

Article

The Power of Convening: Towards an Understanding of Artist-Led Collective Practice as a Convener of Place

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Abstract: In recent years, there has been a growing interest in artist-led collectives with high-profile recognition within contemporary art mega festivals, prizes, and biennials. Yet, these amorphous entities and initiatives tend to be framed either through their politically motivated actions or as a critique of the notion of the single author or ‘artist-as-genius’ mythology. This article builds upon this discourse to shift the emphasis onto both interpersonal and socio-political relationships that constitute artist-led collectives in order to explore their complex role in convening and placemaking and what this might mean for both policymaking and research.

Keywords: artist-led; collective; commons; convening; friendship; practice-led; placemaking; policy

1. Introduction and Context

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the commons, particularly in its practical and theoretical application within arts and culture and more broadly within a cultural policy landscape (Borchi 2018; Ruiz Cayuela 2021; De Angelis and Harvie 2014; Santagata et al. 2011). This article aims to draw on this discourse in order to think through the inter-relationship of commoning practices, friendship as the basis for artist-led collectives, and how this acts as a convener of people, ideas, and culture, which contributes to placemaking. This article contends that these commoning practices invite the conditions for informal collaborative spaces to develop between different groups of people within a given locality (virtual or physical) and thus provide the potential for new practice-led and place-based knowledge that could become part of the constellation of approaches to arts-based research within socio-cultural ecologies. This article suggests that such is this power of convening that there is potential for broader influence on policymaking given the increasingly fraught tensions between devolution with an emphasis on more localized or regional policymaking and centralization, with its consolidation of power at national or state-level government, especially in the UK context.

This article traces the role that artist-led collectives have in bringing often disparate entities together to form projects, happenings, and actions. From the outside, collectives appear to be groups of artists that come together to create artwork utilizing a plethora of methods. These methods might include collaborative working, where the notion of the single author is challenged. They may stage group shows where members exhibit individual work that speaks to a common theme, or they may stage interventions and happenings within public space. This activity is increasingly seen as contributing to the discourse on social art or socially engaged art practice (Hope 2017). However, what sets artist-led collectives apart from other entities within wider cultural ecologies is that they often develop from friendships, and thus each relationship can be understood relationally within its particular dialectical context (J.D. Wright 2019). Further, there is an inherent political positionality that permeates artist-led collectives working in these places as they often coalesce around shifting, hyperlocal issues and ‘problems’ within society. This context has been under-researched, especially the inter-relationship between commoning and friendship and how this leads to convening practices (see Section 2).



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The research questions that guide this article are as follows: what is the role of convening in artist-led collective practices, and how do the unique social bonds that constitute collectives help to develop commoning practices? By moving towards a more nuanced understanding of how these relationships have the power to convene, the studies in this article suggest that there are tangible benefits for researchers, artists, communities, and policymakers in developing transdisciplinary methods, which include space and capacity for these forms of commoning to occur because they represent an invaluable opportunity for new forms of place-based knowledge exchange. In short, the convening practices of artist-led collectives play an important but under-researched role in developing commons assets with communities.

This article is conceptually organized into two separate but inter-related methodological components. First, it presents a thematic study of instances where artist-led collectives are convening projects, gatherings, and happenings that contribute heavily to placemaking from what has been termed a 'grassroots' position (where activity is organized at a hyperlocal level by people in a given area or district). The second component draws upon a digital storytelling (DST) study of working with the art and architecture collective Assemble to co-create an artwork in the form of a story. This DST study was supported by extensive embedded research with Assemble in one of their projects. This article offers a new conceptual framework for this existing study in order to investigate the theories of the commons and convening, which had previously been out of scope. Together, these methodological components are not exhaustive, but they outline the intersections where artist-led collective practices can influence research and policymaking at multiple levels.

2. Theoretical Position

What does it mean to convene? The etymology of the word points to the Latin word *convenire* from the *con-* meaning 'together' and *venire* 'come' (Webster 2023). This meaning of the word was rooted in assembly and the agreement between interested parties in coming together through open-ended dialogue. Socio-politically speaking, having this ability to convene is of great advantage as, in order to move towards agreement, planning, and any form of action, the means of bringing different and sometimes divergent parties together is vital. What is doubly interesting is that the route of the words 'convene', 'collective', and 'commons' share this implicit meaning of 'together' through the Latin '*con-*' and its variants. Further, there is an action or process implied in this shared meaning in the act of togetherness.

In order to conceptually position this article, two vital threads must be addressed. The first is a conception of the cultural commons or, more precisely, commoning practices within artist-led activity. The second is how conceptions of friendship play out in relation to these practices and help create the space to convene.

