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# Being Among Bluebells

## Amateurism as a mode of queer futurity at Duckie's Slaughterhouse Club

BEN WALTERS

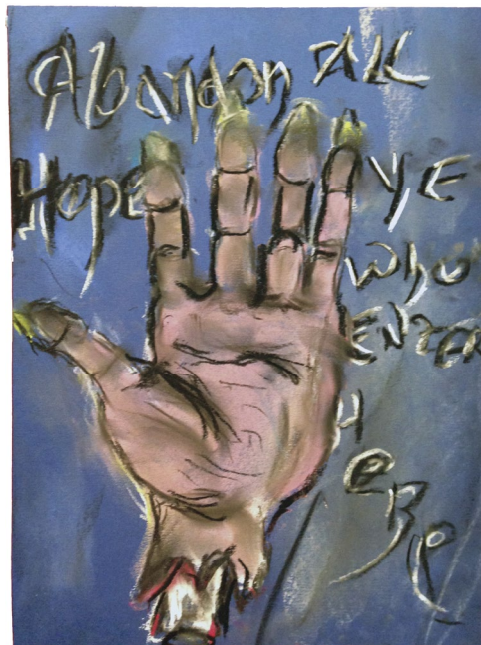


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Work by Slaughterhouse  
Club participants (used with  
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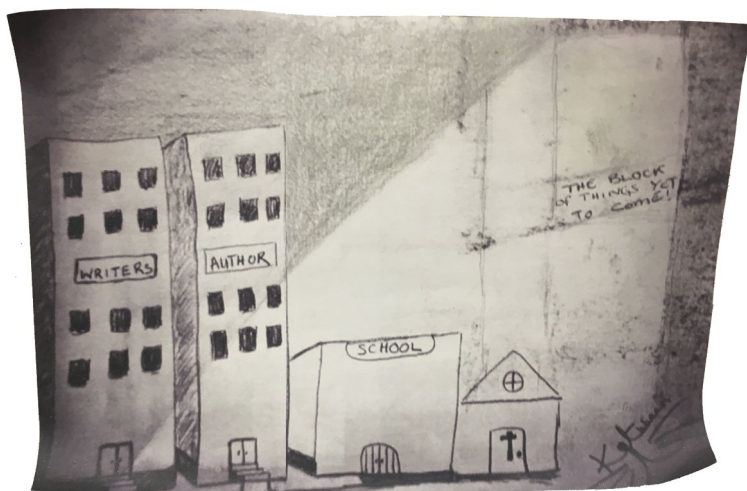
Amateurs have more fun. Rather than connoting failure or delusion, the figure of the amateur can generatively engage the refusal of normative productivity, the distinctive expression of marginalized subjectivities and the embrace of pleasure. These attributes, I argue, can in turn can build empathy, relationality and hope on self-defined terms. A focus on the DIY functionality of the amateur – rather than, say, the relation of the amateur to broader understandings of public reception or normatively validated achievement – can align amateur practice with the value of autonomy in anarchist thinking. The political geographer Gavin Brown, for instance, notes that, whether or not anarchism is consciously avowed, the power of autonomy is mobilized ‘anywhere people attempt to take control of their own lives and create what they desire for themselves ... without deference towards those claiming positions of authority’ (Brown 2011:202). This bears queerly on amateurism in its conception of

individuals or groups responding to experiences and feelings of alienation and marginalization through the creation of forms and processes that allow for experimentation with ways of feeling, understanding, relating and being that are less accountable to market supremacy, social normativity and other dominant discourses of exclusion. Amateurism can be a potent mode for disrupting normative expectations, enabling distinctive and less accountable forms of self-expression and supporting the materialization of more equitable worlds.

I want to illustrate this position with reference to the Slaughterhouse Club, a drop-in arts project for people living with homelessness, produced by the queer performance collective Duckie. I’ll describe the club’s emergence from Duckie’s wider practice, its evolving operation and the wide range of works produced there. It’s helpful, I suggest, to understand participants as amateur artists, inhabiting a space apart from the transactional street or the institutional hostel,







accountable to self-determined pleasure and expression rather than professional norms or expectations around productivity. I explore the disruptive potential of amateurism and the kinds of creativity and relationality enabled when professionals put themselves at the service of amateurs (rather than vice versa). Finally, examples of work produced at the club illustrate its capacity to support practice engaged with, or indifferent to, participants' material circumstances, and expressive of multiple futurities or none at all.<sup>1</sup>

