

WHAT IF...?

## ARTIST-LED BUSINESS AS A PRACTICE OF WORLDBUILDING

by Joon-Lynn Goh

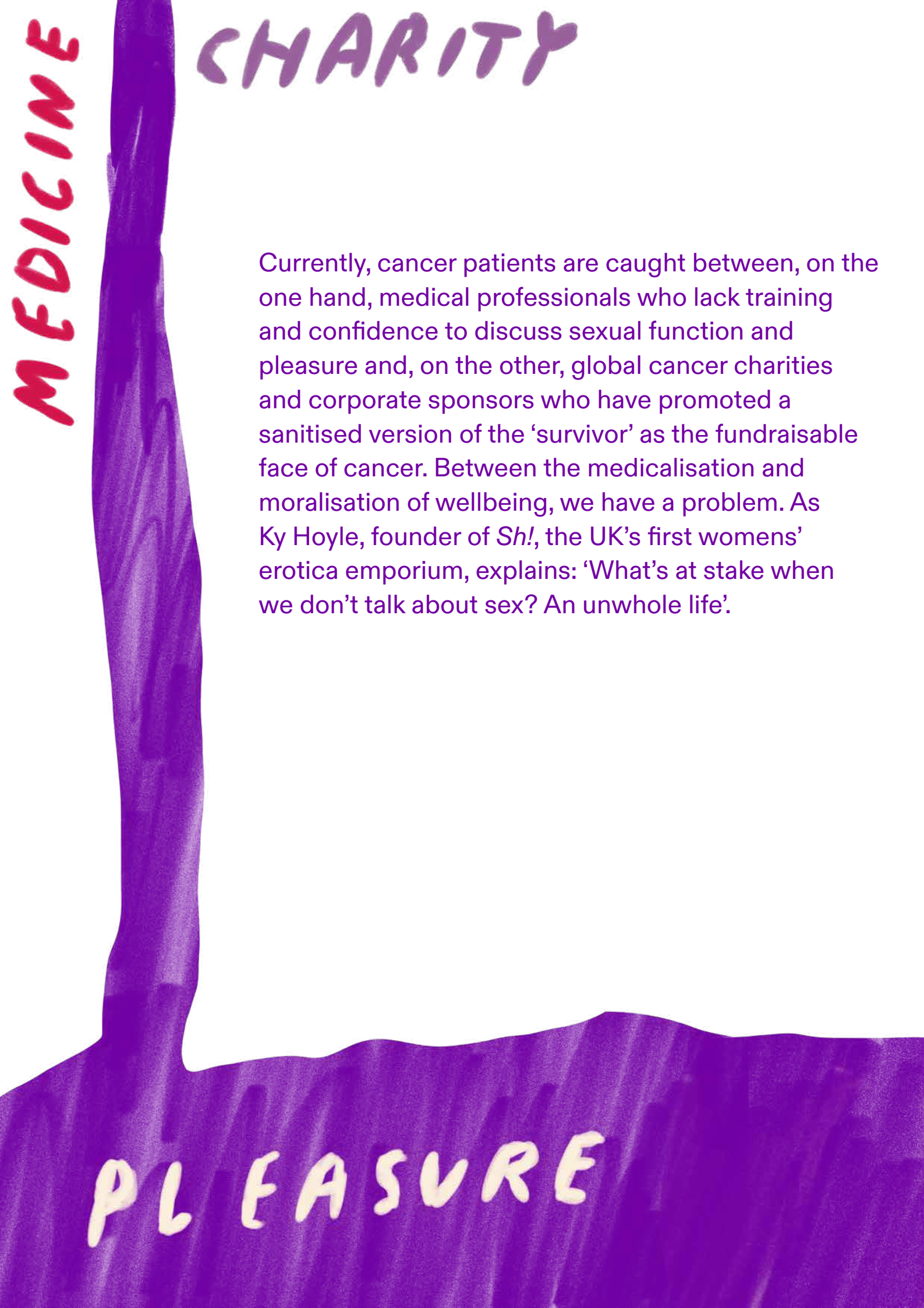
Sex With Cancer is many things. It is a shop; it is an artwork; and it is a campaign, exploring how people living with and beyond cancer can take agency over their own health and wellbeing. What holds these things together is a business. Not a business in the way we usually think of a profit-driven company or social enterprise, but a business led by artists who have experienced cancer and who wish to shift cultures around illness and intimacy.