2.1. Triangulating the Commons, Collectives, and Friendship

The commons have been broadly defined across various fields as the right to use or access resources through a given set of 'customs' by a 'number of people' (Benkler 2016). Elinor Ostrom's (1990) influence on the commons literature from an economic standpoint cannot be underestimated (Ostrom 1990). Ostrom theorized the commons as a practical approach to resource management or Common Pool Resources (CPR). Ostrom's research disproved the apparent 'tragedy of the commons', a concept introduced by Garrett Hardin (Ostrom 1968). This narrative argued that the management of natural resources in a shared way would be open to exploitation and eventual over-consumption. Instead, Ostrom's fieldwork documented instances where small-scale community-led management of natural resources can be self-governed and demonstrated how rules of engagement can collectively develop over time to make CPR sustainable (Ostrom 1990). The commons are often cited as being opposed to private or state-led ownership and are instead about collective management of resources, which has a deep-rooted history in Britain as the right to use common land within a given set of customs (usually woodland, pastures, or

greenspace surrounding villages) by residents of parishes or villages (Hyde 2010). It is important to note that this is a highly contested space with factions within both the theories and practices of the commons that do not agree on the very conditions necessary for commoning to occur (De Angelis and Harvie 2014).

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the commons within cultural spheres as researchers, arts organizations, institutions, artists, curators, and policymakers look for answers to intertwining crises (Santagata et al. 2011; Graham 2017). However, in-depth studies and research into the relationship between the commons and artist-led collectives are still relatively emergent. That being said, some tentative research has outlined how artist-led collectives adopt commoning practices. For example, Andrew Hewitt and Jordan (2020) argue that ‘processes of care, commoning and collectivizing in art practice are not simply a critique of society. It is because these attributes are based in action rather than representation that they offer a socially productive approach to artistic practice in the age of advanced capital’ (Hewitt and Jordan 2020). On the other hand, Jonathan Orlek’s (2021) research on artist-led housing and the commons begins to inter-relate the management and provision aspect of housing that can be run as a commons which is ‘unbound’ by private and public (state-run) ownership with the more ‘inexhaustible’ aspect of human creativity as a commons (Orlek 2021). Indeed, this interplay is central to Alice Borchi’s (2018) research on the commons within Italian theatre occupy movements. Borchi argues that in order to both understand and develop the commons within the context of highly participatory, arts-led environments, there need to be practical, implementable methods of collective organizing from a ‘grassroots’ perspective and a sense of a ‘post-capitalist’ imaginary (Borchi 2018).

It is this sense of both the practical and the conceptual, the political and the organizational, which are intertwined within artist-led collective practices. This article proposes that this intertwining creates a place for more than the sharing of ideas but for active artist-led collective research and the emergence of informal creative place-based methods. Indeed, akin to the Italian theatre occupy movements, artist-led collectives are able to convene with different people in places that are both created and re-created through the interplay of these relationships and practical-theoretical approaches to the commons. This conception also draws heavily on the work of Sergio Ruiz Cayuela’s (2021) unification of two seemingly mutually exclusive stances in the theory and practice of the commons. Cayuela’s research shows that the issue of commons expansion and sustainability, which many scholars support, will need to be overcome for the commons to be viable at scale and thus become a way of moving beyond late-stage capitalism. Drawing on two highly specific approaches to materiality and subjectivity of the commons, Cayuela cites the work of De Angelis (2017) and Stavros Stavrides (2012) as articulating these two approaches. Cayuela writes: ‘whereas Stavrides advocates for expanding commoning as a strategy to enlarge the number of politicised commoners, De Angelis focuses on boundary commoning and commons ecologies for expanding the autonomy and reproductive capacity of the commons’ (Ruiz Cayuela 2021). Cayuela bridges these two positions in a case study of Cooperation Birmingham during the pandemic. Cooperation Birmingham is a cooperative that aims to create a solidarity economy that is not purely based on economic value but also on social and cultural value (Ruiz Cayuela 2021). It operates on a city-wide level and consists of multiple cooperatives, social housing groups, political groups, and unions. What is key to Cayuela’s analysis is that these entities all began to share knowledge and resources and work collectively in a mutual aid structure throughout the crisis (boundary commoning) whilst expanding the cooperation’s members base and ultimately producing higher numbers of ‘politicized commoners’ who took ownership of their own situation and thus reproduced the commons at scale. This case study provides conceptual and empirical evidence that can be applied to artist-led collectives and the way they convene these relationships within broader ecologies.

Friendships, depending on which conceptualization one follows, are not strictly applicable to the commons as they go beyond the initial social agreement about the shared use of a particular resource. The commons can happen without friends, and vice versa; yet, in the context of artist-led collectives, the intertwining of these personal relationships and specific commoning practices cannot be coincidental. I have outlined elsewhere and through extensive research the importance of friendship in understanding artist-led collectives (J.D. Wright 2019; J. Wright 2021). Needless to say, friendship provides the socio-cultural catalyst for how collectives are conceived in places and continue to evolve throughout their life cycles. Although not specifically in reference to artist-led collectives, the work of both Okwui Enwezor and Céline Condorelli has been highly influential in my conceptualization of what friendships mean to artist-led collectives. Enwezor wrote that this form of artistic practice ‘tends to lend collective work a social rather than artistic character’ (Enwezor 2007). Similarly, Condorelli stated that ‘friendship is treated both as an association with other people and with ideas, a befriending of issues’ (Condorelli 2014). It is vital to understand that collectives are based on communication both within the relational dialectics of internal social bonds and with their external environment (J.D. Wright 2019). As such, there is an interplay between the work they make, the place(s) they inhabit, and their interpersonal relationships (social bonds). However, this interplay implies that one cannot be removed from the other, and thus artist-led collectives can be seen through an intersectional lens. In other words, they become more than the sum of their parts.