#### AT THE SLAUGHTERHOUSE CLUB

The Slaughterhouse Club is an ongoing drop-in arts project for people living with homelessness, addiction and mental health challenges, produced by the queer performance collective Duckie and based in hostels run by the charity Thames Reach in south London. Between October 2015 and December 2016, I spent twenty-eight days in total at the hostels on Robertson Street in Battersea and at Graham House in Vauxhall. Coordinated by regular Duckie collaborators Tim Brunsden, Mark Whitelaw and Robin Whitmore, the club takes place in open access rooms stocked with analogue and digital art supplies. In an ambience that shifts between quiet and rowdy, amiable and fractious, languorous and productive, participating residents socialize, listen to music, watch online videos and make art. The club is mostly funded by a £359,740 grant from the Big Lottery Fund's Reaching Communities stream, awarded over a five-year period beginning October 2015.<sup>2</sup> As such, the club

is accountable to some normative metrics around participation levels and reduced alcohol and drug use among participants, which it met. Thames Reach senior practitioners noted the project's effects in reducing drinking and increasing harmonious socializing, and its unusual popularity, even among so-called 'hard-to-reach' residents; they also described Duckie producers as unusually adaptive and inclusive, having few fixed goals and not attending only to the most enthusiastic participants (Duckie 2017: 5–9).

The club's success owes something to Duckie's unique trajectory and its evolving engagement with situations of marginalization. The collective began in 1995 as a boozy queer club night, platforming entertaining, experimental short-form performance, and

<sup>1</sup> This argument is adapted from my doctoral thesis (Walters 2018). Unless otherwise stated, observations are from my field notes and Slaughterhouse Club producers' online 'diaries', provided by producers, and quotations are from my field notes and recordings. Participants' names have been changed to protect anonymity, except for Billy and John, whose names already appear on published materials.

<sup>2</sup> The Slaughterhouse Club faces considerable uncertainty given the end of its current funding stream in October 2020 and the potential impact of the coronavirus pandemic on its often vulnerable participants.

■ Work by Slaughterhouse Club participants as it appears in *Maggie* magazine (used with permission).



soon expanded to larger-scale immersive events and full-length shows. Since 2010, it has also developed community-based projects, working, for instance, with young queer performers, older people without many family or friends and queer, trans and intersex people of colour. Each of these projects is highly particular but the Slaughterhouse Club is perhaps the most distinctive of all, not being based around a performance event or specific output of any kind. It represents a slower, more patient kind of work, showing how small moves can grow into sustained collaborations and small marks into substantive artistic achievements. Under these conditions, participants have created a huge volume of work, including animal drawings, sardonic cartoons and symbolic streetscapes as well as a range of musical works and street, nature and portrait photography. Other participants have recited Tamil poetry, stencilled slogans, created an animated explication of a car engine and made written, collaged, video and audio works directly engaging experiences of homelessness, addiction and mental health problems. Operating quietly and unobtrusively in an atmosphere of support and fun, the club enables – without obligating – participation, agency and collectivity by materializing a life-world that supports and valorizes subjects who have often failed or refused to participate in normative progress narratives.

Participants' construction as empowered artists is central to this. Early iterations of the project, emerging from around 2003, imagined potential public performance events or encouraged artworks conceived by producers and centred around, for instance, scheduled and collaborative processes incorporating visual likenesses of participants. When these proved problematic, the project evolved to foreground formats that gave participants fewer expectations and more control, focusing on individual expressive projects emerging from participants' own professed interests and experimental practice, facilitated by equipment, material and producer support where requested. Rather than positioning participants as potential public performers or objects of (self-) representation, the club enables them to set their own terms of engagement and output, if any. 'The participants were treated as artists', according to Duckie producer Simon Casson, and the project

aims to help them 'see and believe in their own humanity' (Duckie 2017:2, 5).

