

Interview with InCUBATE

by Ceci Moss



InCUBATE storefront (Photo by Bryce Dwyer)

I first encountered [InCUBATE's](#) work at [Creative Time's](#) exhibition "[Convergence Center at Park Avenue Armory](#)." For the run of the show, this Chicago-based artist-run organization set up a temporary soup cafe in collaboration with artist [Robin Hewlett](#) and artist group [Material Exchange](#). Visitors were invited to purchase soup, and these funds were then directed toward small grants to support art projects. The soup cafe was an extension of their ongoing project [Sunday Soup](#), which offers monthly meals in their storefront space in order to fundraise money for individual artist's projects. Sunday Soup is but one example of the alternative economic models put forth by InCUBATE's varied activities and research. In a shaky economic climate, InCUBATE's grassroots approach to arts funding propose useful solutions to enduring, and most likely, increasingly pressing obstacles. For our ongoing series dealing with contemporary art and the recession, I decided to interview InCUBATE (Abigail Satinsky, Bryce Dwyer, Roman Petruniak, and Matthew Joynt) about their activities. - Ceci Moss

What is InCUBATE and how did it begin?

InCUBATE stands for the Institute for Community Understanding Between Art and the Everyday. We are an experimental research institute and artist residency program dedicated to exploring new approaches to arts administration and arts funding. Acting as curators, researchers and co-producers of artist's projects, our main focus has been to explore ways that artists, both historically and today, have incorporated models of

resource allocation, community building, funding structures and forms of exchange as part of their artistic practice.

We originally came together while studying Arts Administration and Policy at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Given our desire to provoke a critical recognition of how art practices can better relate to alternative systems of economic and cultural exchange, we found ourselves becoming more and more frustrated with how the discipline of arts administration remains overdetermined by the popularized and polarized models of for-profit and non-profit. As young arts administrators interested in supporting critical art practices, affecting official cultural policy in the United States via traditional channels seemed a bit lofty and, with a growing understanding of the direction of public and private funding, completely uninteresting. At the same time, our concerns seemed directly opposed with the mechanisms of the contemporary art market. Therefore, we started InCUBATE with a few simple ideas and questions about money. How could we better understand the lack of funding for alternative and innovative cultural work? Is it possible to develop new infrastructures to qualitatively affect artists' lives? Our activities have manifested in a series traveling exhibitions called *Other Options*, a creative research residency program, and various other projects such as *Sunday Soup* (a monthly meal that generates funding for a creative project grant). Our core organizational principle is to treat art administration as a creative practice. By doing so, we hope to generate and share a new vocabulary of practical solutions to the everyday problems of producing culture under-the-radar.



Image: Sunday Soup at InCUBATE (Photo by Bryce Dwyer)

Who is involved? Where are you based?

April of 2009 will mark the 2nd year anniversary of our existence in a small storefront space adjacent to the Chicago's Congress Theater, a venue located near the neighborhood of Logan Square. Our space is approximately 900 sq/feet that includes a multipurpose meeting area, a kitchen, 2 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms, and a basement work

area. Currently, the core members of InCUBATE are Bryce Dwyer, Mathew Joynt, Roman Petruniak, and Abigail Satinsky. Jennifer Breckner helps to coordinate our monthly *Sunday Soup* event. Ben Schaafsma, one of our founding members, passed away in October of 2008.

How do you maintain the InCUBATE space? What kind of funding structure do you rely on?

We don't apply for grants and rely on small-scale donations to keep our projects running. We each contribute a small amount of money from our own pockets to help cover the cost of rent and utilities. For the first year, Roman lived in the space. Our artist residency program generates money to pay rent. We started the residency as a way to pay each month's rent and to expand our network of collaborators.



