging many of the tropes of business training (the expert advisor, the investor pitch, the coordinates of success), peoples' assumptions of a singular, narrowly-defined, antithetical business realm were also being taken apart and attended to. The stories that inspired people were not the 'give us a million pounds' confident pronouncements, but conversely those that were tentatively expressed, worked through struggle or recognised mistakes. This suggests that the 'centre of the business' might include the emotions it runs on, its social relations and the banalities of a maintenance task list. It bears little resemblance to the repertoire of business case canvases, innovation pathways and growth projections that

business advice still overwhelmingly relies on – nor to the anti-business sentiment that artists often harbour.

Unpackaging is not the same as removal: the artefacts and effects of business as usual were not purged from the research space. On the contrary they permeate and perforate it. The egress coaching sessions reflect an interpolation of divergent, sometimes contradictory beliefs, as peoples' new understandings intertwine with retained assumptions. In the Feral MBA these contradictions are not a point of failure but the field of operations. Management scholars Mary Phillips and Deborah Knowles (2012 p.421) are instructive in mapping Butler's (2004) theory of gender performativity to the performance of taking up an entrepreneurial subjectivity: a simultaneous process of 'being done and undone' by a dominant business discourse that is both formative to that subjectivity and can be displaced. In the Feral MBA, the new knowledge being processed is not a matter of synthesis or a process of separation into an alternative business realm, but of finding ways to manage these imbricated relations in the same place and frame.

A lasting insight came from the closing debrief session in Hobart with *Inception* Assistant GG.

> If we had told everyone we're going to do active listening and co-operation, no-one would have come. Framing it as 'business', because of the way it's staged, it's about business but it's also a performance: we can be open and talk about things we are less comfortable with... [I'm amazed by] how quickly trust has been created within this group…and they have come to this thinking through business.

This comment goes to the heart of the question of business as a place for meaning-making– and what the staging of art can perform. The findings also signal the difficulty of the whole endeavour – of changing thinking about a business or livelihood while inhabiting it. The task of undoing strong ideology and finding other ways to think and transact in the world is substantial. It is necessarily partial and intermittent and requires ongoing practices of training and maintaining. People exited the programme back into the day-to-day pressures of business not with a transformative action plan but with a cognitive reset that is subtle, variable and slow-acting – with a long tail – and with some tools or means to keep that recalibration in process.

Chapter 5. Conclusions

It's an ongoing process but I think definitely a wedge has been put in (*Succession* participant, egress coaching session).

This research marks out a working context at an intersection of fields. Its investigations span from the inadequacy of the business school model to the work that artists are doing to reconfigure their business-like processes, to my own experiments with the Feral MBA and what that has produced.

The findings add up to multiple things. Rather than a summing up this chapter takes a 'baroque' sensibility to concluding, in Law's (2004) sense of thinking without overview. This maintains that 'there may be no need to pull it all together; and, indeed, that it is impossible to pull it together and that to try to do so is to miss the point' (Law 2004, p.23). It is picking up curious objects rather than presenting a new coherence, with the resistance to closed knowledge systems (and an openness to anomalies and unfinished trajectories) that marks the whole research approach. In the spirit of the string bag, the conclusions are presented as a collection of vignettes: an ensemble of ideas that can be shuffled and regrouped and, critically, remain open to conversation.

Tagged in order of appearance the vignettes are: **Weak technologies** (potentially a grappling hook for the items that follow), **Unpackaging business**, **Being feral**, **Talking shop**, **Vulnerability**, **Business as occupation**, **Juxtaposition and doublings**, **Superimpositions and interpolations**, **Models and 'magic'**, **Giving up on the future**, and **Training and maintaining**. As might be expected of a carrier bag – which may contain tools, items of sustenance, reading materials, found objects, scribbled notes – these items belong to different orders of things. They could be considered as insights, methods or practices to apply in business, concentrated on the performative effects of a prevailing business ideology and how this might be countered, materially, incrementally and from experience. Collectively, the vignettes demonstrate how the ideas behind the research were shaped through their encounter with the participants and the Feral MBA process. They link the abstractions they grapple with to tangible understandings. The vignettes are accompanied by the business

counter-materials that stand as conclusions in their own right, and are active in the world though their own channels, as working implements and items of trade.

I will venture some suggestions for the patterns or paths that might be taken through this tangle of things, linking back to the research questions and contexts (as is the PhD task) and then hand over to the reader to make their own connections. The vignettes are followed by a short consideration of evaluation and next steps.

To return to the research questions:

1) What could it mean to approach business as a medium for artistic enquiry?

2) What formats, experiments or interventions could be designed to test this proposal?

3) How might these experiments contribute to and challenge current thinking about how we do business?

4) How to begin to address the gap between a feminist, ecological conception of business and the practice of actually inhabiting that space?

In compact terms, the Feral MBA research is situated within a richly variegated field of art-business practices that demonstrate a vastly more diverse approach to doing business than that foregrounded in creative industries discourse. The counter-materials and practices of the Feral MBA take business as a medium for experiments, working specifically at the level of habit and of form. The knowledge gleaned through the programme enters the world through direct application in the participants' business lives, and through understandings that might advise business thinking in other fields: in diverse economies theory, in critical and 'outlier' practices in business training, and through art practices that work with business. At a practical level these conclusions consider: What could a small business operator do with this information? A critical business educator? An arts administrator or business advisor in the arts? An artist looking to take up business as a creative prospect? A diverse economies scholar?

Applications in business and in art

In terms of the MBA-led world and its alternatives in social and ethical business (introduced in Chapter 2.2), it is the form of the Feral MBA that is recognisably different. To ground a project in 'weak theory' attends to outliers and experiments rather than models of best

practice. The programme engages with the world in a materially different manner to the global roll-out of the MBA as a singular educational model. It responds to debates in the business school over the MBA's relevance and efficacy with a reversal of vision: to start 'where we are', from diversity, locality, complexity and the baroque level of detail that comes with lived experience, to figure things out from there. As with the alternative business Masters programmes that Bendell (2007) and Coleman (2013) describe (as referenced and outlined on pp.54-55), it is the affective and behavioural aspects of business that are the centre of attention. The additional dimension in the Feral MBA is bringing tactics and understandings from art to the business space.

The Feral MBA pilots engaged novel and experimental forms of emulsification, rupture and performance. Emulsification works as a hands-on metaphor for breaking down an overwhelming condition (the dominant ideology of business in a capitalist economy) into navigable elements. The interest in experimenting breaks from the entrepreneurial trope of disruptive innovation on the critical question of where the boundaries of the experiment are drawn, including fundamental conditions of confidence, positivity, ethics and the formulation of success. It works with an element of rupture that cuts through the bounding box of business – its constitution, meaning and desired ends – rather than fomenting disruption within these bounds. Taking the 'MBA' as a reference point goes straight for the performative dimension of business where the performance orientation of art might have particular traction. This mix of performance and performativity produces singular acts of staging that extend their effects out into the world.

Crossing into the art space (laid out in Chapter 2.4), the Feral MBA provides a working stage, a cast, a set of tools and potential actions to improvise with Cox and Bazzichelli's (2013) incitement to take up business in all its complexity as material for artistic reinvention. Within a larger field of artists working with business and economy, it engages art not just for its representational power but for its 1:1 scale capacity: a kind of art that is both what it is and an artistic proposition for what it is (Wright, 2013). This double orientation draws out the business in art practice, and vice versa. Unlike a prototype, a theory or a gallery-based artwork, the Feral MBA situates its experiments in the world, on the same plane and scale as the issues they are dealing with. The coaching performance and *Feral Business Budgets* move to replace actual coaching sessions and accounting

practices. The monetary experiments are plays on the implications of funding with real resources and relations at stake. The material practice of *radmin* offers a conduit to smuggle radically other ways of thinking about business into a working day, and to transport the administrative layer that is an integral part of doing business to its public-facing side. It is mixing Wright's (2013) theory of 1:1 scale into Ukeles (1969) maintenance perspective, taking the doubling power that art can conjure to the resourcing and relating. The idea of *radmin* is not about doing admin as art but doing it differently as admin: a fine yet critical distinction in terms of determining both the actor and the audience for this work.

