

As the first weekend of September arrived once more, so too did the much-anticipated b-side Arts Festival. This year, having immersed myself in the festival's offerings on the Isle of Portland, I was left not only full with pride, but also brimming with reflections – some of which I attempt to unravel here.

It was midday but somehow it still felt like early morning. Coming back onto the island and soon bumping into all the familiar faces of b-side and friends. As if they'd never stopped running around, organising, facilitating, chatting, laughing, all night (it wouldn't surprise me if they hadn't).

It had stopped raining, finally, and the sun was still burning through the morning cloud. Sally Watkins, a co-founder of b-side and a woman who one rarely, if ever, sees without a quiet sparkle of life in her eye – almost as if she's always in on a secret that something magical is about to happen – was greeting some visitors on their way to see the exhibition of The Red Dress.

As we passed she tore off from her conversation to stop me, an excitement and urgency in her tone;

'Ellie, I must tell you' she exclaimed, in reference to a conversation we'd had the night before, whilst she was washing up in the tiny kitchen of Portland's Royal Manor Theatre, where I'd told her my thoughts about The Red Dress.

'I've gone in again this morning and spent some time with it. I've been thinking, it's all about the economy.'

The words spilled out as she explained her ideas for the new Portland dress, which stands beside the intricate detail of The Red Dress as a blank canvas, waiting to be embroidered with the marks of Portlanders. The hope is that it will transform into a vessel of Portland identity to be mirrored back to the visitors of next year's festival. Sally mused about how it could also become something that feeds back into the local economy.

The Red Dress made its way to Portland after having been worked on by majority women across 51 countries. Kirsty McLeod conceived of the project in 2009 as an expression of

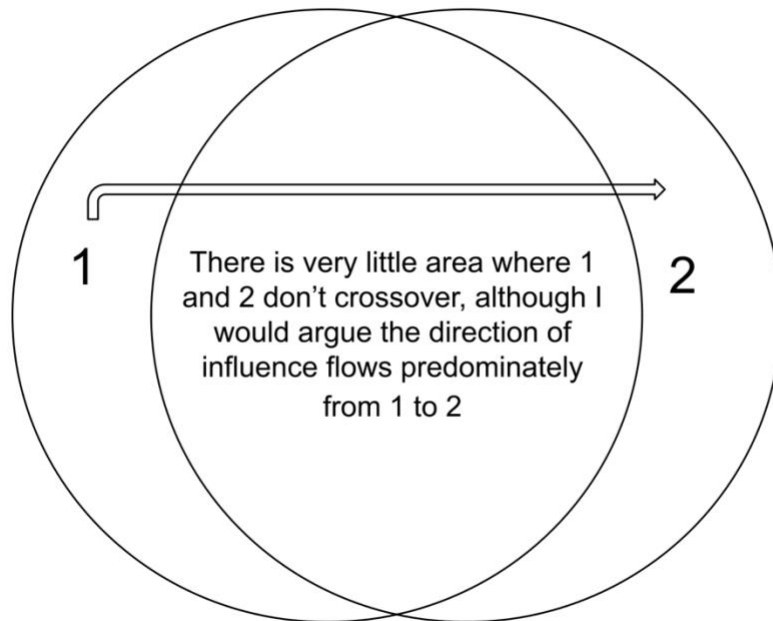
identity without borders, uniting people through embroidery. Throughout the 14-year-evolution into its current form, the dress has become about so much more. It has become a vessel through which voices can be amplified, a vessel of self-expression, of geopolitics. Identities are held together through its material stitches and yet it becomes so much more than its materiality. Sally is, of course, right – it is about the economy. Itself funded by charities, The Red Dress economically supports the artists and communities it interacts with. All 141 commissioned embroiderers were paid for their work and continue to receive a portion of exhibition and merchandise profits, as well as the opportunity to sell their work on The Red Dress Etsy shop.

The concept of the dress is about more than just its stitching; its stitching about more than just the dress; and its journey about more than just its travelling. The dress' feedback loops, (the artists, the dress, the journey, the *economy*) perforate each other to create a wider movement of support that quietly disrupts the oppressive and impoverished systems that many of these contributing artists have struggled under. The dress becomes in itself a regenerative economy.