What is important to this article and the continued research in this area is that this coming together and the development of social bonds around ideas sustains forms of action beyond the initial inter-personal relationships that constitute the ‘visible collective’ (i.e., those who self-identify in some way as being part of the inner circle). It is because of this social character and the way these relationships form that artist-led collectives are able to act as conveners between different parties and entities in broader ecologies. At the crux of this matter, the act of convening opens a form of commons with those involved, a shared space that is not predicated on individual ownership or profit-making but on ideas and even sharing of resources that has potentially deep socio-cultural and even political value. Of course, artist-led collectives are not the only conveners in society, nor are they unique in developing socially engaged projects, which is attested to by growing discourse on the plethora of individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions working with these methods (Belfiore 2022; Bishop 2005; Hope 2017; Kester 2004; Schrag 2018). Yet, their particular socio-political positionality, which is place-interdependent, differentiates the method of convening, and this plays out in vastly different contexts.

Further, building on Hewitt and Jordan’s assertion of commoning and care within collective practices, it stands to reason that commoning practices are only ‘activated’ or become ‘visible’ when artist-led collectives convene or work with those external to the core membership (Hewitt and Jordan 2020). This is because the social bonds and friendships that constitute collectives themselves go beyond the practical application of the commons. They may internalize a sense of commonality and elements of commoning and even the conceptual imagination of the commons, but the ‘action’ that Hewitt and Jordan refer to only happens when collectives enter external relationships and projects (Hewitt and Jordan 2020). This is crucial because current research does not make this distinction. This does not deny the complex interplay between collectives and their environments, neither is it an entirely fixed distinction, as collectives frequently collapse, lose members, and gain members, but there is a distinct difference between the core group that identifies as the collective and those that they work with at any given point in time.

2.2. Placemaking and Convening

The act of convening, of bringing people together, invariably involves a complex relationship with place. Whether virtual or physical, conceptually or geographically located, this act of convening is both shaped by and contributes to the shaping of place. Art has an ever-changing relationship with placemaking, from its problematic role in the gentrification

of post-industrial urban areas, as outlined by Sharon Zukin (1988), to the purposeful use of art as a tactic of masking the displacement of people, which became known as ‘artwashing’ (Zukin 1988; Pritchard 2020). However, arts’ inter-relationship with placemaking is not linear or even causal: as Cara Courage (2023) suggests, art ‘encourages people to renew their connection to where they live, to ask questions, to empower themselves, to intervene in planning and policy, to change infrastructure and impact the cultural, social and economic life of their neighbourhoods’ (Courage 2023).

The tensions between what have been termed ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ approaches to placemaking are varied and play out in different contexts in a myriad of ways. However, it is clear that art and placemaking are intrinsically inter-related, and the complexities of socio-cultural, geo-political, and historical spheres come into play when considering the role of art and indeed artists in this relational dialectical knot. Of course, place is something that is never fixed and has a long history of study within social geography and the social sciences. Doreen Massey’s (1994) eponymous work on the subject posits that ‘what gives a place its specificity is not some long-internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus’ (Massey 1994). For Massey, this specificity brings with it inevitable tensions between people and differences of perspective. Within this milieu, artist-led collectives and their practices of convening must negotiate between these tensions and even begin, in specific instances, to bring disparate people and things in a place together, be they policymakers, developers, local residents, arts organizations, artists, curators, cultural and creative freelancers, or academics.

Of course, there is an inherent power in having the ability to convene, and it is, in some respects, a privileged position. Collectives that have the ability to convene are, to a degree, empowered in their specific context. A full exploration of the ontology of power is not possible within this article. However, it is important to this discourse that the work of Michel Foucault is considered because of its obvious application. Foucault argued that ‘power relations are rooted deep in the social nexus, not reconstituted “above” society as a supplementary structure’ (Foucault 2019). For Foucault, power resides in all social relationships, and thus the power to convene is a form of exertion or exercise with multiple actors. The following discussion will draw out these instances in order to move towards a deeper understanding of these forms of convening within a place.

3. Methodology

This article employs an experimental methodological framework that combines elements of digital storytelling (DST) through creative arts-based dialogue with secondary desk-based research on instances of artist-led collective convening practices. The DST project was initially developed and undertaken over a three-year period between 2016 and 2019 with the artist-led collective *Assemble* (J.D. Wright 2019). DST is a form of participatory research methodology which draws on the broader spectrum of practice-based methodologies. Participatory methodologies are described by Justin Jagosh as ‘the co-construction of research through partnerships between researchers and people affected by and/or responsible for action on the issues under study’ (Jagosh et al. 2012). In the case of this article, I worked with *Assemble* to co-create a story through a dialogue that addressed the very issues which the collective itself faced. By blurring these boundaries between researcher and participant, we were able to create a collective form of story as artwork (and thus practice) in its own right. This interplay is described by Caitlin Nunn as follows: ‘art forms are employed as methodological tools in all or part of the research process’ (Nunn 2022). Indeed, there is increasing interest in participatory arts-based methodologies within research and arts-specialized institutions, as outlined by Patricia Levy and in the handbook on decolonizing participatory research (Leavy 2018; Seppälä et al. 2018).

