

— Emma Webb

CRYING THROUGH OUR SINGING

A Union Hall, Communal Luxury and Cultural Activism

American suffragette and labour activist Helen Todd coined the battle cry “bread and roses” in 1910, inspiring the famous poem by James Oppenheim. Set to music and recorded by many artists over the past century, Bread and Roses has become a feminist and union standard.

The song encapsulates a fight for dignity that goes well beyond wages or workplace conditions (or the vote or anti-poverty measures). It speaks to nourishment of the heart and mind, artistic and intellectual expression, good times not hard times, singing and its affect, and a life-long access to leisure not restricted by class.

Our lives shall not be sweetened / From birth until life closes / Hearts starve as well as bodies / Give us bread, but give us roses / As we go marching, marching / Unnumbered women dead / Go crying through our singing / Their ancient call for bread / Small art and love and beauty / Their drudging spirits knew / Yes, it is bread we fight for / But we fight for roses too.

Bread and Roses is sung by many a community choir. I’ve hummed along to performances of it for years, especially at my workplace: a publicly funded, feminist, contemporary arts organisation based at a heritage-listed union hall in Port Adelaide (Yerta Bulti, ‘the Port’),

South Australia.



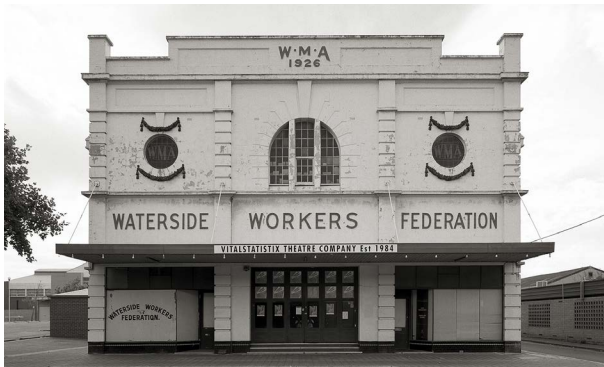
Bread and Roses scene from the film “Pride” (2014)

OUR PLACE: UNION HALLS, COMMUNAL LUXURY AND MUTUAL AID

My organisation, Vitalstatistix, resides at the Waterside Workers Hall (Waterside). The hall was built by the Port Adelaide Working Men’s Association/ Waterside Workers Federation (WWF) in 1926-27 and was home to them, and then the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), for many decades before Vitalstatistix became custodians in 1989.

Waterside was built to provide an organising home for the wharfies and more dignified facilities for workers’ daily pickups. The hall was also established as a picture theatre and included decorative murals, proscenium arch, stage and curtains, ballet barres and originally even an orchestra pit. Interestingly, there was

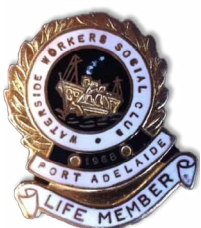
a custom around the Port of growing red geranium plants in lieu of roses. We have a couple of pots out the front of the hall to this day.



Throughout its history Waterside has been a place for music, dances, plays, media production and cultural action. During the Port waterfront strikes of the 1950s, the hall was a hive of activity for organising as well as a place for mutual aid and culture, with food distributed to striking workers and their families, a workers' credit union, nightly shows coordinated by the Entertainment Committee, and screenings by the newly established Waterside Workers Federation Film Unit.

In 1960, after the WWF fought for the right of American singer and activist Paul Robeson to enter Australia, Robeson held free, by all accounts deeply moving, concerts for workers around the nation from our hall to the building site of the Sydney Opera House.

Waterside was a site for other international solidarity and anti-racism work too, such as with the Indonesian and South African struggles and through the famous Magpie Dances which flouted racist anti-consorting laws with "black and white" socials for wharfie and Aboriginal families (recreated in the 2000s by Vitalstatistix and Kurruru, a Port-based First Nations arts organisation).



Waterside is not unique. Many workers halls around the world play this function of combining union organising, cultural work and forms of mutual aid. One of the

most well-known examples is the Victorian Trades Hall, the oldest known workers hall in the world. Still home to trade unions and campaign groups, it is also a much-loved arts venue. Victorian Trades Hall is included in the Workers Museum of Denmark's campaign to see a global selection of workers' assembly halls inscribed as world heritage.¹

In 1987 the WWF/MUA sold the hall to the South Australian government, expressing a desire for Waterside's usage to continue their cultural work including that of the very active Women's Committee. MUA legend, comrade Rex Munn,² also known as "the Singing Socialist," was particularly insistent that the hall be provided to Vitalstatistix (Vitals). Our arts company took up residence and fittingly the first Vitals performance in the hall was a play called *A Trip to the Light Fantastic*, based on the records of the WWF Women's Committee.

The WWF understood the value of art, culture, and gathering informally – for quality of life, for expression of humanism, for imagining a new world. So now, when Vitals presents experimental performance, new music concerts, contemporary dance, participatory live art, and many other artworks at Waterside, we can naturally situate our programs in the tradition of the hall, one of enquiry and change-making, and as a place of cultural democracy.

And while our more formal, publicly funded programs do honour Waterside's purpose, it's also the other activities at the hall that keeps this spirit alive; the May Day celebrations, the community meetings, the "weddings, parties, anything," the mounings and celebrations of the lives of leaders in our community and movement; and the community choir, *Born on Monday*, who have gathered to sing at the hall for nearly twenty years.

PUBLIC PLACES, EVERYDAY CULTURE – AND LIBRARIES IN WORKING CLASS SUBURBS

Community halls, whether they be workers halls, sports and recreation clubs, or municipal



Stories from My Neighbourhood - Born on Monday Choir, City of Port Adelaide Enfield (2019)

buildings, are the bricks and mortar of “communal luxury” – places where people organise, access, and share culture and recreation together. These places offer something qualitatively different from the provision of publicly subsidised Culture (think large theatres, galleries, museums) on the one hand, and commercialised, transactional, extractive, siloed consumption (Netflix, Spotify) on the other.