The club's intention, then, is to shift perceptions of relationships between support-service workers and users 'from "helper" and "person in need of help" to reader and author, viewer and artist, or audience and performer' (Duckie 2014: 10). More particularly, I argue, and potentially, the Slaughterhouse Club constructs its participants as amateur artists. It's important to note that the club's producers don't like the term 'amateur', preferring simply to refer to participants as artists. To them, 'amateur' conveys a discreditable tang of incompetence or failure, an association (as I will discuss later) shared by some critics. I find 'amateur' a useful word, however, locating practice at the club as intentionally distinct from professional, applied or therapeutic art practices and capable instead of centring such fruitful considerations as self-determined pleasure, relatively autonomous operation and indifference to public audience. Amateurism can be a way to frame the coexistence of minimally conditional access to the means of aesthetic production with the legitimization of non-productivity.

The club's participants are accustomed to the transactional space of the street and the institutional space of the hostel. The club offers a different, less accountable, more freely expressive space in which, perhaps very slowly, they become able to see themselves and one another anew. As José Esteban Muñoz notes of the various precarious platforms for expression available to marginalized people, 'quotidian action yields utopian results ... animating the desire for a time and place that is not yet here' (2009: 152) – and, in this case, I argue, materializing such a site, in a room in a hostel where people, alone and together, sit and think and feel and understand themselves and one another a little better and make things that say who they are. In this sense, its participants constitute the kind of figure identified by Elizabeth Freeman as being capable of jamming the machinery of normative progress and success by dint of inhabiting neither a peaceably static, feminized domestic sphere nor a reliably economically productive masculinized public sphere. In Freeman's words, such queer figures (including 'blacks, homosexuals, and other

deviants’) threaten ‘the forward movement of individual or civilizational development’ (2010: 24, 28). This helps frame the disruptive capacity of the amateur.

#### THE DISRUPTIVE CAPACITY OF THE AMATEUR

Various critical understandings of the amateur have been articulated to strikingly different ends. Sara Jane Bailes, for instance, reductively frames the amateur as a deluded wannabe, ‘an often risible and endearing figure ... always already bound up with the notion of failure’ who warrants attention only because the ‘*forcelessness* and weakness’ of their expressive capacities can be ironically mobilized by professional artists seeking to critique hegemonic ideologies of artistic mastery (Bailes 2011: 93, 30, emphasis in original). This negative framing excludes both the amateur who fulfils hegemonic expectations and the amateur whose aspirations lie elsewhere; it also aligns with the point-and-laugh construction of the naive, incompetent amateur exploited in entertainment formats ranging from the *Kabarett der Namenlosen* in Weimar Berlin to *The Gong Show* (Chuck Barris Productions, 1976–89) in late twentieth-century America to *Britain’s Got Talent* (Syc0 Entertainment, 2007–) in the UK today. The view of the ‘absolutely dreadful’ amateur also haunts John Kelsey’s account of an amateur performance night at a Cleveland gay bar in the 1940s – yet, in quoting Kelsey’s account, Muñoz finds value in an ‘aesthetics of amateurism’, also evident in punk rock, that signals ‘a refusal of mastery and an insistence on process and becoming’ (Muñoz 2009: 106).

This amateurism is not only about failure but also about the exploration of individual subjectivity and alternative value systems. There’s queer power in such understandings with relevance to operative autonomy. As noted above, Brown argues that amateur agency is significant not because it fails on conventional terms but because it insists on ‘doing something different’ (Brown 2011: 200, 203). He lists several features of amateur endeavour that align with anarchist ethics, including valuing ‘skill-sharing over professional specialisation; fluidity and horizontal forms of organisation over hierarchies;

sites for learning and personal growth away from the more controlled environments of formal education; and a celebration of playful inefficiency over the earnest efficiency of alienated work’ (205–6). All of these apply to the club, at which producers sometimes learn from participants in a mostly playful and informal setting. Nicholas Ridout, meanwhile, suggests that the amateur can be a full-blooded utopian, trying, despite capitalism, ‘to realize something that looks and feels like the true realm of freedom’ (2013: 4). Such concerns align with the club’s emergent, autonomous and adaptive operation and its provision of access to forms of expressive freedom otherwise unavailable to participants.