This DST methodology is based on the work of Brenda Gladstone and Stasiulis (2019), who integrate arts-based DST with other more traditional ethnographic methodologies (Gladstone and Stasiulis 2019). Although the researchers are working in a healthcare setting, their use of this integrated and nuanced methodology has proved a useful translation into both the subject matter of this research and the methods employed. Further, the traditional 'separation' between the researcher and participant is blurred through this process. Indeed, this blurring is actively sought from the beginning of the research design.

This project could not have happened without this embedded practice, as articulated by Sophia Woodman and Zaunseeder (2022). The researchers describe their embedded research into festivals and the commons as 'an account that is not neutral, or disengaged, but immersed in the festive commons and part of the social relations it involves' (Woodman and Zaunseeder 2022). It is for this reason that I will not erase myself from this research or become a 'passive-observer', as I am implicated from the beginning. It is also why I choose the active voice and the occasional use of first-person perspective in this article.

DST provides a useful way to create a shared space across accessible platforms which deconstructs and reduces the potential power imbalances between researcher and participant. DST methodology is complementary to the commons (in a peer-to-peer technological sense) and collective practices. DST has been justified by Copeland and Moor (2018) as follows: 'sharing stories has been seen to strengthen community, and beyond that, digital stories as artifacts hold the potential power to mediate relationships amongst community groups' (Copeland and Moor 2018). The authors suggest that forms of DST can build trust between the different parties, and arguably, this form of storytelling can capture more nuanced and in-depth data.

4. Results

For more than half a century, there has been a discernable discursive trend in how artist-led collectives tend to bring often disparate groups together. This appears to defy borders and, indeed, seems to be happening across the globe. This is evident from the French Internationale Situationniste (SI) forming in 1957, which brought together artists, writers, and social provocateurs in staging interventions into the daily life of Parisians and beyond, to the anarchic Japanese Collective Hi Red Centre, who infamously cleaned the streets of Tokyo in protest at their government's rhetoric over presenting a 'clean image' during the Tokyo Olympic games (Tomii 2007; Plant 2002). In the 1970s and 1980s, collectives such as General Idea, based in Toronto and Grupo Chaclacayo in Peru, then in Germany, emerged. These collectives drew upon anti- and counter-cultural movements and blended political and social performances and interventions that questioned gender, sexuality, and, ultimately, the 'human condition'. These practices were exemplified by General Idea's hijacking of terrestrial broadcasting to Grupo Chaclacayo's photographically documented celebration of sexual deviance against the Peruvian catholic orthodoxy (López 2013; Bayer and Ritchie 1997). Of course, all these aforementioned practices and projects required levels of convening beyond the core collective. For example, Grupo Chaclacayo collaborated with photographers and musicians on a frequent basis and General Idea had working relationships with several arts policymakers and art museums. Although the goal was invariably political, in some way, it was about enacting some form of protest or change using art as a vehicle. These convening practices are seemingly heterogeneous instances and do not appear to conform to a specific set of definable rules due to their implicit inter-relationships with their specific contexts. However, there are discernable trends between these instances which gesture towards a method or set of methods which are socio-politically, geographically, and historically sensitive.

In recent years, there has been a perceptible shift or trend for collectives convening both within cultural sectors and also with other sectors, such as housing, environmental resources, and education. A prime example of this form of work is Resolve Collective based in London. The collective is 'an interdisciplinary design collective that combines architecture, engineering, technology and art to address social challenges' (Collective 2023).

Resolve's practice revolves around what Orlek has described as 'new ways of being-in-common' whereby the public/private binary is circumvented, and instead, both practical and imaginary shared spaces can be opened between people, places, and things (Orlek 2021). Resolve's projects, such as the Site and Sound with The Access Project, brought together young people from Brixton with sound engineers and architects to design a new live music venue on a former railway arch. This project epitomizes these emergent forms of convening as the collective helps to bring together often disparate groups of people in the collective pursuit of both knowledge and skills exchange, as well as action that is socio-politically motivated and imbued with the potential of a collective imaginary of a public place. This shift, although still political in desire, is focused on fostering a shared space for new ways of thinking about a problem or range of issues faced in the world(s). It is increasingly about finding a conceptual form of cultural commons that might be thought of as an ever-shifting, ideologically pluralistic, onto-epistemological positionality between the many different worlds that exist for many different and diverse peoples.