Considering our own business and livelihood as the experimental territory brings in the potentially disabling prospect of risk.Yet artists are generally out on a limb already, as small business actors. The invitation to experiment opens up options to see the situations we are already in from new perspectives.

Acting with diverse economies theory

The Feral MBA materialises methods and approaches from diverse economies theory (Chapter 2.1) through practices of staging, making and trading. Rather than 'arts-based methods' to supplement a social sciences repertoire, it presents a stage to experiment in a different realm, as a business training course that embodies and enacts the potential that diverse economies theory establishes. The business counter-materials assemble a suite of unstable tools that do their own work of reframing, articulating difference and generating possibilities for action. It is taking the devices, protocols and routines of business beyond observation and analysis, as things to intervene in and remake.

That artists are effectively small businesses themselves supplies a further point of departure from the institutional contexts in which diverse economies scholarship is predominantly produced – with an understanding that the resources that resource the thinking also 'matter"[159]. The business and livelihood perspectives of the itinerant artist are substantially different to those of the academic profession with its particular demands and incentives of salaries, pensions and research funding.

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[159] 'To extend Haraway's (2016, p.25) chant: 'It matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges. It matters what relations relate relations. It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories'.

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The Feral MBA makes a case for thinking about business *from* the business space, not considered from a separate economy.

Business as a vehicle

Across these mixed contexts, the Feral MBA is positioned in response to Bateson's (1972) insight that habit-level change is as difficult as it is vital. Taking business as a medium or vehicle to engage with Bateson's dilemma – how to actually feel and act in a relational understanding of the world – could be the programme's defining sleight of hand. The kind of change it is working with is incremental and under the skin. It returns to the tenacious question of scale (Chapter 2.3), and how to reconcile these activities (minor, local, interior, incremental, hard to monitor) with the political urgencies they respond to.

Speaking to scale

My response to the idea that only the large-scale can be transformative is the qualitative difference that the Feral MBA represents and delivers. The programme produced a kind of affective transfer through its scale of operations and one-to-one connections (Chapter 4). It supplied an opportunity for richness, diversity and encounter, with a depth and quality of complexity and interdependence that disappears as soon as you move outside this finely-tuned scale. This quality is active across all my work as an artist and trader but was sharpened and formalised through the production of the Feral MBA. The trick is to mark this granular scale as also consequential. It requires a retreat from the kinds of bold, defining narratives that business and business education more often expect.

Law (2015) has challenged the logic of a 'one-world world': a liberal modernity that tolerates a multiplicity of belief systems from within a single container world which represents the 'real' reality. Law suggests we instead inhabit multiple, incompatible realities whose categories and meanings may not be coherently shared, meaning that there is no overarching logic or liberal institution that could mediate between them. Different practices enact different realities: the 'pluriverse', in Arturo Escobar's (2018) term. To work together in these

necessarily fractured spaces requires ways of knowing and doing that are 'contingent, modest, practical, and thoroughly down-to-earth' (Law, 2015 p.128).

The vignettes that follow are suggestive of the tricks we might need, for the challenge of making everyday processes meet the urgencies of transitional conditions.

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Eleven vignettes

<u>Vignette 1. Weak technologies</u>

To position what the Feral MBA is doing, I extrapolate from weak theory (Gibson-Graham, 2014) to '*weak technologies*': a move that brings together a 'weak' knowledge approach with a material one. The idea of weak technologies responds to the models, toolkits, metrics and heuristics that are prevalent in business training and advice, with routines, practices and devices that resist settling into new packaged shapes.

To think beyond business as usual, people[160] are reaching for alternative business models from management toolkits for organisational change[161] to legal organisational form such as B-corps, co-ops and CICs. This the stuff of business training – both in the MBA-led world and in social/ethical alternatives. These devices serve as compact forms of knowledge that might stand up to the performativity of mainstream business ideology with their own counterweight of authority. Such packaged formats provide a valuable shorthand for action – for example in the way that legal organisational form encodes a set of business principles and aspirations so that the organisation need not think these up anew, in the process of each business day or activity[162]. At the same time,

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[160]   'People' here applies to a broad observation of peers. It includes participants in the Feral MBA and other related workshops conducted in the process of this research, people I have coached, mentored, those I have just talked to about their business interests and also my observation of the way people approach business training in general, including in social/ethical in business where a model-formed knowledge exerts a particular power.

[161]   These often appear as a kind of 'branded' theory – examples include *Teal Organisation*, (Laloux, 2014), *U-Theory* (Scharmer, 2009) and *Holacracy* (Robertson, 2015) – each delivered with their own suite of books, websites, webinars and toolkits.

[162]   See for example legal scholar Bronwen Morgan's (2018) discussion of the way that certain legal forms work to embed social and environmental narratives into economic organisation through materials such as articles of incorporation. Morgan focuses on the often-overlooked expressive (rather than instrumental) dimension of legal

these models and templates do not represent the diversity of shapes and motivations that business takes, from community organisations to corner shops.

For the Feral MBA, a model-formed knowledge is insufficient for the same reasons that it carries power. Disentangled from the complexities of making, abstracted and made portable for widespread adoption, the devices of packaged knowledge are designed to be used by 'everyone'. It is a kind of knowledge that is 'amenable to travel' (Strathern 2004a p.17). Yet for a programme proposing to think about 'business' as an open question, a model-based knowledge loses its usefulness, and can override other modes of thinking (experiential, colloquial, tentative and emergent). At worst, the model becomes another disembodied master view that seeks to explain everything (Haraway, 1988). The specialism of art is to stage things so that we *do* need to think about them[163] – with the help of assistive technologies: a stage, special effects, props and a different mindset.

To the extent that tools or technologies were produced through the Feral MBAs research, these are contingent and unstable. Rather than offer new solutions they materialise an approach. The business counter-materials appear not as finished products but as techniques or protocols to be sampled and varied. Their processes and artefacts are site-specific, inhabited and incomplete. The way they were introduced and experimented with through the programme encouraged participants to continue the process of sampling and experimenting with the technologies they encounter in their own business lives.

Vignette 2. Unpackaging business

I visualise the Feral MBA as a process of unpackaging. In e-commerce, 'fulfilment' describes the third-party industry of warehousing, packing, shipping, tracking and returns. These are the largely unseen labours of supply that the bootstrapping small business(or 'side hustler') takes upon themselves, often as an extra marker of overwork.[164] In the Feral MBA, the interest is perhaps in *'unfulfilment':* keeping the assorted paraphernalia of business and its delivery mechanisms unwrapped and in play. It is not about rejecting packaged knowledge per se, rather the Feral MBA

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organisational form.
[163] 'Problem-opening', as a colleague once described it (Rich, 2022)
[164] Fulfilment is the stuff of the *Cube Cola* business: installing and maintaining the online shop, the Paypal integration, the collection of padded envelopes salvaged from other deliveries, labelling and taping things shut, serial post office visits, dealing with customer emails, Customs forms and the occasional breakage not least the massive administrative rupture of Brexit.

does not seek to determine a whole process of transformation in business but to host and maintain a specific stage of it (in both senses of the word), where transformation becomes possible. What is up- or down-stream from this process – with whom or what the project will negotiate its interdependence – is also part of the action (and will be considered as part of the research next steps, outlined at the end of this chapter).

Leaving things unpackaged enables incommensurable understandings to coexist without resolution, in a 'pluriversal' sense (Escobar, 2018), to be managed through ongoing engagement rather than reconciled (Law, 2015). What happens in the space once things are unwrapped is to foster the conditions for difference in business to emerge.

Vignette 3. Being feral

In both Feral MBA pilots, I observed a broad aversion to confident business shapes, not only in relation to the language and processes of mainstream enterprise but to those of ethical alternatives. There was also a general enthusiasm for the 'feral', in all its ambivalences: its *'in-and against-ness'* in one participant's words. I am interested in the way that the icon of the feral can act as a carrier for the opportunity offered by diverse economies theory: to switch the 'ethical' in business from its common conception of 'business for good' – with its vague[165] and disabling standards of virtue, both selective in the relations it accounts for, and substantially unrealistic – to an ongoing act of choice over which one has agency, in Gibson-Graham's (2006b) terms. In an ecological understanding of the world in which everything is interdependent, it is 'implausible', in Gray and Milne's (2004) assessment, for a single endeavour – or a category of them – to be ethical as a stand-alone characteristic. But if being ethical is not a state of virtue but a continually negotiated, co-implicated process of how to think and act as different kinds of economic subjects – a doing rather than a being – it suggests an expansive role that business, as a medium, could play. The feral as an avatar manifests this agency in pigeon form.