Unlike the projects Brown and Ridout discuss, and notwithstanding the collaborative support on offer, the Slaughterhouse Club is predominantly a site of solo rather than collective expression. In this sense, participants share attributes with the amateur as described by Carolyn Dinshaw. Dinshaw frames the amateur as ‘a bit queer’ by virtue of refusing the normative temporalities associated with professional productivity and success in favour of a meandering, unaccountable practice rooted in personal attachment and the freedom to ‘linger at moments of pleasure’ (Dinshaw 2012: 31, 22). This queerness, Dinshaw argues, is more pronounced when, like club participants, amateurs are ‘belated’, ‘underdeveloped’ or otherwise normatively lacking in relation to the reproductive family as well as wage work (31). In this sense, club participants’ sometimes irregular hours, unpredictable rates of progress and migratory aesthetic proclivities become neither failures of productivity nor undisciplined errancy but expected aspects of a structured identity materially and vocationally supported by the club. This support is crucial because normatively unaccountable amateurism is much more easily attainable for those with independent means than those without. Stephen Greer has attended, for instance, to the spectacular aesthetic profligacy of Henry Paget, fifth Marquess of Anglesey (Greer 2019: 88–91), while Dinshaw’s account focuses on privately wealthy individuals such as the Victorian medievalist Frederick James Furnivall, who sometimes set aside his work to enjoy ‘cricket, walks, [and] picnics’ or to be ‘among



bluebells, honeysuckles, laburnums, cuckoos, and nightingales' instead (Dinshaw 2012:28). Equivalents for Slaughterhouse Club participants might include sleeping, talking, drinking or smoking with friends and acquaintances, walking around the neighbourhood or enjoying time in a park. To be among bluebells can be the stuff of queer futurity.

#### ENABLING DISTINCTIVE SUBJECTIVE EXPRESSION THROUGH UNCONDITIONAL SUPPORT

Vital to its resistance of normativity, the club does not withdraw support if participants choose to do such things instead of attending, or attend without producing work. Even some critical defences of the amateur implicitly reproduce normative expectations: Dinshaw, for instance, celebrates amateur literary criticism because it 'can expose and critique professional literary activities' and 'help us' enrich practices of knowledge creation – 'us' apparently being professional academic researchers (Dinshaw 2012:24). Overlooked is the possibility that the amateur might not be motivated by knowledge creation at all but by, for instance, the desire to express oneself freely or be distracted from burden or be validated in one's own eyes or be in amenable company predicated on a shared interest. The club asks not what amateurs can do for professionals but what professionals can do for amateurs.

■ (right) Artwork for a CD of a Slaughterhouse Club participant's music (used with permission).



The Slaughterhouse Club affords participants kinds of support typically dependent on formal education and/or disposable income, including but not limited to art materials, electronic equipment, day trips and excursions, film screenings and technical instruction. Vocational support includes lengthy conversations unpacking the practical and aesthetic implications of different ideas and choices and exploring the relationship between intention and practice as small ideas evolve into engaged processes or material outcomes. During my period of observation, producer support also involved organizing platforms for the exhibition of participants' work, on the walls of the club rooms, around Robertson Street and Graham House, in print (a twelve-page magazine, *Magpie*, showcasing participants' work), online (an in-house podcast called *Change FM*, an ebook of paintings) and in CD form (a selection of Billy's keyboard renditions).

Some participants expressed gratitude bordering on astonishment for this support. Dominic told me: 'they're almost falling over each other to hook onto an idea of mine and try and move it forward. I've never experienced it before and it's an absolutely amazing experience'. Dominic was no less surprised that this support came without conditions of participation or productivity. He told me:

Even though I wanna be there, maybe I've got this appointment over in Brixton or wherever and I'll bump into somebody on the way back and I might have a beer with them or something and I don't get back and I think, 'Oh, shit, I said I'd be back at two

■ Cover image, *Magpie* magazine (used with permission).





and I'm not there and they're gonna be cross with me'. And they go, 'Oh, hi, Dom! How's it going?', which makes me just wanna engage more.

This brief anecdote conveys Dominic's motivation to attend the club, his expectation that the expression of a desire to attend will constitute an accountable commitment, his need to coordinate club attendance with other obligations, the possibility of unplanned pleasurable encounters disrupting that attendance, the expectation that failure to attend will incur emotionally charged disciplinary repercussions, surprise at the amicable absence of such repercussions and, crucially, the acknowledgement that this approach incentivizes further engagement with the club.

The club's low accountability and lack of specific goals facilitate engagement, then, but they also facilitate creativity by encouraging the experimental pursuit of expressive activity on the basis of subjective pleasure and distinctive personal interests and aptitudes, from expressions of long-standing hobbies (including card tricks) or nostalgia (including illustrated memories) to works representing nature (including drawings of tigers and dinosaurs) or fantastical realms (including a multimedia animated fantasy saga).