Taking my experiences of co-founding Sex With Cancer as its starting point, this text is an exploration of the practices and possibilities of artist-led businesses in the UK. Working at the scale of the everyday, I believe artist-led businesses have the capacity to build different worlds in our current one. They can be sites of experimentation, magic, and stewardship in ways that can make change and transformation more accessible, pluralistic and aligned with the needs of future generations.

As we begin an ultra-marathon recovery from a global pandemic that has exacerbated long-standing social inequities in the UK and worldwide, finding tangible forms to build different worlds is not a fantasy project. Rather, it is about imagination, agency and possibility. It is about never returning to business as usual.

## MAKING 'WHAT IF?' A BUSINESS

I am an organiser working with migrant justice movements and an artist exploring infrastructure and community economies. At the start of 2018, I discovered I had breast cancer. This discovery led me to a year of treatment at St Barts Hospital, in which time I would often meet up with my friend, former cancer-patient, and co-founder of Sex With Cancer, Brian Lobel. We would talk about how treatment was going and how I was feeling emotionally and physically, but more often than not, we spent time discussing a 'What If?' idea that Brian had. *What if cancer patients started up their own sex shop?* This led to other questions: What would it look and feel like? How would it operate, be led or owned by cancer patients? How would we connect the different worlds it had the potential to bridge, from cancer to art, and enterprise to wider social movements? And how could all of this be fun? The conversations served as purposeful distraction as I faced an uncertain and difficult year. Three years later, with some resources and a team, we are now working to make 'What If?' into a business.