This has become apparent in the work of Indonesian collective Ruangrupa. The collective came to international attention for their curation of Documenta 15 in Kassel, Germany (Goltz et al. 2022). Yet, their work and project in Jakarta is arguably more interesting and relevant to this article. Since the early 2000s, they have been involved in establishing a school for the study of contemporary collective art and ecosystems studies titled *Gudskul* (Ruangrupa 2023). This transdisciplinary non-profit initiative was convened through a collaboration between two other collectives, Serrum and Grafis Huru Hara, and 'ventured to create a common pool system in which all resources were collected and divided proportionally, according to each collective's needs' (Ruangrupa 2023).

What is illuminating is that the school is sustained by a mixed-income model (commercial donations, learner contributions, and funding from the collectives' other activities). However, it gives out bursaries and assistance to those who need it and has a 'pay what you can' policy (Kwan 2022). The Gudskul has enacted what De Angelis and Harvie have referred to as 'two recent intellectual traditions' in commons discourse (De Angelis and Harvie 2014). They describe one as following Ostrom's practical implementation of Common Pool Resources (CPR) and the other as a form of peer-to-peer shared networked commons which 'is more focused on software and other forms of information commons' (De Angelis and Harvie 2014). This latter strand plays out in the non-hierarchical pedagogic practices within the school. This is described as a 'co-learning approach with the students' where members of the collectives are coordinators rather than 'teachers', and the students work with them and with each other to not only conceive ideas but implement their ideas and interests within their different localities (De Angelis and Harvie 2014). Through De Angelis and Harvie's conception of the commons, the Gudskul holds this 'antagonistic' space between capital and the commons because it is partly sustained by commercial capital yet enacting commoning practices of distribution and support (De Angelis and Harvie 2014). In short, the Gudskul has taken both a commons structure in its use of CPR by developing a form of a collective learning experience 'in a place in which the main art institutes remain recalcitrant when it comes to supporting experimental art disciplines [...] and where public funding for the arts is still very limited, pooling resources becomes necessary' (Kwan 2022).

Gudskul is more than just another 'alternative' art school: it is embedded in the cultural, economic, social and geographic fabric of Jakarta. Members of Ruangrupa refer to an overarching set of principles called *lumbung*, which is based on the 'the Indonesian word for a communal rice-barn, where the surplus harvest is stored for the benefit of the community' (Documenta. 15 2021). It is this communal and common space that conceptually seeps into Ruangrupa's ethos and is vital in the emergence of convening practices at the heart of their project. As I have begun to illustrate, commoning practices are more than simply the vehicle for convening used by artist-led collectives: they are intertwined with how collectives act and the various ways of being with themselves and

others. This next section will begin to trace the ways in which artist-led collectives convene and how this contributes to making places.

DST with Assemble

Over a three-year period between 2016 and 2019, I worked with Assemble to co-create a story on the digital storytelling platform Yarn. The following analysis focuses on the theme of self-determination within these stories in which themes of convening practices emerged and why these practices have become important in their relationships to placemaking.

Assemble is an art and architecture design collective based in London. Akin to Ruangrupa, they came to public attention through the functions of the international art world: in Assemble's case, the 2015 Turner Prize for their work with Granby Community Land Trust (CLT) and the resident-led renovation of houses in Liverpool. However, what became almost immediately obvious when commencing the story with a member of the Assemble was that the prize was an adjunct to a collective practice that had been developing since 2010 (Assemble 2023). Assemble is constantly in negotiation with different forms of power and social relationships, both internally and externally. This was expressed in the Yarn story as follows: 'we operate within certain worlds where we are complicit in—even while being critical of—the status quo' (Edgerley 2018). This tension is also evident in the commission process that Assemble engages in, which is not much different from other non-socially engaged architectural companies where there is a client brief and often a competitive process. Assemble navigates public and private finance, bridging organizations, working with councils and property developers. In short, the same forces of capital and the state permeate the places and spaces of contemporary existence in which Assemble practices. Yet, the way they work in a horizontal method through DIY practices and in an open and accessible manner begins to challenge this status quo. Early on in our story on Yarn, Frances (Fran) Edgerley, a co-founder of Assemble and the main person with whom I conversed throughout the story, highlighted this theme. Edgerley suggested that 'I think our practice, where it is interesting, is fundamentally interested in architecture as self-determination—that is why we set up Blackhorse workshop, Baltic Street adventure playground, and originally the idea behind Granby workshop.' (Edgerley 2018). This concept of self-determination became a central theme in the story of Assemble and is important in understanding how they convene and continue this practice over time in very different places. Borchi positions self-determination as the ability to self-govern and having the relative freedom to self-create and self-care through sustainable methods (Borchi 2018). Similarly, Cayuela argues that developing forms of mutual aid through both distribution and contribution can move towards genuine emancipatory practices for different forms of self-organized groups. Cayuela points out that 'whereas charity legitimates and perpetuates capital and the state as forms of social organization, mutual aid offers the potential to look beyond those and enacts values associated with a social organization based on commoning' (Ruiz Cayuela 2021). This is crucial in the context of Assemble's practice and their convening role because they do not simply bring different parties to the metaphorical table; their intent is for those whom they work with to lead in their own contexts. This process is also reflexive as Edgerley stated that they were always conscious of 'how your internal relations then reflect outwards through your work' (Edgerley 2018). This suggests that the interplay between openness and accessibility, between the internal and the external, must always be in flux with the possibility of re-negotiation, which moves towards elements of boundary commoning. This self-determination is thus part of the convening process for Assemble, and it is intrinsic to placemaking, as Courage suggests: 'this emphasis on partnership and connections is another essential component of placemaking' (Courage 2023). For Courage, this sense of shared ownership through community-led approaches can create a deeper understanding of the nuances of a specific place. This became apparent on several occasions during our conversations, including with members of the Baltic Street Adventure Playground in Glasgow. The Playground is child-led and was set up as 'a direct response to the lack of play space and out of school provision for the community of