Image: [Hideous Beast](#) Residency at InCUBATE (July 2008) (Photo by Charlie Roderick)

The community of people using the space has since grown. In an effort to make our situation more sustainable and open up our physical location to wider access, the storefront itself has recently taken on a new identity as The Orientation Center. Rather than being solely a place for InCUBATE's activities, the Orientation Center houses a diverse range of projects: meeting and office space, our artist residency, a library and several regular community meals and lectures. We co-manage the space with two other local cultural organizations: [AREA Chicago](#) (a magazine and events series about culture and politics in Chicago) and the [Chicago Underground Library](#) (an eclectic library of publications and zines made by Chicagoans) as well as other co-workers who contribute rent and program events. Everyone that uses the space on a regular basis contributes towards rent. Our economy is based on the fact that all the organizations and people involved contribute to each other's activities and share both personal and professional affinities. We have limited resources, but find that operating at a micro-scale and being as honest as possible about our capacity actually makes the fundraising we do

manageable and immediate.

As far as providing direct support to the artists we work with, we've been doing the *Sunday Soup* grant program for the past two years. *Sunday Soup* is a monthly brunch meal hosted at our storefront space. Guest chefs cook simple soups using local ingredients and the meal is sold for \$10 per bowl. At the end of each month, the soup income is given as a grant to support a creative project. Visitors who purchase soup also earn a spot on the grant selection committee. All of the grant proposals are emailed to *Sunday Soup* patrons, and a popular vote determines the grant recipient. Applying for a grant is intentionally simple and un-bureaucratic in order to encourage broad participation. This enables InCUBATE to stimulate and promote experimental, critical and imaginative practices that may not be eligible for formal funding. *Sunday Soup*, while raising money, also serves as a way to build a network of support that reaches beyond purely monetary assistance. Guest chefs prepare soup, organize presentations and engage visitors in conversation. The convivial atmosphere of *Sunday Soup* becomes an open platform to generate conversation about the availability and distribution of resources within the mainstream arts establishment and share different ways of working.



Image: Artist Robin Hewlett during "Sunday Soup" at Convergence Center at Park Avenue Armory (Photo by Abigail Satinsky)

Now that we're in a recession, do you think more alternative spaces/ organizations like InCUBATE will pop up? Do you foresee more traditional institutions looking to these sorts of models for direction?

Alternative modes of organizing have always been around, and the heightened necessity of "making-do" may encourage their proliferation. Traditional institutions appear like impervious well-oiled machines when, behind their public face, they run by their own

sets of idiosyncratic internal logic. We think it's important to honestly express the conditions that enable us and the ways we go about working. Basically, InCUBATE is a learning tool to figure out how and why institutions function the way they do, who the people involved are, and what interests they serve. InCUBATE is an access point, a way to finding a seat at the table in which resources are allocated and visibility is provided. We want to determine an approach that articulates the kind of art-world we want to participate in.

Traditional institutions shouldn't be discounted as they have a useful centralized visibility and resources. We find it important to create a different set of platforms alongside of, beside, near, and resembling the way institutions work to make their processes transparent. In this way, we can think of our engagement with large-scale institutions in terms outside of failure or co-optation, to see what productive benefits could be gleaned. In order for us to explore what cultural democratic practice is and how it can continue to be relevant to everyday life, it is necessary to understand the way in which culture works within existing infrastructures and how it is reproduced.

This is where we recognize the importance of loose-knit and as-needed coalitions with other alternative organizations. In our own local situation, there is an incredible network of experimental cultural centers like [Mess Hall](#) and [Experimental Station](#), innovative art venues like [He Said-She Said](#) and [threewalls](#), and hybrid business models such as [Backstory](#) that operate according to the needs of specific people and neighborhoods in the city. We don't feel the need to join forces by operating out of the same space to amplify everyone's activities, but rather to see ourselves as part of a functioning ecosystem in which we are one site among many in which a set of questions are debated and contextualized. By truly partaking in each other's activities, beyond monetary investment, a healthy infrastructure evolves by virtue of our mutual support. This network extends beyond Chicago to other groups and projects with shared concerns including those interested in open-source fundraising like [FEAST Brooklyn](#), [Tanda Foundation](#), Josh Greene's [Service Works](#), and [Sweet Tooth of the Tiger](#).

If traditional institutions were to pay more attention to alternative models and reorient their practices, they might succeed in making themselves more democratic spaces, permeable to their publics.

Could you discuss the project *Other Options*? As a critique of the "Nonprofit Industrial Complex," what "other options" have come out of *Other Options*?