Figure 39: Feral pigeon icon

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[165] Cox and Bazzichelli (2013) point to the near-entire absorption of 'ethical' business back into mainstream business presentation.

<u>Vignette 4. Talking shop</u>

> I've been on a lot of panels that talk about this stuff[166] but without any conclusions
> (*Inception* participant, ingress coaching session).

This comment hovered at the edges of my thinking throughout the research. The *feral business coaching* gets away from 'talking shop' by doing exactly that: in coaching, talking is all that 'happens' but the process grounds the talk in bodies and in lives[167]. It is a kind of discussion that is geared for action or works towards a to-do list, albeit one that might occupy a psychological, mythical or micro dimension.

The knowledge it produced is in the first place embedded in situ, in the participants' understanding of business: their own and the world's: the accounts reported in Chapter 4 capture only an echo of this. This kind of knowledge is dispersed and dynamic, it is messily transmitted and needs to be embodied or routinised and continually revived. The outcomes may not be easily reported or collated: it is a kind of learning with diffuse outcomes and timelines.

There is another, more reportable type of knowledge in the process and its effects. Diverse economies theorist Jenny Cameron takes up Latour's (2004, p.205) idea of 'learning to be affected' as a mode of collective, conversational, embodied and iterative learning that could start to change human behaviour in the overwhelming context of climate change (Cameron, Manhood and Pomfrett, 2011)[168]. The *feral business coaching* approach stages something analogous in the business zone, providing opportunities to speak and listen that move the kind of thinking that normally goes on within the confines of a single business or livelihood entity into common concern. What happened in the active listening sessions and the *Feral Business*

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[166]   The speaker was referring to ongoing public debates in the arts on the subject of arts livelihoods.
[167]   The *feral business coaching* is also a technology designed to remain unpackaged, not for wide scale distribution but to be practised and experimented with in situ.
[168]   Cameron applies Latour's concept to a community garden research project that unfolded through a series of bus-trip workshops. Community gardeners had the opportunity to visit and discuss each others' gardens in depth, becoming sensitive to the differences between them. Cameron describes the process as a performative form of research that is collective and experiential, with the potential to move people to act.

Clinics was significant not just for its potential for action but in how it made us feel[169]. It recasts business training as an affective process, where becoming sensitive to one's own working conditions and those of others is the first step in starting to work differently.

Reflecting on the difficulty that people encounter in breaking out of the hegemonic formations they also resist, such as the separation of economy from ecology, Miller (2019 p.137) suggests:

> One would have to risk what one *is*—and thus risk a certain form of extinction—to go against one's habitat. The political question, then, becomes not simply that of cultivating courage and dissent but also of *constituting different habitats* in which other forms of action and relation become more possible.

The Feral MBA is generating habitat not as physical infrastructure, but in protocols, intentions and relations, through processes of staging and coaching, to frame a space in which habits of thinking can change.

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[169] A debrief practice repeated at the end of the clinics and active listening sessions asked people to share not the content of the sessions but how they felt the process went.

Figure 40: Inception closing weekend Phys-ed

Vignette 5. Vulnerability and interdependence

Vulnerability is one curious artefact to surface through these processes that merits a close reading[170]. In the pilots, people referred to vulnerability as an opening rather than a weakness (its primary association in business). It was described through the experience of expressing uncertainty to others: 'being vulnerable and being listened to' in one person's words.

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[170]   While events of the COVID-19 pandemic might suggest obvious cause for vulnerability as a focus, the term entered the conversation through the *Inception* pilot in February 2020, when the pandemic's effects had not yet started to bite. I also note that in *Succession*, people were using the term to reflect on their work patterns and histories, rather than in connection to current events.

Its prevalence might be linked to its recent popularisation in other discourses. Adrienne Maree Brown (2017) associates vulnerability with mutual support in Black activism. In management literature, Berné Brown (2018, p.1) advocates for embracing vulnerability's qualities of 'uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure' as leadership resources, although within clearly-defined bounds and towards clearly-marked business ends. Keeping these connections in mind, I am curious to investigate the emphasis on vulnerability in the Feral MBA via a trail of thought that threads through ecology and interdependence to emerge somewhere new (in business terms).

In anthropology, Marja-Liisa Honkasolo (2018) defines vulnerability as the exposure of an entity to its environment: a lack of control that also 'holds the promise of being transformed by new encounters' (Honkasolo, 2018 p.4). Tsing (2015, p.20) links vulnerability to precarity and a state of indeterminacy that is always and necessarily unbounded: 'Precarity is the condition of being vulnerable to others … thinking through precarity makes it evident that indeterminacy also makes life possible'. It means not being able to live to plan, or within modernist concepts of advancement and progress. Interdependence is fundamental to this understanding, along with an expansive and uncertain rendition of community, characterised by philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) not through affinity or proximity but a non-exclusionary 'being-in-common'. In diverse economies theory, Miller redefines 'economy' as the negotiation of livelihoods amongst 'vulnerable, mutually-exposed beings' (Miller, 2019, p139). Miller invokes Timothy Morton's (2010) ecological vision of interdependence as 'the notion – terrifying when taken seriously – that everything is connected to everything else' (Miller, 2019 p.124).

An ecological rendering of vulnerability as interdependence makes for a significant departure from an autonomist Marxist discourse of precarity that has become prominent in the arts (Fisher, 2018; McRobbie, 2016; Bazzichelli, 2011; Standing, 2011). In this context, precarity[171] is associated with the job insecurity and exploitative working conditions to which the artist as flexible worker is subject. This position has been problematised for conflating the insecurities of art work with the perils faced by other, substantially more hazardous forms of human existence such as seasonal migrant labour, where a daily experience of exposure and exclusion has been normalised (Vishmidt, 2020; 2005). However, the assumption of precarity as intrinsically harmful is generally taken as

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[171]   Bazzichelli (2011) uses the term 'precarious subjectivities' to characterise a state of being produced through te exploitative labour structures and insecure, contract-based work that are prevalent in a knowledge economy. Here, precarity is represented as a (new) class of existence rather than either a temporary state of being or a universal condition.

given[172]. This stance is understandable, given a widespread recognition in the arts of working conditions that are not producing stable livelihoods. Responses include seeking higher and/or more reliable incomes for artists, through establishing rates of pay (Artists' Union England, 2021) or more radical initiatives calling for an artists' universal living wage (Pledger, 2020). Yet to focus on a monetary solution risks the kind of accounting that remains confined above the waterline, in an *'icebergean'* sense[173]. Bringing in an ecological perspective is not to overlook the financial side of things, but to break the frame of how a beneficial economy is determined.

Tsing's (2015) ecological perspective threads together vulnerability, precarity and indeterminacy as markers of the essential capacity of things to be transformed through encounter. Applied to business, it means exchanging Brown's (2018) templates for engaging vulnerability as an instrumental leadership resource for something far less contained. An ecological understanding means that the unit of livelihood is not the individual, or the 'entity' concept in accounting (Milne and Grey, 2013) that places the single organisation at the centre of attention, but 'organism plus environment' in Bateson's (1972 p.489) sense. It means exchanging the social capital of the network[174] for an understanding of interdependence as a necessary condition of life (Miller, 2014), not a set of affiliations that are chosen or built. An ecological reading of vulnerability means being interdependent without boundaries – in Morton's (2010) sense – including with those entities and practices one might contest. It returns to Kleesattel's (2021) understanding of maintenance art as a form of feminist institutional critique where entanglement in antithetical systems is not the problem but the essence of the art practice.

Vignette 6. Business as occupation

The Feral MBA is 'unpackaging the ideology of business on the ground of the ideology itself, not as a separate domain or utopian dream', a PhD supervisor notes. It is tremendously difficult to change

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[172]   With exceptions: for example Critical Art Ensemble (2012) propose forging new alliances between endangered plants and endangered social or community spaces (drawing on a history of such tactics from environmental activism) in ways that leverage the precarity of each for mutual protection.