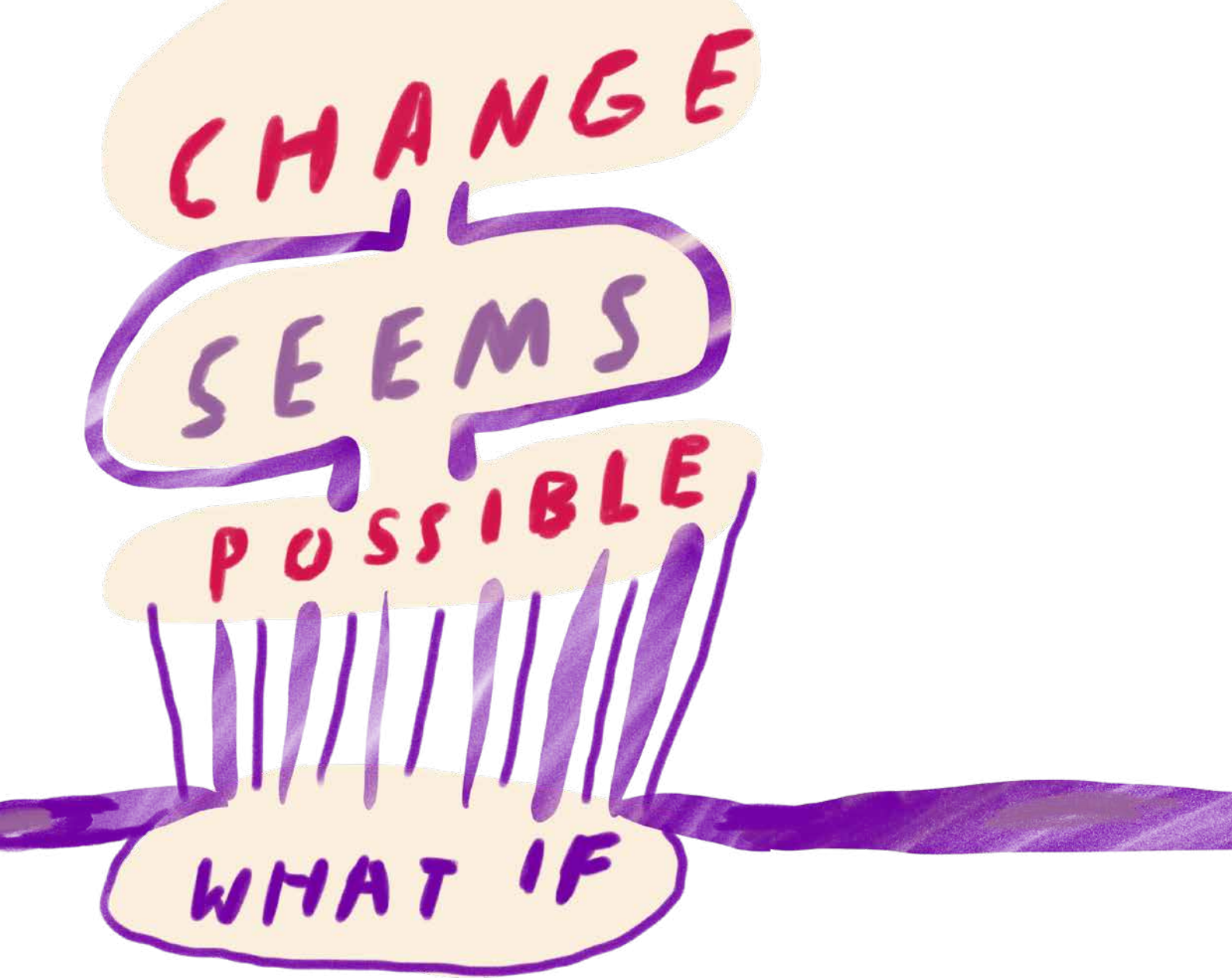


MEDICINE

CHARITY

Currently, cancer patients are caught between, on the one hand, medical professionals who lack training and confidence to discuss sexual function and pleasure and, on the other, global cancer charities and corporate sponsors who have promoted a sanitised version of the 'survivor' as the fundraisable face of cancer. Between the medicalisation and moralisation of wellbeing, we have a problem. As Ky Hoyle, founder of *Sh!*, the UK's first womens' erotica emporium, explains: 'What's at stake when we don't talk about sex? An unwhole life'.

PLEASURE



Sex With Cancer takes the unlikely form of a business led by artists who have experienced cancer, dealing with sex in an arena of care dominated by medicine and charity. It is an online shop selling sex toys and pleasure kits, as well as a resource of peer-led solutions to 25 frequently asked questions about sex and cancer, and a series of artist commissions exploring the intersections between intimacy, illness, disability, age and agency. Brian and I like to think of Sex With Cancer as a provocation; as a call for ‘pleasure activism’ in the Cancer World, which in the words of activist and writer adrienne maree brown is the ‘work we do to reclaim our whole, happy and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy’.



## BUSINESS AS AN ARTISTIC MEDIUM

*Sex With Cancer* situates itself in an ecology of artistic practices that are exploring business as an artistic medium. In these practices, business is not limited to the language and forms of social enterprise or profit-driven capitalism. Instead it is a means to enquire and experiment with elements of livelihood, sociality, accountability and worldbuilding, in ways that centre the needs of communities marginalised by the social and economic status quo. With this lens, business has the potential to be ‘any productive activity that could bring us sustenance’ in the words of activist legal scholar Janelle Orsi.

Artist-led businesses in the UK that I consider as peers include: The Feral MBA – ‘a radically different training course in business for artists and others’ led by artist and trader Kate Rich; Company Drinks – ‘art in the shape of a community drinks enterprise’ as described by artist and founder Kathrin Böhm; DKUK, a hair salon consisting of ‘a group of artists who have retrained as hairdressers using our artistic backgrounds and knowledge to enhance our hairdressing skills’; ABEULOS/YARD Arthouse – an artist-led hotel and cultural hub in development that is committed to ‘amplifying the imaginations and possibilities of community-led transformation’; and the Migrant Design Agency, a project in early development, which is exploring how migrant artists and designers can offer their design skills towards a wider migrant justice movement.



Each of these artist-led businesses can be understood as having a ‘use-value’, a concept championed by the network Asociacion de Art Util, who look at forms of art practice with direct social, political and economic impact. Or to borrow a phrase from art theorist Stephen Wright, they are orientated towards *usership* rather than spectatorship, in operating at a ‘1:1 scale’.