The theme of this year's festival, 'Who Do We Think We Are', is of course also about the economy, (and much more). We live under a (financialised) structure which has formed subjects of its society (us) into products of binaries and exclusions under its pressure. How do we figure out who we are under these conditions of division? And how do we communicate between these deeply-dug borders? How can we create local, regenerative economies in a time when greed and prejudice is foundational to the global economy? These are the kinds of questions that b-side are, if not answering, *asking*, and certainly provoking thought upon.

To flesh out my thoughts, I'd like to propose two different meanings of the word 'economy':

1. Money – the structure or conditions of economic life in a country, area, or period.
2. Arrangement – the mode of operation of something, the organisation of a system especially of interaction and exchange.



1. *Economy as money*

As The Red Dress travelled, it boosted the economy of the areas it moved through. In a parallel gesture, b-side's Portland Dress aspires to cultivate similar economic enrichment, through potential subscription models that support the embroiderer's labour. By embedding themselves within the community's ecosystem, b-side has become a cog in Portland's local economy, reinforcing social and economic bonds alike.

The Red Dress also symbolises well the difficulty of balancing the global economy with the local. For b-side, who have received a great portion of their funding from large bodies such as the Arts Council, their reach is important. In order to maintain funding from national bodies alike, it is essential that b-side continue to promote themselves as an organisation with international reach as well as local, community wide foundations – balancing this is a constant act of consideration.

b-side's funding makes them well placed to share resources and carry out their positioning work from within the community, but in order to play the role of long-term facilitator they must ensure cash flow is always coming in. And by the nature of financial interest, b-side's stakeholders add another pressured layer into its wider relationships. Within what quickly

becomes a multi-faceted landscape of various investments, stakeholders and political pressure, how do organisations like b-side position themselves as a Community Interest Company (CIC) within our current economy, always ensuring they keep community at the core of their values? As a visitor to b-side's festival it is easy to forget, but these *economic* relationships between art, sponsors, community and how b-side position themselves, are always already intertwined with all that b-side do.

2 i: *Economy as arrangement*

The spider's web stitched onto the upper back piece of The Red Dress reveals intricate detailing underneath. Initially I thought of how I might feel if my work had been stitched over, only to be revealed within the gaps of the web. But the more time I spent with the dress the more I realised the web is symbolic of the interweaving lines that tie us together amidst migrating populations – the strings of the web become threads of identity that can travel through places, spaces and time. It is not stitched over the work as an act of obfuscation, it becomes a framing device through which the threads underneath it are arranged and connects multiple panels of the dress under its reach. After a few hours spent with the dress, when the crowding visitors had eventually slowed, I imagined that the web had spread beyond its material ends to cradle the entire dress, forming a kind of invisible meshwork of identity, its threads as lines of navigation, opening up channels of connection. I imagined b-side as this spider's web, not necessarily organising Portland, but opening up ways of seeing – forming itself within and through and around what is already there as an intentional framing device. Like the spider's web, b-side creates lines of connection within the community to open up spaces of imagination.

Inside St George's centre I caught the reflection of the dress in the frames of embroidery that lined the walls of the hall. Each frame holds names of Portlanders stitched by hand in 1978, a tribute to mark nine hundred years since Portland became a Royal Manor. Just as residents of the Bibby Stockholm, who visited The Red Dress, spoke to me about the patches that were embroidered near their home countries, Portland residents found their names embroidered into the census. I could feel b-side's web, growing within and between

those gathered in the hall, softly arranging a sharing of experiences. Through close community work and both acutely and softly curated spaces, b-side are facilitating an interaction between generations of Portlanders as well as with new identities, cultures and histories, to softly create an expansion of possibility within the still limited space of the isle.



Photograph of the back of The Red Dress by Paul Box (2024),
<<https://www.flickr.com/photos/bsidefest/53985310110/>>.

2 ii: *Arranging the landscape*

The landscape of Portland has changed dramatically in the last century and half, after an influx of housing; common land being bought by private quarry firms; the Naval base

coming and going and subsequently Portland Port retaining private land. But b-side are able to incorporate even the long abandoned and private land within its gently woven web. The Old Engine Shed sits within Portland Port's land as a slowly deteriorating outhouse that once housed the engines used by the Admiralty Quarries. It has sat in a state of disuse since 1935, until b-side, in liaison with Portland Port, began to use the space. Just beneath the 'DANGER, Private Property' sign outside the shed's entrance, b-side's colourful logo is nailed into the ground. The signs stand together as a reminder of the pressures b-side are under as a CIC to stay a-political, and their responsibility to be a neutral body that always maintains the whole community as a priority.