[173]   I borrow the word 'icebergian' from Böhm and Szreder's (2020b) application of the diverse economies iceberg to the art market and the unseen economies that support it.

[174]   In its standard use, networks presume the interaction of independent nodes, ties and edges (Escobar, 2018). In contemporary business practice there is also the emphasis on 'networking': the network as activity and commodity, where building relations produces social (and economic) capital. In ecology, Morton (2010) discards the idea of a networked ecosystem as a vastly simplified version of ecology (one that reproduces an aggregative market logic) for the concept of the 'mesh', a way of describing the radical interdependence of all living and non-living things.

our thinking about livelihoods from the inside – conversely there isn't anywhere 'outside' livelihoods to think from. Knowledge-making, like everything else, is situated within livelihood practices. This understanding forms the foundation of the staging of the Feral MBA, its operating procedures and the series of doublings it cultivates.

Vignette 7. Juxtaposition and doublings

..thinking about love and care and business together... (*Inception* Assistant GG, ingress coaching session).

The project of establishing the Feral MBA proceeded through a series of doublings: the bringing together of things that do not merge. The pilots were simultaneously fieldwork and artwork, the coaching-as-research had the added dimension of the deal, the coaching performance doubles as coaching session and artist's talk, the *Feral Business Budgets* enact poetic effects and project management on the same page. In each instance, the different functions do not resolve or cancel out but add capacity to each other, with the excess or 'plus' (Sholette, 2015 p.98) that art can bring to everyday things. The doublings dramatise a cognitive dissonance that the project is built on – its organising schism – between the complex livelihoods people inhabit and the narrow band of options provided by an economic discourse focused on the individualised trajectories of personal finance, wage claims, mortgages and investments.

The juxtaposition of words and worlds in the 'Feral MBA' and '*radmin'* (as radical administration) provided an initial leap of association, opening new space for people to think about things that had not been on the business agenda, or to think about them differently. The terms worked as a shorthand for those participating in the programme and broadcast an intention outside it. They bring together unfamiliar associations, while articulating practices that already exist: one participant described *radmin* as 'a language and a context for what I am already doing'.

The application of juxtaposition in a business training programme could be considered through Coleman's experience. In the context of the struggle of her MSc in Responsibility and

Business Practice to survive in the antithetical environs of a traditional management school, Coleman (2013 p.261) writes:

> Bateson suggests that form is a primary mode of communication, which is understood analogically, in patterned form, rather than propositionally, by the rational mind... Significant change involves change at this "meta" level, a change of context as well as content (Bateson, 1972).

Coleman's reflection brings form – art's speciality area – to the forefront of the change process. In applying understandings from art to the format of business training, the Feral MBA overlays a context in which paradox is a familiar habitat onto one where it represents the kind of confounding failure that may shut down the experiment altogether (as the demise of Coleman's programme suggests). Positioning the Feral MBA as (also) art is the programme's primary juxtaposition and the thing that lends it traction: in turning the tools of business into a kind of art practice with operating power to bind back into the business realm.

In the pilots, juxtaposition worked as a temporary disordering device to shake up habitual thinking. To extend the knowledge gleaned from the programme into the world, at the granular level of habit and gesture that Bateson marks out, calls for a different, more enduring mechanism.

Vignette 8. Superimpositions and interpolations

Another provocation that stayed with me throughout the research was that of an *Inception* participant: how to extend the 'magical thinking' produced in the Feral MBA outside the protected environment of the programme/lab (p.164). My observation is that this took the form of a perceptual shift – adding other, parallel business realities to existing ones – rather than a comprehensive transformation[175]. On exit from the programme, people expressed new perspectives in fragile and subtle forms, as a kind of superimposition on or interpolation with everyday life.

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[175] While a transformative experience was reported by several people (both at the juncture of the programme ending and looking back on it later) I take this with a grain of salt. From a coaching perspective, change is complex and nonlinear, and the coach needs to be wary of either taking credit for the achievements of the coachee or responsibility for their setbacks.

This phenomenon does not settle into a single shape: it also appeared as an overlay. Like Julier's (2013) 'co-articulation' (p.136), a superimposition-interpolation-overlay can produce new understandings, opening up possibilities in spaces that previously felt locked. Like Artigas' (2001) *The Rules of the Game* (p.136), the Feral MBA interleaves different protocols and contexts in the same frame and time[176]. Like Miéville's (2009) *The City and the City* (p.136)*,* it might be experienced as removing a filter from an existing situation[177]. And like the reframing actions of diverse economies theory, it brings activities and relationships that were rendered invisible back into view.

For illustration I offer two pieces of anecdotal evidence from the pilots' aftermath.

In Tasmania, in the months following the Feral MBA, a farming partnership took inspiration from their experience of *Inception* events (amongst other things) to reconsider their relationship with the Australian benefits system, not as antithetical to the radical philosophies that guide their farming practice but constitutive to its larger ecosystem. In collaboration with a clerical agent inside the benefits office, they filed a successful claim for the Farm Household Allowance[178]', a long-term basic income that will keep the experimental side of their business afloat.

In Plymouth, two *Succession* participants acted on knowledge and confidence gained through the programme (amongst other inputs) to make a successful pitch to a business incubation programme whose methods, objectives and proponents might appear spectacularly opposed to those of the Feral MBA. Winning the endorsement provided their business with vital institutional support to apply for an entrepreneurship visa for its co-director[179].

These two events demonstrate the kinds of multi-agent exploits that carry the learning from the Feral MBA into other contexts and scenes. To consider such collusions as a space of potential (as their protagonists did), rather than a confounding psychological schism, could stand as a vital

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[176] With its full superimposition of a Mexican football and American basketball game, Artigas' project is about coexistence, not assimilation.

[177] Miéville's book unfolds as a detective tale, through which his protagonist unlearns a deeply entrained not-noticing of the two superimposed cities he already inhabits.

[178] Services Australia, *Farm Household Allowance* https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/individuals/services/centrelink/farm-household-allowance. Last accessed 22/06/22.

[179] Gov.uk *Entrepreneur visa (Tier 1)*https://www.gov.uk/tier-1-entrepreneur. Last accessed 22/06/22.

'result' of the Feral MBA. The programme rearranges the business ecosystem by uncovering assets and allies in areas that may previously have appeared hostile, irrelevant or out of bounds. It does not concentrate on critiquing troubled systems or designing utopian alternatives, nor is it agonism in Mouffe's (2014) sense of an active opposition. Instead, like a pigeon, it scavenges in common spaces for communal resources to build something different.

As evidence of outcomes, the events described above are designedly slight. I am withholding from making evidence claims that detail the many exemplary business projects represented in the pilots (and produced subsequently), their hardy and dazzling shopfronts, in favour of these minor, paradox-holding, back-room manoeuvres. The superimposition-interpolation-overlay potential of the Feral MBA is minimal, occasional, portable, possibly subliminal. The change it represents it is partial and intermittent. It draws out tangible opportunities for experiments, exploits and trade, side-stepping Tsing (2015) and Cox and Bazzichelli's (2013) suspicions, that such activities will be inevitably recuperated by the status quo. It is a means of thinking that does not assume the inevitability of a dominant power, or that recognises that 'co-option runs both ways' (Gibson, 2016)[180].

The 'ways of seeing'[181] that this superimposition supplies are worlds away from the certainty expected in business, its upbeat delivery and confident metrics. What became operational in the Feral MBA was the opposite: the '*anti-pitch*' as one participant described it. Askew to the singular determinations of best practice, it instead admits ' the inherent paradoxes of business as a political project', in Cox and Bazzichelli's (2013 p.19) words.

The capacity to hold the contradictions is not an easy one. Over the run of the programme, participants dipped in and out of a paradox-holding state, and I can think of as many counter-examples, in contrast to the micro-triumphant stories above, of people struggling to reconcile the old binaries or electing to stay within them. It attests to the 'difficulty of changing epistemological habit' (Bateson, 1972 p.486), at the level of the senses and of non-rational modes of thought, that is the project's operating task.