children and families in Dalmarnock' ([Baltic Street Adventure Playground 2023](#)). Assemble initially worked with a consortium (including Create London, Creative Scotland, Glasgow City Council, and Clyde Gateway Development Corporation) on the capital works that were needed for the Playground to function. It must be noted that the playground was created within the context of an area that has seen more than a decade of regeneration. This regeneration was given greater impetus through the legacy of the Commonwealth Games in 2014. However, as has been well documented by researchers such as Neil Gray, this regeneration (even with considerable state intervention) is not just unfinished; it has failed to deliver the original plan ([Gray 2022](#)). Through the lens of the commons, this initial stage is somewhat problematic, as some would see this as cooption or capitulation to the emancipatory significations within both the imaginary of the commons and the practicalities of resources because the finance was raised through a hybrid of public–private funding. However, the community at Baltic Street and Assemble have incrementally instigated a form of self-determinism by moving the initial project into a self-sustaining community interest model by working with localized food distributing schemes, volunteers, schools, and cooperatives to create a space for sharing knowledge and skills and developing a sense of care within and by local residents. To a degree, they have begun to initiate a form of commoning closer to that of the emancipatory outlined by Cayuela ([Ruiz Cayuela 2021](#)). This had been achieved by slowly expanding the commons subjectivities through increasing the numbers of people visiting (including school visits and volunteering) and thus contributing to the playground, and its ethos, coupled with moving towards a self-sustaining model.

Writing in 2019, I suggested that Assemble and Baltic Street had 'moved beyond public policy initiatives and implemented this sense of community voice. The fact the Playground was actively positioning its children as content creators set a precedent for the ongoing relationship with the wider community' ([J.D. Wright 2019](#)). This idea of community voice is highly problematic, and clarification of this statement is needed. Baltic Street Playground was, in fact, initiated and run by residents of Dalmarnock, and they saw themselves as needing to come together to build a space/provision that was missing. This was a case of 'bottom-up' placemaking that worked with/and alongside a collective, which itself formed a community of those invested in many different ways with the Playground. As such, the 'community voice' was only ever specifically those involved in the playground and not representative of the entirety of the area. Assemble's inter-relationship with this situation was as broker of the relationships between specific funders, policymakers, playground workers, and those residents that initially came together. As such, Baltic Street itself became a community in and of itself, with many complex inter-relationships with wider socio-cultural and geo-political trajectories.

It is this process, at the nexus of placemaking, collectivizing, commoning, and convening through play, art, cooking, growing (they are producing their own food in their vegetable patch), and architecture that is constantly evolving. In summary, the question of *how* collectives convene is, on the surface, very simple—they themselves convene around a *need* within society, which then becomes about working in a collaborative way with others who have vested interests in that *need*. However, the complexity is then about their approach to that *need*, which is always place-specific and defined by the interplay of people, organizations, and resources.

5. Materials and Methods

5.1. The DST Project on Yarn and Beyond

This DST project was undertaken on an open-source digital story platform called Yarn. Yarn's initial iteration was developed as part of the Pararchive project, an Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project running from 2013 to 2015, and included more than ten academic and organisational partners ([UKRI 2015](#)). Yarn was programmed to be an open digital resource wherein anyone could search for collection online resources and combine those resources with their own digital media (e.g., text, images, videos) to

tell their own stories, make new archives, be creative, and conduct their own research. The reason for its implementation in the project was that it provided an ethical, accessible, and adaptive platform in which to work collaboratively over several years. Yarn was also a relatively neutral space with a set of clear parameters that helped to instigate a sense of the commons, which, in essence, embodied the research in a reflexive manner. This ethos traced its way throughout the project as it developed and became more about the sharing of ideas and knowledge as the researcher–participant dialectic broke down. Coupled with the Yarn dialogue, this research draws upon engaged voluntary work and employs ‘hanging out’ methods with Assemble’s projects in Baltic Street Adventure Playground (Walmsley 2018). This helped to further feed into the digital storytelling work and provide a phenomenological perspective (spending informal time with the group) of their work.