Such support affirms participants' status as amateur artists by both enabling and valorizing distinctive expression on their own terms and without capitalizing or instrumentalizing outcomes. These amateur artists are bound not to profitable productivity but to the queerer concerns of self-determined, unaccountable pleasure. After all, etymologically, to be an amateur is to act out of love. Their duty is to the pursuit of stimulating, absorbing and enjoyable activity, to no necessary end. The professional

does it for money and status. The craftsperson takes pride in recognition of a job well done. The amateur does it for fun. And at the club, fun acted as a technology of utopian experiment, enabling the rehearsal of exploratory and potentially transformative ways of being.

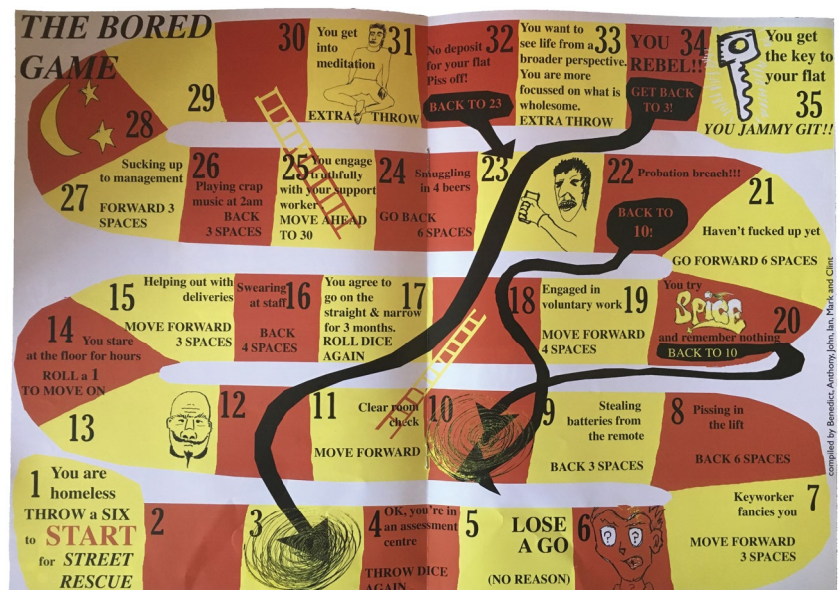
#### WORKS GENERATED AT THE CLUB

The self-determined, self-accountable work created at the Slaughterhouse Club during my observations covered a wide range of subjects, forms and affects. I want to describe two examples here. One shows the club's capacity to generate witty, complex amateur work engaged with the material realities of participants' lives; the other shows the club's capacity to support self-realization beyond contingent constraints.

The first work, 'the Bored Game', not only conveys the lived experience of life in Thames Reach but also shows, within a single piece, the club's capacity to support various, even conflicting positions of futurity. A rare collaboration between multiple residents (six), it irreverently portrays hostel life in the form of a 35-square snakes-and-ladders-style board game, repositioning a format conventionally associated with domestic nuclear family fun to articulate experiences far removed from idealized normative domesticity. 'The Bored Game' is funny and spiky, earnest and flippant, aspirational and absurdist, evincing both hopeful

■ (left) Logo for the Change FM podcast (used with permission).

■ 'The Bored Game' as it appears in *Maggie* magazine (used with permission).





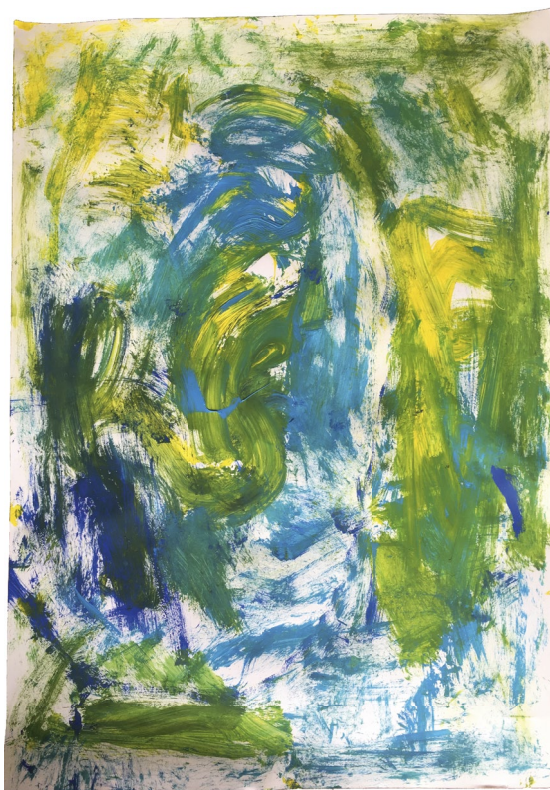
■ (both pages) Works by Slaughterhouse Club participant John.