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[180]   My notes from a Q+A session at a talk by Katherine Gibson (hosted by Kathrin Böhm) in response to another question frequently put to diverse economies theory, that economic practices that resist capitalist logic will inevitably be recuperated by capitalism. Böhm, K. *A Haystack on Icebergs with Katherine Gibson*. http://h-a-y-s-t-a-c-k-s.net/a-haystack-on-icebergs-with-katherine-gibson. Last accessed 22/06/22.

[181]   In art critic John Berger's (1972) concept of a vision that is active and relational: we situate and constitute ourselves through it.

<u>Vignette 9. From models to 'magic'</u>

The thinking circuit that follows is a stretch. It takes its cue from participant reflections on the administration of the Feral MBA that hinted at 'mystical' attributes and a 'special kind of power' (p.143). It threads back to the CERN scholar's joking reference to artists 'being magicians' (p.92), and forward to the critical question of how the 'magical thinking' from the programme might find traction in the world. It responds to a central quandary of how to act in a massively performative field of business without succumbing to its methods or becoming imperceptible. It also takes up the question of scale and how intricate, nonscalable projects might have consequence.

There is a dual process in artistic research in which discursive understandings run alongside 'bodily interventions, structural literacy and imaginative jumps' (Krauss, 2019 p.492) – a good description of the embodied processes and leaps of thinking in the Feral MBA events. Yet this characterisation does not get to the excesses and enigmas that art can also produce. One way to describe the experience of the pilots is that something happened – a granular kind of transformation in the pilot groups that was both elusive and stage-managed. I will approach this phenomenon side-on, with a wildcard – 'magic' – engaged here for its qualities as a black box, for what it might activate. A stand-in for some mechanism that can be left purposefully opaque.

Naming the project the 'Feral MBA' is a play on words and a play with form. Along with a remix of concepts and contexts, it carries with it a more covert quality of a fait accompli or self-fulfilling prophecy (Callon, 2007) that brings what it names into being. In the language of performativity, it 'makes what it states' (Bourdieu, 1990 p.109). The name sends a signal that identified and catalysed something in people. It is a self-selecting cohort, but the same goes for any MBA. Performativity is key to this transfer: the special powers attributed to the way I ran the programme are a concerted part of its act. It is a confidence trick that calls for a suspension of disbelief, in the dramatic convention of overlooking the limitations of a medium in order to immerse in a world. *If we all decide to believe this is an MBA, what then might be possible?*

Figure 41: Economics as an uncertain art
Image credit: Chiz Williams
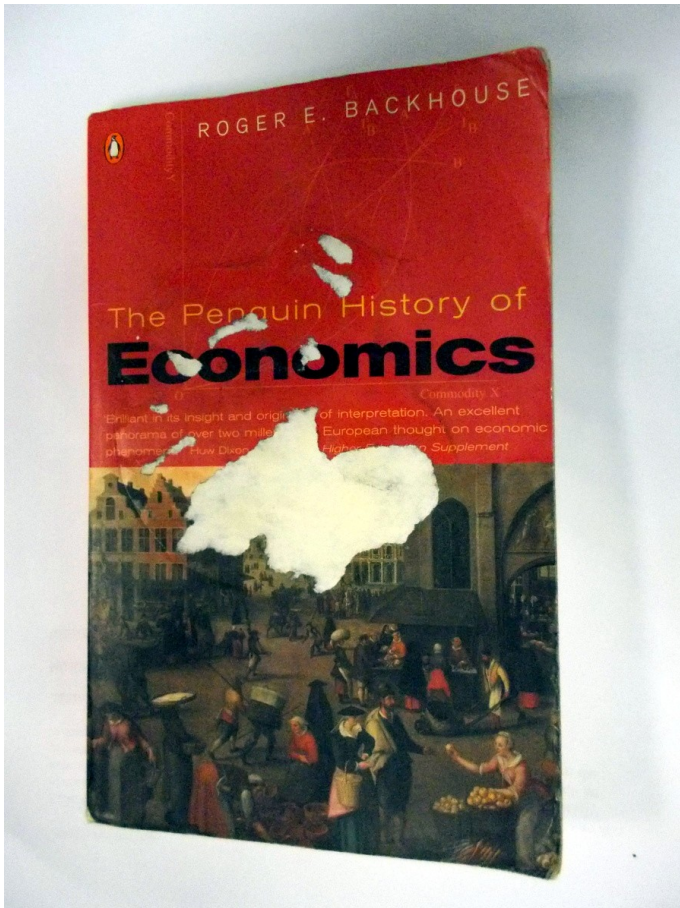
For Bourdieu (1990 p.110), performative language carries its own 'magical efficacy', by which certain forms of institutional authority empower certain words and activities to appear as facts. In Butler's (1999 p.120) queer/feminist vision this 'social magic' is not exclusive to existing authorities but can be expropriated and subverted, from unauthorised sites. A performative approach takes 'economic reality', as crystallised and reified in the mortar of the MBA, as itself a contingent work of storytelling. Recasting the economy as a plausible fiction, rather than settled reality, opens the opportunity to construct other narratives with their own devices and activities that are just as credible– which is where the artist as myth-maker (p.68) comes in.

Art has its own history with magicians, exemplified in the shamanic character of performance artists such as Joseph Beuys or Marina Abramovic. These artists' transcendent acts[182] in large part rest on confidence. To inhabit a space with attitude is part of the performance of art, alongside a capacity for illusionism or tricksterism. The Yes Men's outrageous stunts project a facsimile of reality, followed by a reveal. Yet my interest in magic is not in the personal charisma of the artist-shaman, but in the way that art's carrying power is dispersed into props, protocols, routines, staging, the assistants and the crowd. It is magic as a form of stage-management that is coming to confidence in business with its own box of tricks, part-channelling and part-divesting from the artist's spell-casting abilities[183].

The essential work of the Feral MBA – its theory of how things might change – is to open up new ways of seeing in business, critically at the micro-scale of habit. My hunch is that some kind of heightened capacities or asymmetrical powers are needed, beyond or even against the workaday capabilities of toolkits and models, to counter the excessive holding power of the dominant business imaginary. In the Feral MBA, the coaching protocols, monetary experiments and *radmin* devices worked to unsettle expected patterns of relating and administrating. They also perform as rituals, talismans and tricks to carry over into daily life where traces of their magical efficacy might persist.

The act of emulsification as rendered in *Cube Cola* (p.111), is magic extraordinaire. It warps the fabric of things so that a kitchen-sink operation can take on a world-leading beverage behemoth. At the same time it is an everyday practice of transformation, familiar to anyone who has made a salad dressing. This is magic as material practice (something that the *Coaching by Numbers* cards (p.131) also act out) you follow some steps and its transformatory capacity works[184].

The work of maintenance art provides another way of looking at this energetic transfer. Considering Ukeles' work with the New York sanitation department, art critic Jillian Steinhauer (2017) observes that '[a]rtists – even disempowered female ones – had (and still have) the social capital to turn their maintenance work into maintenance art, simply by saying so; [sanitation workers] do not'. Steinhauer's distinction is a critique that the next generation of maintenance artists takes on. When Casco reinterpret Ukeles' maintenance artwork within their own team of administrative-curatorial

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[182] Sharing a room with a coyote as Beuys did (Wallis, 2003) or locking eyes in silence with members of the public for 8-hour shifts in Abramovic's case (MoMA, 2010)

[183] As my 'disappearing act' from the *Succession* programme (p.104) managed to successfully trial.

[184] For more on the concept of emulsification as a contribution to knowledge and practice, see the Afterword, p.

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staff (p.73) they are de-linking the spell of art from the aura of the artist and investing it or mutualising it in the situation as organisational routine.

I end this thinking trajectory with a closing act of vernacular magic. The monetary experiments that traversed the Feral MBA take the challenges of funding our work as something to conjure with, in more or less spectacular or integrative ways. The volume and variety of reactions that these experiments engendered, from confusion to outrage to intrigue[185] indicate both the attraction and the volatility of the prospect. Messing with money is controversial, as the public response to art/pop duo The KLF's infamous performance of burning one million pounds of their own earnings in 1994 attests[186]. The KLF are a hard act to follow: you need a million pounds and it helps to be commercial music superstars to attract attention. The Feral MBA monetary experiments by contrast are easily replicable with the night's door takings and a bucket[187]. The trick does not require excessive inputs to work, yet generates its own excesses in the resonant traces it leaves behind it.