5.2. Thematic Analysis

This article adopts a thematic analysis in order to draw out key themes across the research and is supported by the relevant commons literature. Thematic analysis has varied applications, from the fields of physics to anthropology. Flexibility is its strength, as articulated by Paul Mihas. Mihas states that ‘themes pierce the surface of data to evoke a higher-level story or abstract concept. They go deeper in unearthing participants’ tacit assumptions and pervasive logics and in connecting seemingly different topics’ (Mihas 2019). For this reason, this analysis will draw upon the following set of themes based on the process of convening guided by literature on commons practices. It is important to note that this is an application of a new conceptual framework to already existing data in order to investigate a specific set of themes that had previously been out of scope.

6. Discussion

6.1. Embodied Placed-Based, Arts-Led Research

In a recent publication on cultural policy and ‘the local’ Victoria Durrer, Abigail Gilmore, Leila Jancovich, and David Stevenson draw together research on the complexities and processes at play within different conceptions of ‘the local’. The authors state that ‘our particular proposition is the urgent need for greater understanding on the role of place within these processes and for critical reflection on the contingent nature of policy with locality’ (Durrer et al. 2023). The authors’ publication is a call to action for researchers and practitioners in this space(s). This article has begun to trace the way that artist-led collectives form social bonds or ‘friends in actions’ that oscillate between local, regional, national, and often global issues. This action simultaneously embodies forms of the commons or commoning practices to approach these issues. It is clear that this intersectionality and the placed-based context in which artist-led collectives operate have the potential to both ‘answer’ this call for action from a research and practical perspective and, in turn, influence policy at different levels. A note of caution is needed here as this article does not claim that collectives can influence every level and form of policy. Instead, what is proposed is that policymakers who are interested in place should consider how these convening practices can create these shared spaces and resources with many different stakeholders. What appears to be emerging through the way that artist-led collectives convene, by bringing often disparate parties together within a place through forms of commoning practices, is a set of artist-led situated research practices. This further suggests that artist-led collectives working with these methods of convening are already developing a ‘non-institutionalized’ or ‘post-institutional’ research methodology, which is, to a degree, rationalized within their entire collective endeavours. In order to articulate this further, one must return to Resolve Collective, Ruangrupa, and Assemble by drawing out several vital points.

Assemble has developed a set of processes or methods that they have refined and adapted through the learning from each of their projects. As Edgerley suggested, they almost unconsciously internalized aspects from their first project, including ‘open access process, no hierarchy. . . , DIY/learning through doing, publicly focused (‘the public’ as client)’ and that these became ‘vague guiding principles for what we collectively thought [. . .]

moving forwards' (Edgerley 2018). Similarly, Ruangrupa have described themselves as 'a platform that can transform information and experiences from daily life into knowledge' and Resolve Collective states that they have an entire section of their website dedicated to the research that underpins, supports, and energizes their practice (Collective 2023; Berghuis 2011).

What is clear is that research is not arbitrarily separated within these artist-led collectives: it is reflexive and based on action within a constant interplay with others. Crucially, this then continues to inform and shape their practices in future projects. Here is the crux of the matter: because artist-led collective practices are both 'in and of the world(s)' (to adapt a quote from art historian Thomas Berghuis and many others), then it stands to reason that they are both involved with and within new forms of understanding the complex social-cultural, geo-political, and historical milieu which is contemporaneity (Berghuis 2011).

Of course, from an external research perspective, one cannot simply go about forming collectives, as they essentially form through social bonds that cannot be engineered. However, what is demonstrated here is the possibility for careful and considered forms of research, be they arts-based or otherwise, to work with collectives over time. Further, researchers who have already formed artist-led collectives as part of their own practice could develop new collective arts-led methodologies from an experimental point of view (J. Wright 2021; J.D. Wright 2019).

6.2. Influence on Policy

Artist-led collectives are already in the process of influencing policy decisions, albeit in somewhat abstract ways, through arts funding and by running or establishing art fairs or through their involvement in developing community land trusts, amongst other forms of advocacy. However, the most intriguing possibility is how, through their practice, they represent a new form of organisation and offer new ways of being, making and understanding the diversity of places. Through the power of convening, collectives bring together, in close proximity, many stakeholders in a place. It is this convening that could move towards influencing new directions in policymaking. Mark Banks has recently developed a theory of contributive and distributive creative justice in relation to cultural work. Banks describes the fact that society is highly unequal and that cultural and creative work is particularly afflicted with inequality and inequity (Banks 2023). Banks draws upon a wealth of research that reveals these issues, arguing that 'while distribution is a worthy goal, the consistent failure to distribute justly might lead us to question the assumptions and mechanisms underpinning these distributive systems' (Banks 2023). In short, Banks offers a potential theoretical solution to this historically entrenched predicament. Banks argues that 'the universal distribution of an opportunity to contribute to culture-making might be needed to ensure maximum opportunity for people to take part in cultural work' (Banks 2023). Of course, sharing jobs in this way would require a complete systemic re-shaping. However, this concept has clear synergies with the practices of self-determinism, non-hierarchical working, and sharing practices that play out within artist-led collective activity. Indeed, as outlined in this article, a set of creative contributive and distributive practices are vital to the functioning of the collectives discussed. The modus operandi of Assemble, Ruangrupa, and Resolve Collective are predicated on the interplay of both contributive and distributive working; otherwise, their projects and overall practice would fail to gain traction and become entirely insular and closed off.