[Other Options](#) is a traveling and evolving exhibition, which features artists' projects concerned with the re-interpretation, alteration and creation of infrastructures that affect their everyday lives at the same time as their artistic practice. *Other Options* has traveled to five locations across the US (Chicago, Grand Rapids, Syracuse, Pittsburgh, and New York City), with each venue featuring a locally developed initiative to provide audiences with an access point to understand other projects featured in the exhibition.

This project is meant to interrogate the limitations set in place by the current systems of

funding and support for noncommercial forms of art. These varied approaches collected through this research include models based on creative enterprise, which re-invest and disperse profits in ways similar to non-profit organizations (Joanna Spitzner Foundation and Tanda Foundation). Other approaches include inventive and resourceful uses of surplus and excess, reallocating institutional resources and creating temporary structures that meet timely needs (Material Exchange). These examples are not necessarily meant as models to be reproduced, but offer temporary and contextualized practices, which have the potential to inspire practical changes in the way in which culture is supported on both large and small scales.

Here are some of the projects we've worked with in *Other Options*.

[The Joanna Spitzner Foundation](#) seeks to expand creative knowledge through its support of contemporary art and ongoing research in art, economics, and philanthropy. The Foundation gives small grants to artists that are funded by wages donated from work performed. This funding strategy is used to demystify economic systems by connecting them to lived experience. The foundation is an art work in progress by Joanna Spitzner as well as a functioning private foundation. It seeks to generate dialogue about daily life, economics and giving, while furthering the creative and social possibilities of art.

[The Tanda Foundation](#) is an attempt to integrate an informal economic structure (tanda) with a more formalized structure of charitable giving typical in the U.S. (foundation). The foundation exists as a web 2.0 structure that allows users to create personal profiles and upload project proposals in need of funding. The site's primary function is to connect artists and with multiple funders. After depositing money - from \$1 to \$20 - into the Tanda Foundation, users are awarded voting privileges to decide which projects will be funded. The Tanda Foundation attempts to stimulate a productive exchange by requiring users to provide feedback on the proposals in addition to their vote.

[Material Exchange](#) is a group of artists and designers working in Hyde Park, Chicago who work with cultural institutions and other organizations to donate material surplus that is no longer useful to them. Material Exchange then offers different ways to redistribute this material surplus as way to generate funds to support their own practice, as well as supplying materials for themselves and other artists to use. By treating waste as form of material history imbued with memories and stories too, they undertake experimental economic models that encourage dialogue and alternative modes of participation.

There has been some discussion on the Museum 2.0 blog regarding "[deliberately unsustainable business models](#)." Basically, Nina Simon describes organizations, such as [Machine Project](#), which accept that their existence will not be indefinite, and seek to organize exciting and interesting projects while they can. How does the idea of a "deliberately unsustainable business model" fit into your research and/or the alternative

economic models suggested by your projects? Will InCUBATE exist in 20 years? Should it?

The idea of a "deliberately unsustainable business model" definitely was a factor when we first came together. Our organization doesn't have non-profit status and we have consistently rejected spending all of our time on fundraising in order to keep the project moving. Instead, we want to develop work patterns that are capable of circumventing commonly held truisms of non-profit management, especially the incessant desire for organizational growth, as well as the notion that institutional success can and should be measured quantitatively. In our opinion, these practices of non-profits, in their own way, often end up being "deliberately unsustainable." We have seen this pressure on artists as well, as the scarcity of financial support has perpetuated a competitive environment of grant-seekers, which has resulted in more artists professionalizing their writing skills, increasing the amount of time they spend on administrative procedures needed to support their career as an artist. The processes and bureaucracy of the grant writing and allocation process can often be burdensome and impenetrable, and for some artists, it can suppress the desire or ability to experiment.

Our work is a process of negotiation. After two years in operation, we have come to discover that in order to be of relevance to others, our practices and values must be articulated using a slow building process. They are directly dependent on a gradually accumulating group of people who want to be involved in collectively pooling resources, sharing histories on what's already been done, and imagining the conditions for an ethical and critical art world that would support its constituents. InCUBATE will exist as long as it's possible for us to function this way.