A further observation is that the unfolding accounting extravaganza of the *Feral Business Budget*, also about money, did not ignite controversy at all. As a business technology, money carries a charge which administration (intimately related) generally does not. Articulating *radmin* might be the Feral MBA's other enduring sleight of hand. As a practice, admin is peer-to-peer, has a wealth of found materials to work with, can be scaled to the variety of different office contexts and energy budgets, is revisited as a daily practice (often on company time) and is anyway necessary.

Vignette 10: Giving up on the future

In a recent conversation, a CERN colleague contemplated (in relation to her own academic institute's key performance indicators) how 'success' might be restructured as not something 'out there', a trajectory to be reached for or the achievement of an intended goal in the future, but as the fulfilment of current obligations, cares and concerns. Carrying a 'weak' commitment

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[185]   See Viriconium Palace (2020), included in RADMIN Reader 2020, p.12 (*Counter-materials Ring Binder* p.9B).

[186]   The artists travelled to a Scottish island, built a bonfire with the cash and filmed the conflagration) which formed the basis for a film, a tour and a book, 'K Foundation Burn A Million Quid,' collecting public reactions of delight, irritation, hostility and disbelief, along with the artists' own expressions of ambivalence towards what they had done (Adil, nd).

[187]   For other, more grass roots plays with money see *Who Wants to Be..?* by UK art collective The People Speak, which took the shape of a deliberative democracy game show, in which the audience would debate and vote on how to spend a collective pool of cash. V2 *Test_lab: Who Wants to Be...?* https://v2.nl/events/test_lab-who-wants-to-be. Last accessed 22/06/22.

through to the question of what success might look like calls for extra mettle. It requires Haraway's (2016) 'unthinkable' goggles: to cultivate an open-ended, interdependent take on (one's own) business success means making a host of other expectations impossible to think with.

For Yoruba Indigenous scholar and educator Bayo Akomolafe (2021):

> The point is we cannot risk being successful; we cannot risk doing everything we set out to do. I mean, it is beautiful to achieve what we set out to do, to see things happen, to dream good dreams, to do something with our time. The success I speak of is not so much the text as it is the book, the ways we are caught up in patterns of behaving that prohibit and are insensitive to the imperatives of loss, of dying well, of losing ground, of becoming-other, of being disturbed, of being met and defeated by things that exceed us. We cannot risk smooth sailing from here. We cannot risk arriving; we can't risk being saved if transformation is our longing. To be saved is to restore the recognizable, and reinscribe the formula of the same: this is the very grammar of unbothered closure that is implicated in the heating up of our oceans, in the pandemics, and even in the cyclical repeatability of contemporary justice-seeking activisms and liberal politics, when it uses the same tools of stuckness to create an ethical totality that yields to nothing other than its sense of righteousness.

It is a tall order, and far from the 'fail fast' tropes of startup entrepreneurship where even the failure of the whole enterprise is subject to safeguards, such as the legal and social protections afforded to bankruptcy. Akomolafe's failure is of a different order, one in which the containing environment itself prefigures collapse. His injunction speaks to the aspiration at the heart of the Feral MBA, to apply the prospect of a radically reframed economy to the daily actualities of business. It means that the coordinates of success must also be open to rupture.

Akomolafe's words are a philosophical statement rather than a to-do list to apply to the detritus of everyday life. The kind of change the Feral MBA is negotiating seeks to make the old ideas of success in business unthinkable, in ways that are intermittent, pragmatic and piecemeal.

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Vignettte 11: Training and maintaining

That change would be approached through practices of training and maintaining returns to the spectre of scale. Anthropologist Shannon Mattern (2018) suggests that for maintenance to challenge innovation as the dominant economic paradigm, a bigger stage is needed. By contrast, weak theory offers ways to think about dominant ideologies other than scaling up to meet them. Making things material and habitual is different (and extra) to making them large. Exchanging new paradigms for new habits calls for a smaller but as-consequential stage.

Training, in its popular forms of recreational arts and sports (such as boxing clubs and pottery schools), thrives on repetitions[188].The need to continually repeat the practice is not a sign of failure: it makes the practice what it is. For Casco (p.73) it is appreciating the labour of fixing things that go wrong as part of the purpose of the art institution, not something that impedes it. What happens in the business '*is*' the project, in a Feral MBA participant's words (p.162). The maintenance orientation of the Feral MBA curriculum challenges the fixation in contemporary business training and advice on innovation, benchmarks and progress. Instead it is a process where results may be slow to surface, or to determine. Yet a commitment to weak knowledge forms does not mean that the knowledge produced through the Feral MBA cannot travel.

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Hitchhiking in Tasmania

At the end of year three of the PhD research (still in Tasmania, with international borders yet to open), I took a break from writing to go bushwalking on the Tasman Peninsula. I caught a ride back with a Rio Tinto engineer, who had just completed an MBA at the University of Queensland, with mixed feelings, ('wide and shallow' in his summary). He asked me about the PhD, so I told him about the Feral MBA. It was a long conversation in which we broadly agreed on the incendiary threat of climate collapse but not on the remedies. In the end, it was the example of the Sail Cargo Alliance (pp.18,32) that cut through my host's strong narrative that only the large-scale technologies

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[188]   Something that the 'Phys-ed' practice materialised in miniature or homeopathic form.

of capitalist industry can provide credible ways forward.

The scrappy agency of sail cargo operators transporting 70-tonne consignments of wine and olive oil on wooden ships from Portugal to Cornwall is not just a charismatic idea, it is action already existing in the world: a fact on the waves. Its carrying power is despite or perhaps because of its asymmetry with the scale of the maritime emissions problem[189]. The sail cargo project is open to some easily-levelled critiques: the commodities it transports appear as luxury goods when held against supermarket prices[190] and many of its operators do not address the foundations of past trade exploitation it builds on[191]. But viewed through the understandings of the Feral MBA, it is a vivid example of a kind of ethical practice that is partial, exploratory and profoundly interdependent, rather than 'good'. It materialises one side of a highly political debate in action[192].

Some of my best artist talks have happened while hitchhiking. From a resource perspective it is singing for your supper: the conversation is the deal. It makes for another kind of overlay, as a momentary mingling of worlds. Sharing understandings from the Feral MBA with the Rio Tinto engineer points to one of the routes via which knowledge from the programme might be communicated outside it – along with their limits. The scale that the Feral MBA operates at does not overpower the engineer's logic but it does slice actionable openings into other worlds and relations. It recalls the Feral MBA participant's experience of communicating the value of her business to the business advisor (p.163), and their mutual understanding that it could be 'truly radical but [also] a real thing'. It is using the singular stories of economic diversity (Tsing, 2012) to share what is concrete and vivid in business to 'infect other economic sites or scales' (Gibson, 1999, p.4).

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[189] The International Maritime Organisation (2020) reports an increase in total shipping emissions and in the carbon intensity of international shipping from 2012 levels, with further increases projected. The contribution of ocean-going transport to total global greenhouse gas emissions is also on the rise.

[190] Although this disparity is subject to change: at time of writing global trade disruptions have applied significant inflationary price pressures to food commodities across the board.

[191] Some of its technologies, routes and corporate forms trace back the Atlantic triangular trade between Europe and the Caribbean.

[192] For researcher and sail trainee Christiaan de Beukelaer (2021), the change that sail cargo acts out equates to reducing scale of the shipping industry by slowing it down, fundamentally changing the equation of what would get shipped and why. It is a substantially different approach to that o f the 'ecomodernists' or 'green growth' lobby, who are campaigning to deploy wind-assist propulsion technologies across the whole shipping industry (International Windships Association, 2021). The latter would significantly reduce transport emissions, while leaving the operations of the industry (its shipping speeds, volumes and business models) intact. The micro-operations of the Sail Cargo Alliance will never deliver the aggregate emissions cuts required to meet the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) global transport goals. Yet (in de Beukelaer's assessment) change on that scale also requires a radical rethinking of the business of shipping, of the kind that sail cargo represents.

It is also change focused in the moment and the process of encounter. The ethical choice to be a different economic subject 'start(s) where we are' (Gibson-Graham, 2006b p.196), and one of the places where change is negotiated is in person and in action. Entangling the engineer in the sail cargo story, with its outsized anecdotes and human-scale relations performs a shift from an optimising mindset to one where other ways of thinking might stick.