For Wright, a 1:1 scale of operations means art projects that are not utopian concepts, scaled-down models or representations of things in the world. Instead, they operate on the scale of daily life, being both what they *are* but also *artistic propositions of what they are*. So the cluster of artist-led businesses listed above performs a variety of real services: a business school, a sex shop, a drinks company, a hotel, a hair salon and a design agency. Yet they are also artistic propositions: exploring community economies, pleasure activism, Black-led neighbourhood transformation, artistic livelihoods and no border futures.

What this means is that artist-led businesses are containers for practices that are and feel very different from what we might commonly think of business, regardless of whether they are run for commercial profit or for a social cause. For example, in the hair-salon DKUK, the service is a haircut, but rather than sitting in front of a mirror, you face an artwork. This setting opens up a very different collaboration with your hairdresser, and creates a different kind of intimacy and location in which to view and discuss art. The business is a hair-salon, but it is also a hair-salon run by artists.



## WORLDBUILDING IN OUR EVERYDAY

As an organiser and artist invested in making change and transformation feel more possible, what excites me about artist-led businesses is that they build different worlds in our current one.

I like to think of artist-led businesses as containers for worldbuilding. In the context of science fiction, worldbuilding refers to a writer's craft in constructing an imaginary world. It requires a critical analysis of our current world, an expansive imagining of alternative worlds, and a skilled execution of storytelling. It is both visionary in scope and minute in its attention to detail.

Science fiction has long been a source of inspiration in art, design, architecture and social movements, manifested through practices of speculative design, design justice, visionary organising and afrofuturism. In a similar way, science fiction's craft of worldbuilding can sharpen our understanding of artist-led businesses. If worldbuilding is a way of exercising our imaginations, and if exercising our imaginations, affords those most marginalised by the status quo the ability to 'write ourselves into the future' (brown, Imarisha), then artist-led businesses can be containers to hold the futures we desire. They are the structures, configurations and settings that enable us to manifest and practice our visions and values of a different future in the present moment.



As containers for worldbuilding, artist-led businesses are also containers that are accessible. They can bring different ways of acting and relating into the fabric of our everyday interactions, exchanges and transactions. They can become sites of daily experimentation – and it is at this scale that change and transformation is most visible, available and adaptable for others. In contrast to the top-down thinking of charity or government-run change-making programmes, there is a DIY, iterative, and ground-up spirit to artist-led businesses that make different worlds seem more doable. It encourages you to think – if they can set up a shop from a ‘What If?’, what might I do?