futurity and sardonic refusal. The squares' red and yellow colours conjure both festivity and alarm; hand-drawn ladders offer advancement while raggedy arrows end in ominous whirlpools. Many squares bear instructions either enhancing or impeding progress. Helpful squares alternate in tone between cocky ('Key worker fancies you. Move forward 3 spaces'), wholesome ('You get into meditation. Extra throw') and sarcastic ('Haven't fucked up yet. Go forward 6 spaces'); negative ones encompass absurdity ('Lose a go (no reason)'), manky realism ('Pissing in the lift. Back 6 spaces') and recalcitrance ('Probation breach!!! Back to 10!'). Most strikingly, the final square's promise of a key to a flat of one's own offers a future-oriented vision of rehabilitation and recuperation – yet the penultimate square holds open the possibility of wilful refusal and defiant agency for its own sake: 'You rebel!! Get back to 3!' Published as the centrefold in *Magpie* magazine, 'the Bored Game' shows how the club enables and indeed champions subjective expression of the lived experience of hostel life without foregrounding individualistic self-narrativization (as many applied theatre projects do) or dictating the tone or sensibility of participants' engagement

with ideas of progress or propriety. Works made at the club might be about the desirability of normative success or its absurdity or both.

The Slaughterhouse Club also supported John in a painting practice structured around present engagement and indifference to past and future. From early experiments rolling balls through paint, John developed an abstract practice that worked with serendipity, moving between finger and brush work and incorporating accidental spillages. Whitelaw told me that, in his experience, most non-professional participants in arts projects are initially strongly goal-oriented but John, exceptionally, 'doesn't need an end point in order to start the work'. As John put it, 'I just like dabbing paint on paper and seeing what comes up. It's interesting. It evolves'. His works were fluid and adaptive, swirling and emotional. To see him work was to see unselfconsciousness in action: the brush seemed less an instrument of calculated demarcation than an extension of his moving body. He made curved shapes that corresponded not to any represented object or idea but to the sweep of his arm as it extended naturally to the paper. Through form and colour, John's paintings





documented his body in motion and his emotions in flux. But this documentary status was incidental to their existence as something satisfying and non-teleological to do with his self in the present. Painting gave John another way of being in the world.

At times, this proved cathartic: agitated after the suspension of his benefits, John improvised a dark, dynamic abstract form in red, black and green, concluding in a lighter mood that 'that's got the angst out of me' even as he acknowledged the persistence of the material challenges he faced. John was not impervious to recognition. He was tickled when Whitelaw dubbed his distinctive abstract style 'paralytic prolific' and proud that his growing body of work was displayed on the walls of the club room used by the club (tongue in cheek, he called it 'my art gallery') and arranged as an ebook by producers. Increasingly confident, he asserted his presence in the space one night by painting in his distinctive style directly onto a tabletop. His world was expanding. His death, less than a week later, was sudden, leaving his body on the street halfway to the off-licence. Eleven of his paintings were on the wall of the club room and the painted tabletop stood in the corner. Two weeks later, it had been wiped clean. John's was not a practice of futurity but of insistence on the now. 'You start at the start and end at the end and make up the stuff in between', he said.

## CONCLUSION

Inspired by their own experiences, needs and desires, the amateur artists of the Slaughterhouse Club chart their own course and make their own marks on their own terms. The club and its works materialize commitments to belief in amateur artistic practice as a politically charged technology of social change without investing in narrativized biography or defined goals. Rather, it enables forms of escape, resistance, collective expression and emergent world making. The means of artistic production are, if not necessarily owned, made available with minimal conditions or expectations and used on the basis of attachment and pleasure, conveying a range of positions towards past, present and future, or none at all. The club insists that Thames Reach



residents are not hopeless or expendable or merely suitable cases for normative recuperation. They deserve to be heard and they deserve to be held and they deserve to be among bluebells.

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