Figure 42: Hitchhiking in Tasmania

Evaluations

Reflecting on the outcomes of her MSc programme, Coleman (2013 p.265) suggests a process of assessment from action research: 'has any organisational problem been solved, or has something changed as a result of this work?... have self-help competencies been developed by those involved?... is there some contribution to knowledge that can be claimed?'. Running these criteria by participant projects, such as the examples from Tasmania and Plymouth supplied above (p.185), suggests evidence of change in each category. Yet there could be more useful ways to evaluate the programme. For one thing, the orientation of the Feral MBA

across often incompatible worlds of art, business and research brings in different and contradictory forms of assessment, making a simple checklist hard to muster. For another, a programme trained on the performative effects of a business imaginary, rather than business itself, might call for different criteria altogether.

For Law and Urry (2004 p.5), the question for performative research is rather this: which realities do its methods help to enact or erode, and what realities might they help to bring into being or strengthen?[193]. Law and Urry also add a note of caution, that 'the relations of the world will put up a greater or lesser resistance to most of the alternatives we might create'. The projects of collaborative research cannot force realities to shift, but they can create openings (Cameron, Pomfret and and Manhood, 2011). For the Feral MBA, the outcomes for participants are still unfolding and are only part of the story. But providing a habitat to think about business in ways that make space for other realities constitutes significant change in itself.

The paths presented in this research will not be for everyone. Its findings are not amassing a conclusive proof to convince or convert to a new way. What it does present is a plausible, practical offer, to experience business differently in ensemble with others.

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[193]   In Cameron, Manhood and Pomfrett's (2011, p.497) words: 'if research creates realities then our "criteria" are about the type of world our research is helping to create.'

Figure 43: Feral MBA – Succession closing Zoom event

Next steps

For my own business, the first step is to emerge from the long trial of writing and get back into practice where these encounters and connections can happen: specifically to iterate the Feral MBA in further contexts and in different forms. The pilot groups represented a narrow social demographic. The coaching approach is about becoming sensitive to difference in ways that can build knowledge between people, and my intention is to extend these practices, both in locations where I am less like the participants and in places where they are less like each other. The remote

training setup trialled in *Succession* suggests a further opportunity to run something less location-based, with a more specialised constituency of established business operators who are working at the limits of what their own business advice environments are able to provide. My feeling is that the depth of knowledge that such practitioners bring with them and the practices and collectivity that the Feral MBA has assembled will combine in valuable ways.

The Feral MBA is designed both as an occasional, itinerarnt short course and as enuduring infrastructure to trade over time. Its weight as infrastructure is not in physical space or as a legal entity – to focus on the production of formal-material infrastructures misses the radical vault of Ukeles' maintenance agenda into the other, no less substantial elements that enable an art practice or produce a world: to 'sustain the change… renew the excitement ... keep the home fires burning' (Ukeles, 1969 p.1). The kind of infrastructure imagined through the Feral MBA is affective, relational and by nature full of holes. It is not pursuing a coherent, autonomous form but on the contrary is constituted through interdependence. Negotiating what happens up- or down-stream from the programme is integral to the shape of the whole thing. In relation to that, I see the project's centre of gravity moving away not necessarily from artists themselves, but from speaking and acting through art as a domain. The knowledge gained through the Feral MBA research does have a place in areas of DIY and community arts, and in artists' professional development (as a counterpoint to the dominant kinds of discourse there) but also in the fabric of organisation: on boards, in advisory roles, in the accounts systems and with the administrators. The project currently has tendrils into different areas, including my work with CERN and with the FoAM network[194], where the Institute of Experiments with Business (Ibex) might become a longer-term home for the Feral MBA[195].

Any Other Business (AOB)[196]

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[194] Reworking a number of extracts of this thesis for the 2022 *FoAM Anarchive* publication (sample early drafts appear in the *Counter-materials Ring Binder* p.7A) is one means by which elements of the research will gain a life outside the PhD.

[195] The question of how and where to move the Feral MBA out into the world is the subject of a closing futuring process I am undertaking with colleagues from FoAM, in May-August 2022.

[196] In meetings in the UK it is customary to wrap up the agenda with 'AOB'.

COVID-19 scored its inescapable mark across the research proceedings yet significantly, while the impact of the pandemic on art and business practitioners has been substantial, its effects on the makings and the findings of the Feral MBA were surprisingly minor as the kinds of uncertainties and possibilities it generated were coded into the programme from the outset.

Producing a business plan for the Feral MBA is one piece of *radmin* planned for this research that did not eventuate. But thinking '1:1'[197], perhaps the PhD *is* the business plan, just in an unfamiliar and unwieldy form.

For me, a consequential effect of the research process has been a shift of occupation: from inhabiting the singular business instance of *Feral Trade* – a solo performance that relies on the centrifugal role of the trader to hold it all together – to a kind of knowledge that can travel across different business contexts. It is a reorientation not in scale but of register and application. In the process, *Feral Trade* has moved further to the background of things and can be archived: a 20-year proof of work.

The change enacted through this research can be encapsulated in another way as the arc traversed from *Home Ec* – the informal economics salon I was running in my flat (2015–17). My way of wrangling with the subject of economy has substantially shifted: from re-performing economic theory in compact, vernacular form, to a programme that is business-centred and almost sheerly about staging, materials, listening and maintaining. The theory moves into the fabric of things, or even vanishes.

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[197] In Marsha Bradfield's (2021c) interpretation that a 1:1 scale practice is also one that grapples with its own internal contradictions, is collaboratively produced and narratively realised.

Glossary of Selected Terms

Administration

Arcing across domains of artistic, domestic, academic, and entrepreneurial life, administration is something we all have in common. Both urgent and mundane, its practices seep into individual and collective situations yet are rarely celebrated, and sometimes barely acknowledged. Admin's signature activities—fundraising, budgeting, banking, emailing, accounting, meeting, managing, maintaining, organising—are largely experienced as background drudgery, mired in the doing and the getting done, to be endured but not investigated or encouraged.

Administration is the bread and butter of business. Elevating its activities to centre stage, as an act of recuperation or repatriation, even re-enchantment, is elemental to the project of the Feral MBA.

Business

The Feral MBA is working with an expansive definition of business as 'any productive activity that could bring us sustenance' (Orsi, 2012). This description spans or blurs between business, venture, enterprise and livelihood endeavour. It shines a light on the sheer diversity of economic activity, taking business as diversely structured and motivated – a 'vehicle for living', as North (2020 p.98) puts it – not a single, unitary 'business' actor with assumed objectives of profit, competition and growth.

Coaching

Coaching is a technology that became integral to the Feral MBA, both as a means of collecting evidence, and as a peer-to-peer, DIY training resource. Coaching is commonly encountered as life or business coaching, focused on individual fulfilment or workplace goals. Usually delivered as a professional service, the 'coach' is positioned as a service provider, applying their skills to the problems of the client or 'coachee', over a series of time-framed sessions. In general, the practice is solution-focused, future-oriented and goal-directed, aiming to facilitate a space for people to deal with 'stuckness', negotiate change and materialise plans. The institution of coaching in the Feral MBA (p.119) works both with and against these tendencies, as a form of interpersonal

communications and a training process, where the application of close listening to business might be considered as an end in itself.

Training

'Training' in a business (school) context typically refers to a content-heavy programme led by an 'expert' instructor with limited input from the participants. This approach is significantly different from the 'training' pursued in the Feral MBA, where knowledge and learning are co-created.

My source for thinking about training in the Feral MBA is not as discipline or subjection (being entrained). Rather it adopts physical training, from sport and gyms, with a twist. As with coaching, training in the Feral MBA is taken up as an end in itself, working through iteration, endless variation and lively polyphony rather than obedience or falling into line.

For Feral MBA physical trainers GG and GL (p. 159), training is a useful framework to think about practice, while also intricately linked to cultures of power, tradition and authority. Rather than training for a competency, an ideal state or verified outcome, it is a readiness to be unbalanced: to experience what happens in movement when you get a group of people together. At the same time, the confinement or rigidity of training is integral to its effects, as a stage or a container where intense activities can be played out (Gamage and Lochheed, 2023).