WHAT IF

SEX SHOP

HAIRDRESSER

DESIGN  
AGENCY

DRINKS COMPANY

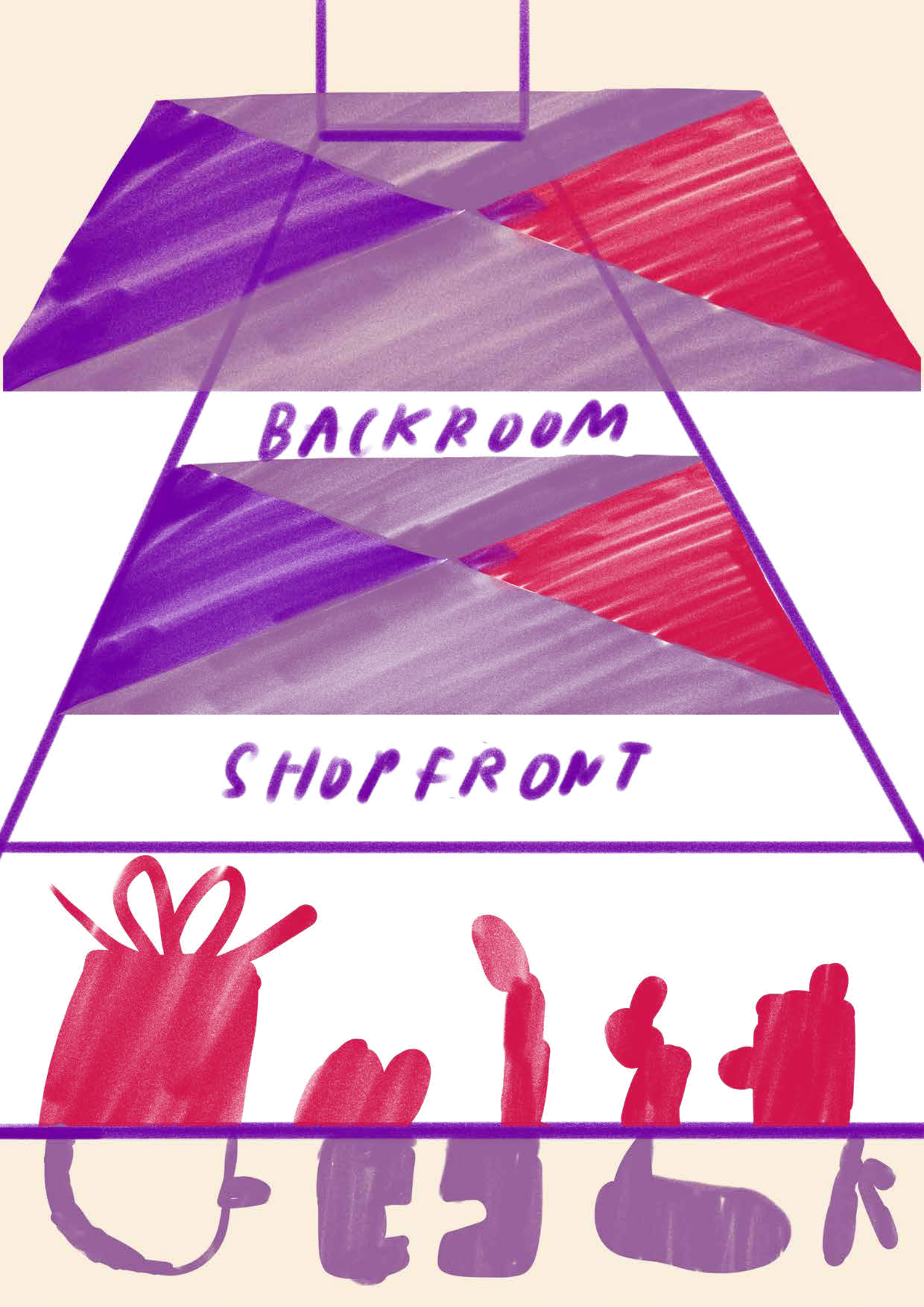
## THE MAGIC OF SHOP FRONTS AND BACK ROOMS

Sex With Cancer is the shop your nurse recommended. Or maybe it is the shop you have passed by and taken a fancy to its window display. You have a few minutes spare so you step in and your eyes start to wander. Something twinkles. You pick it up, turn it around, and a question pops into your mind. As if by magic, a shopkeeper appears to give you just the right amount of information, knowing the precise moment when to back off. You decide to purchase that special thing.

As a bandana is artfully tied around your package, you begin to be aware of a low hum of conversation from behind you. Your ears track the hum to a backroom that wasn't apparent when you first stepped in. In fact, the backroom is a really large space, much larger than its front. There are tables of people chatting and laughing. Others are reading and resting in what looks like cosy chairs, and there seems to be more happening at the very back. You catch snippets of conversations – 'And my doctor actually blushed, looked at the floor, and called for the nurse...' 'Seriously, you put that on your tinder profile??...' 'I don't care if its going to raise millions, I'm not wearing pink...' 'Yeaaa, I finally started the conversation last night...'

You look at the shop, return your gaze to the backroom, and then settle on the shopkeeper, who smiles. 'I see you've discovered the backroom. Why don't you have a look?'