Another potential influence on policymaking from artist-led collectives could be how they reveal the specific interdependencies of place through their projects. To return to Massey's critique of community, the collectives in this article question notions of 'community' as a homogenized group because they work with many different people and sub-groups with often vastly differing views, expectations, and interests (Massey 1994). For example, Assemble did not empower a 'community' in Dalmarnock; they worked with many different people with often competing agendas and ideological positions. Even at a granular level of what 'residents' wanted for the playground, there was always a difference

of opinion and ideas because of the nature of individuality. As a result, these artist-led collective practices challenge long-held notions within policymaking that suggest these 'communities', or 'areas of deprivation', require ameliorative interventions and what has been termed the so-called 'social benefit' argument (Hope 2012; Warner 2002). It is in this complex un-ravelling of social and political hierarchies that collectives could offer policymaking a radical overhaul in perspective and approach.

That being said, artist-led collectives engaged in placemaking through commoning practices should not be seen as a panacea for policymakers to dispense the same repetitious rhetoric on economic benefit and regeneration. Neither should they constitute the only approach to understanding the complexities of place. There is a danger in this form of place-based convening that collectives themselves become gatekeepers, as was articulated by Edgerley in our story: 'I think systemic change is present within individuals within Assemble, but not necessarily within the collective' (Edgerley 2018). Edgerley went on to speak about how they have to 'operate within certain worlds' that are complicit with the 'status quo' and are inherently privileged. Indeed, during this research project, class tensions and outsider-insider dialectics became highly apparent. One clear example of this was in the field notes from the Baltic Street site work. The following extract was in the context of speaking with a worker at the playground: 'I received a lot of praise for my 'non-southern' accent, I had explained how I grew up in Cumbria and Irene suggested that this had helped when I talked to the children as my accent was not completely alien to them' (J.D. Wright 2019). Implied within this comment from the team member was a set of tensions between and within intersectional aspects of socio-cultural characteristics. On my arrival at Baltic Street, I had been briefed by members of the team that when Assemble had first arrived at the Playground, there had been some 'teething' issues with members of the collective being seen as from 'the south' (i.e., England/London) and of differing social class (i.e., predominantly middle-class). These initial tensions felt by some of those working within the playground were definitely warranted, given the seemingly failed regeneration of the wider area (and perception of the gentrification of the city), which had led to the need for the Playground in the first instance (Doucet et al. 2011). However, in this case, these differences between all those involved became invaluable to the creativity needed to develop the playground. This was articulated in the field notes in discussion with another member of Baltic Street, as 'they could see what Assemble were trying to achieve, they got involved at board level and it became about themselves not about an architecture collective from London' (J.D. Wright 2019). The key to Baltic Street Playground's emergence and continuation is in how all parties were able to establish mutual trust through both contributions to the Playground and the distribution of resources. It has become apparent that these are key factors in convening practices.

This highlights the difficulties and contradictions of convening with many different parties with vastly different perspectives and from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. What is needed is a better understanding of this form of convening practices through continued research and engagement with and within artist-led collectives. Further, this research suggests that they should be seen on their own terms and not as a solution to societal problems that require deeper systemic shifts. Yet, they point to a potential set of creative methodologies and place-based participatory research that could be invaluable for policymakers and researchers alike.

7. Conclusions

This article has addressed the notion that artist-led collectives are able to convene different stakeholders in a place through commoning practices. This, in turn, presents a multitude of possibilities for both research and policymaking. Artist-led collectives convening in these ways contribute to placemaking and public discourse on multiple planes and are constantly negotiating between competing forces.

The key implication for policymakers who are interested in the contingencies of place-based partnerships and collaboration is in the complex relationships that are formed by artist-led collectives convening with multiple stakeholders. If the aim of policymaking is to function as a situated practice, then considered engagement within these convening practices represents an important methodology. However, it is vital that all those within these projects and partnerships consider their own positionality in relation to others and the power that they have within these relationships, or they risk becoming exploitative. Further, the collectives must not be seen as ‘the voice’ of places and substitutes for often difficult conversations with different people, groups, and organizations. Artist-led collectives themselves can be insular and seen as exclusive, and thus, for policymakers engaging in place-based work, this must always be taken into account. However, careful building of mutual trust relationships over time can mitigate the risks, as is seen within the case studies and examples included in this article.

In the context of this Special Issue, artist-led collectives present the intriguing possibility of developing new forms of place-based participatory arts and creative methodologies. Further research is needed to discern the scope of these potential methodologies and how effective they may be in different contexts. Indeed, this study had its limitations in size and scope, and broader surveys coupled with further in-depth studies will be needed to understand these inter-relationships. For example, co-creating stories using DST methods could be one element in a much broader participatory methodological model where all those involved within a given place-based project directly work through ideas of the commons and convening. It is clear that there is an emergent trend within collectives that convene to think beyond the old binaries and speak to a pluralism that is much needed as the planet faces multiple converging crises.

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