Thinking about training in the Feral MBA is inseparable from untraining. It involves overriding forces of habit to notice other skills and knowledge we might already have, through formats and routines that may feel foreign. It is a response to the tenacity of prevailing business knowledge, and the quandary of how to apply what we know politically, or sense viscerally, in and against the daily pressures of an ongoing normative business litany. As a form of resistance training, this is always work in progress, mixing rules with improvisation for routines to adapt and pass on.

Figure 44: Sold! Coaching by Numbers Cards
Coaching by Numbers cards pack sold to PhD Examiner during PhD Viva Voce Examination,
November 2022. Image Credit: Teresa Dillon.

Afterword – Emulsification as a Contribution to Knowledge

A compact dissertation in six slides, tracing a route or arc through different representations of the economy, via a series of perspective shifts.

The iconic image of the **Circular Flow** depicts the way that income flows around the economy. Installed in every economics textbook as synonymous with the economy itself, its model of the economy is both near-ubiquitous and drastically blinkered, omitting such fundamental elements of economic life as energy and matter, and the complex social roles we all inhabit, beyond consumer, worker and investor. An image of the economy as machine: abstract, self-organised and self-perpetuating.
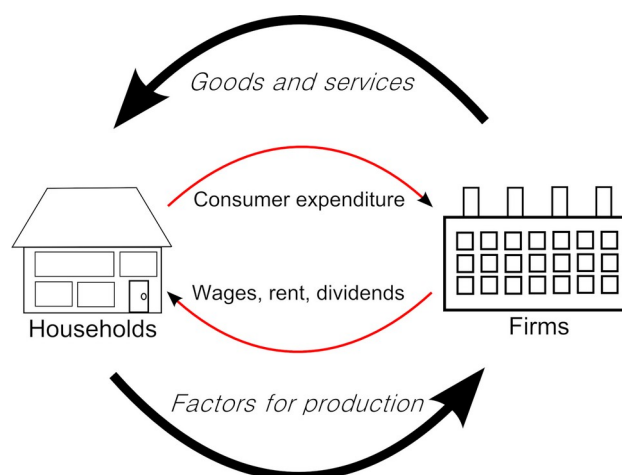
Figure 45: SLIDE 1 – Basic diagram of the circular flow of income.

Image credit: Irconomics (Creative Commons Licence CC BY-SA 3.0 https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)

Economist Kate Raworth (2017) offers up a substantially altered schema with the **Doughnut Economy,** revising what would be considered central to economic functioning, and what might be marginal or unseen. Raworth describes the Doughnut as a radically new compass for humanity: an economic model focused on the sweet spot between the social foundations of human well-being and the environmental ceiling of planetary survival. The Doughnut shifts the endgame of economic thinking from the promise of endless growth to the challenge thriving in balance.
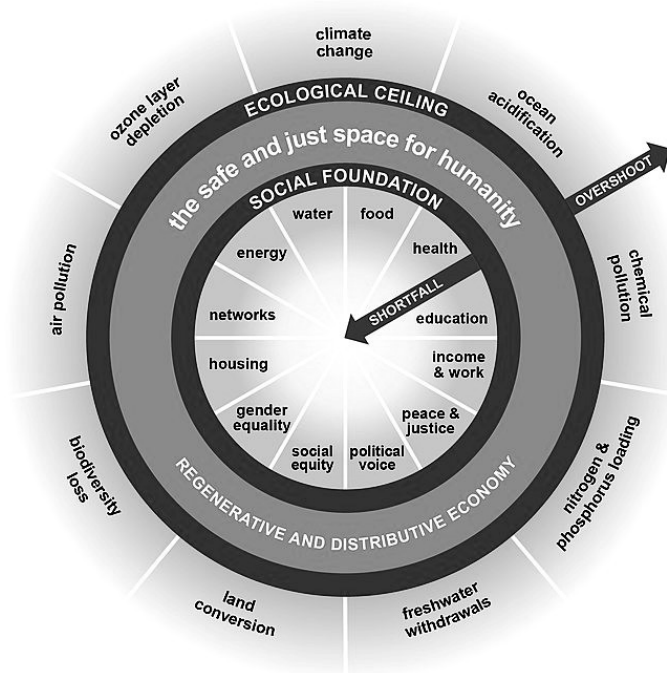
Figure 46: SLIDE 2 – Doughnut Economics Model
Image credit: Doughnut Economics (Creative Commons Licence CC BY-SA 4.0
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

The **Diverse Economies Iceberg** (Gibson-Graham, 2002) presents a different kind of challenge to how the economy might be understood. Rather than an alternative economic model or blueprint for change, the Iceberg articulates the existing diversity of economic life. By naming what is going on, the invitation is to start with what we are already doing, and reimagine the economy from there.

Figure 47: SLIDE 3 – The diverse economies iceberg
Image credit: J.K. Gibson-Graham. Drawing by Ken Byrne.

Figure 48: SLIDE 4 – The iceberg melting
Image credit: Original image Adam Turnbull, modified with permission by Ethan Miller.

Miller's (2019) notion of the **Iceberg, Melting** pushes the metaphor of the Iceberg further out. Embroiled in environmental conditions of rapid climate change, the melting iceberg signals obvious peril but also opportunity, as major thought categories of 'economy', 'society' and 'environment' can no longer be positioned as discrete, competing interests. A generative decomposition, that opens space to reimagine the work of making livelihoods beyond these old divisions, rethinking the relationship between economy and ecology.

Observations

Placed alongside the Circular Flow, these images wield demonstrable power as explanatory metaphors: conversation pieces that work to unfix thinking about what the economy is. Yet doughnuts and icebergs are also off-the-shelf images, chosen for their power as visual analogies rather than direct expressions of economic possibility in themselves. With **Emulsification,** I venture another, stickier slide to the set. Emulsification was deployed in the Feral MBA as a different kind of signifier for how 'the economy' could be broken down and entered into, drawing on the detail of lived experience through the highly contingent business of the cola-maker (p. 111).

Fat   Fat droplets

Figure 49: SLIDE 5 – Emulsification
Employed as a physical analogy, emulsification can also break down problematic masses of
congealed associations – like 'capitalism' and 'the economy' – into more navigable, manageable
states. In the Feral MBA, the motif of emulsification worked to open up thinking about 'business' to
difference, diversity and agency. Image credit: Theun Karelse.

From making things visible to making things

Scholarly discourse commonly reads things (sites, conditions, literature) by applying a theoretical
lens. The lens is a device that transforms or filters, making visible things that might have previously
been overlooked**.** The scholar takes up the lens as an observational technology, not (for example) to
light fires.

Going beyond viewpoint, the work of emulsifying plummets the researcher deep into the territory of
investigation. A reorientation from observation (noticing, articulating, theorising) to handling and
processing, as a cola production line does. While a visual check helps to confirm a successful cola
emulsion, the process is also reliant on other senses: the sound and feel of production equipment, a
familiarity with texture and taste, the fine print of food safety regulations. As such, emulsification is
a material analogy arising from mess (and years) of practice: trial and error, iteration, repetition, tea
breaks, getting stuck and moving on.

Beyond the lens: the **Drill Whisk**, a hardy home-built hybrid, is Cube Cola's own singular
invention. Like the lens, the drill whisk is a device that reorders reality. Its distinction is its status as
a working implement, whose power of reassembly goes beyond the realm of perception to the

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traction it exerts in the world. For the cottage-scale cola maker, the substantial transformation is to turn a disparate bunch of flavour oils[198] into a tradable commodity, one that can be acted with and transacted in the same arena as the world's beverage giants.

STANDING ON THE HANDS OF GIANTS

http://cube-cola.org

Figure 50: SLIDE 6 – The Drill Whisk
Image Credit: Kayle Brandon/Cube Cola

The diverse economies scholars claim scholarship as a form of activism, enabling transformative action in the world: 'theory is our practice' as Katherine Gibson (2022) puts it. As artists venturing into this space (p.92), we are formulating our own tag line, 'practice is our theory' (Rich and Elzenbaumer, 2022). A generative reciprocity, shifting the baseline of what we are doing from art as a discipline to practice – thinking with materials – as a viable, parallel space for theorising business and economy.

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[198]   Orange, lime, lemon, cassia (cinnamon bark), coriander, nutmeg and lavender.

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