BACKROOM

SHOP FRONT



If artist-led businesses are containers for world-building, I want to explore one container that takes the shape of a shopfront and a backroom. Shops exist in our everyday, and are centered around usership: it is users who will determine how a shop is used and what is useful to them on that day. Sex With Cancer and other artist-led businesses intervene in this expectation, making metaphorical and actual shopfronts with backrooms that instead conjure up an ‘as if by magic’ experience. By this, I mean that people might enter into a shop to explore one world, yet find themselves unexpectedly in many others. For example, you may purchase a Company Drinks elderflower lemonade, to find yourself on a hop picking excursion in Kent. You may pick up some lube from Sex With Cancer, to find yourself feeling braver from a conversation around desire, ageing and illness.

We could consider this shopfront and backroom strategy through anthropologist James C Scott’s concept of infrapolitics; a front or camouflage to smuggle in an ulterior motive. Artist Kristina Wong recently proposed this in other words by responding to anti-abortion legislation in Texas, US, with an idea: ‘who wants to help me open an abortion clinic in Texas disguised as a gun store?’ But perhaps a better way of understanding this strategy is via what anthropologist Arturo Escobar names the pluriverse; ‘a world where many worlds fit’. With this perspective, a shop front and backroom is a strategy that invites users to explore and discover the many worlds within themselves that may not be apparent at first. Artist-led businesses hold a journey of possibility and plurality, in which people find their own way from shopfront to backroom, and in which each person’s discovery has a magical potential.

## AN OPPORTUNITY OF STEWARDSHIP

Artist-led businesses do not only operate at the scale of the everyday. They also operate with a timescale or mindset that goes beyond the single event (more often the currency in art), to practices that are daily, ongoing or even generational. This timescale is very similar to that of infrastructure, which urban geographers Alan Latham and Jack Layton summarise as ‘the background structures and systems that allow social, economic, cultural, and political life to happen’. From the physical infrastructure of pipes, power grids and roads to the social infrastructure of libraries, community centres, high streets and carnivals, infrastructure facilitates our relationships and access to resources, or lack thereof.

As infrastructure has immense power to perpetuate cultures and shape worlds far beyond our own life-spans, working with infrastructure involves questions of stewardship between generations. As engineering professor David Billington reflects: ‘Our railroads, highways, parks, and power grids reveal who we were and what we aspired to become at the time that we built them. The systems we build in coming years will tell future generations who we are and how we see the world today. If we fail to bridge our gaping social divisions, they may even determine whether that ‘we continue to exist’.

I am interested in the correlation between artist-led businesses and infrastructure because it focuses attention on the opportunity of stewardship in world-building. By operating with ongoing timescales, artist-led businesses create a space to interrogate and enact our role as stewards. In this role, we are given the chance to take seriously the impact of what we do as a bridge between past and future generations. We are pressed to consider: What worlds are we passing on to future generations? What worlds do we want to build upon and nurture? And what worlds do we resist? There is a difference between a sex shop and a sex shop that is aligned with a long history in which pleasure is a strategy of healing and empowerment for marginalised communities. There is a difference between a hotel and a hotel that is invested in social and spatial justice that continues the black radical imagination into the future.



## TRANSFORMATION, NOT BUSINESS AS USUAL

In 2016, policy advisor and researcher Dan Gregory tracked the breath, depth and texture of social life being lost across England. This included 28,000 pubs closed since the 1970s, 121 libraries closed in 2016 alone, and 600 youth centres closed between 2012–2016. In 2021, countries, cities and neighbourhoods are grappling with questions of how to recover from a global pandemic that has exacerbated losses such as these. How we imagine, repurpose and invest in infrastructures that support our health, wellbeing and relationships is paramount.

In this context, artist-led businesses are not just a fantasy project or an intellectual itch to scratch, but a medium through which to explore change and transformation at the scale of the everyday. As real life services *and* imaginative propositions of different ways of living, artist-led businesses are sites of experimentation in which doing things differently can become more accessible, pluralistic and aligned with our commitments to the next generation. Beyond a simple binary of profit-driven companies and social enterprises, artist-led businesses are deep in a practice of worldbuilding in a time that requires our most imaginative and pleasurable transformations, rather than business as usual.

Essay by Joon-Lynn Goh, written in the summer of 2021, in correspondence with Kate Rich.

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REAL LIFE SERVICES

ARTIST-LED  
BUSINESSES

DIFFERENT

WORLDS

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