But the two signs also remind us of the (if somewhat complicated) layers of togetherness that b-side seek out within a divisive and often isolating system. b-side's sign (web) does not obscure the Portland Port sign as you approach the Engine Shed. Instead, it frames it between itself and the shed, which houses The Dhaqan Collective's Somalian aqal. The sounds of Somalian voices, spoken into poetry or sung into melodic phrases, leak from the shed's open entrance. I am welcomed into the cold stone structure with the smell of chai, brewing in a vat of Somalian tea in a dark corner. Light is diffused through the canvas of the aqal, pasting yellows and blues onto the Portland stone. A beam passes over a slab of rock behind the canvas structure to reveal a large fossil from its hiding. At once the rigid stone walls, which have stood still since 1826, took on a porosity, as if the sounds, smells and lights from the aqal had somehow stretched the space from within.

Inside a shed
that once housed machinery
that carried the stone
that built London
from which
colonisation
built the Empire,
A new history is hosted.



Photograph taken in The Old Engine Shed showing The Dhaqan Collective's Aqal, 2024.

The Port's presence is neither ignored nor highlighted here. It is softly and deliberately acknowledged. The Dhaqan Collective host us inside their aqal, serving us tea and reading

us poems. b-side host the Dhaqan Collective, but are also being hosted by Portland Port, whose land they exhibit on. The Port are also hosting the people living on the Bibby Stockholm, (the barge moored in Portland Port, used as an accommodation vessel for male asylum seekers), some of whom have also been hosted by the Dhaqan collective when they visited the Engine Shed. b-side's web makes space for everyone, holding within its weave a landscape of interaction and exchange – an ever evolving economy of Portland.

Concluding thoughts

It would be easy to say that the pressures b-side are under are forgotten amongst the joy of the parade that happens on Sunday evening. And to some extent, they are. But b-side's strands are softly embedded into the soil underneath the streets down which we march; and these pressures are no longer forces of division, but become communalised within the web which holds us, dancing, together.

Before the festival began – Rocca, the director of b-side (and all-time spark of joy behind their operations) had asked me to write something. The brief was: “the opposite of ‘it was really delicious, what a great festival’, because you’re a board member so obviously you’d say that”. But Rocca, I have to write about its deliciousness!

What use is lofty academic theory when artist Mohammad Barrangi is sharing cherished Iranian recipes (Baghali ghatogh and Mirza ghassemi), as we stand next to his ethereal – almost celestial – sculpture, whose magic is brought to life set amid the remains of an old Portland cottage, now transformed into an enchanting walled garden.



Photograph of Mohammad Barrangi and his sculpture in the Walled Garden on Portland by Paul Box, 2024, <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/bsidefest/53985371495/in/photostream/>>.

And how can I resist from reveling in the festival's deliciousness when, inside Miss High Leg Kick and her partner Abi Cunliffe's makeshift perfumery, my mum gushes about how proud of themselves they should be until their role-play as fragrance chemists breaks with their emotion.

Gil Mualen-Doron's 'New Union Jack' flag, which incorporates global communities that contribute to the UK's cultural legacy, flies high from Portland Marina, deliberately visible to those staying on the Bibby Stockholm. From the back of my car, on the drive down the island from the parade, Gil tells me about the flag's journey all through England over the past nine years, and how it also links to his relationship with Israel's flag, where he grew up,

which does not represent the Palestinian citizens of the country. He says that the two flags conceal and consolidate colonial practices and mindset. In that moment between us we shared joy and grief, pride and confusion, comfort and anxiety. I can't even begin to transfer those dichotomies to paper, but these are the meaningful exchanges that b-side's web allows space for.

...And as the evening drew in, we paraded through Portland's streets. I'm dressed as a sea goat amongst unicorns and mermaids pushed in beds by their pirates, dancing with guys from the Bibby who hold giant handmade eyes and a great length of paper caterpillar that weaves above our heads – the Afghan sisters' butterfly leading us all. I stop halfway back to chat to Rita, an elderly lady and long-time Portland resident, who tells me she's missing the Paralympic closing ceremony to join in from her doorway. My mum, somewhere in the middle, wrapped in a floor length pride flag, singing alongside people who were strangers 20 minutes ago. How could I not be filled with an overwhelming sense of joy, pride, belonging, and, of course, a consuming urge to write about how delicious it all was?



Photograph of the b-side parade by Pete Millson, 2024,
<<https://www.flickr.com/photos/bsidefest/53990141341/>>.