In fact public space in the broadest sense, whether this be buildings, or parks, or community gardens, or rivers, or playgrounds – or even iconic music venues that people view as public property even when they are not, as the campaign to save the Curtin Hotel in Carlton, Victoria demonstrated³ – are essential to people partaking in culture, expression, and leisure throughout their lives. These everyday experiences are often suburban,⁴ collective, lighter on resources/carbon, and free or cheap.

Looking at culture and its provision across zones of economic activity (such as, loosely, public, transactional and the everyday) is useful; and libraries are interesting in this context – for instance while not inherently extractive, libraries provide essential internet data for people who may have no other access, alongside publicly funded and everyday accessed culture.

I am always reminded in a city like Port Adelaide, with its leftist history, that bricks and mortar, and outdoor space, are hollow shells without people and activism. In 2021, unions including the MUA, May Day and Workers

Memorial committees, cultural institutions like the South Australian Maritime Museum and Vitals, and a band of community volunteers and enthusiasts, celebrated the centenary of the Port Adelaide Workers Memorial through a series of arts projects and community celebrations around May Day.

One project was an ephemeral artwork, the Labour of Love Paste-Up walk.⁵ Large-scale, non-permanent pasteps by artist Bit Scribbly⁶ celebrated thirteen people who are inscribed on the Workers Memorial, in sites around the Port. And one of these local



Labour of Love - Arthur Mortimer, South Australian Maritime Museum (2021)

legends was radical librarian Arthur Mortimer.

Arthur fought for the establishment of libraries in the working-class suburbs of the west of Adelaide (including Port Adelaide and adjacent Semaphore). He obscurely used the Dr Seuss book Horton Hatches an Egg to highlight the Horton Report (1976) which called for a massive funding injection into public libraries. In one direct action he transferred prams full of books from the State Library to a Semaphore shop-front. Eventually he was successful in winning funding for libraries in the west. The story goes that then South Australian Premier, Labor hero Don Dunstan, said “here’s \$2million but get Arthur Mortimer off my back.”

REBUILDING WORKERISM IN ARTS AND CULTURE

At Vitals we have a wonderful, informal relationship with unions in the Port. This has been forged through celebrations, friendship and comradeship, and shared struggle in recent campaigns to save working-class built heritage within the urban redevelopment of Port Adelaide. Our union comrades have participated in laboratories⁷ we’ve held with artists for a current project Bodies of Work, exploring cultural labour, rights and the future of work, and in forums co-presented with Reset Arts and Culture such as Arts and Culture After the

Creative City.⁸

How would formal relationships be made between artists and unions in Australia, beyond our memberships of unions, a new approach to renewing workerism in arts and culture? In Australia, this question is more than purely utopian now, with a recently launched National Cultural Policy that attempts to break down distinctions between “high” and popular art, and speaks to “the artist as worker.”⁹

There is some history here. Art and Working Life (AWL) was an initiative of the Australia Council for the Arts, a federal government agency, and the Australian Council of Trade Unions, from 1982 to the early 1990s. AWL encompassed many activities from directly funding projects, supporting arts and cultural officers in unions, placing performing arts organisations and their projects in residence at large workplaces, and producing an extraordinary catalogue of posters made by visual artists. In South Australia, significant AWL work was led by a legendary group of women trade union officials, activists and community arts workers.

It’s still hard to imagine an initiative like AWL being reformed today, even under Australia’s new (New?) Labor Government, elected in 2022. To start with, the 1980s in Australia was the era of the Prices and Incomes Accord. Unions and government, together in a social compact. Its logic, while destructive in the end to unions, wages, and the social wage it was supposed to benefit, did give rise to a multitude of compacts in areas like arts and environmental conservation. Now, in the palliative stage of neo-liberalism’s dying, Australia’s new Treasurer is positing that the latest compact to support our social foundations will be with wealthy philanthropists and business.

Moreover, workplaces and their cultures, and the way artists are paid, are very different than forty years ago. Several decades¹⁰ of enforced precarity and small business mentality, plus the crisis of the welfare state, has decimated a generation of individual practising artists and

their connection to any kind of workplace or collectivism. Culture wars have painted “the arts” as an imagined elite, and the creative industries mantra has tied arts and cultural impact to economic productivity rather than public good.

There are some hopeful signs: freelance artists organising in unions,¹¹ the cultural work of unions like United Workers and the MUA, and a shift back to the organising model in unions from what became a ‘service model’ under the Accord. The artists we work with at Vitals are deeply engaged in making radical change as illustrated in this essay by our 2022 artist-in-residence Jennifer Mills, “Art in the Works,”¹² about our experimental arts hothouse, Adhocracy.



Adhocracy – a retrospective, Vitalstatistix (2023)

A RADICAL, DEMOCRATIC AND CLIMATE JUSTICE PURPOSE FOR CULTURE?

How – and if – the new National Cultural Policy (Revive: a place for every story, a story for every place)¹³ and the Australia Council (soon to be renamed Creative Australia) can meaningfully work with unions, public sectors, and a purposeful mandate of cultural democracy, to take a civil society or commons approach to culture, will be seen in the coming five years of the policy’s enactment.

Running an organisation like Vitals, one at cutting edges of artistic practices that is also embedded in the Port’s community life and political histories, I’m curious about how the varying traditions of communal luxury, mutual aid and social democracy might inform our future work

and that of the arts and cultural sector.

Can the sector relearn the community organising traditions that in the past have been central to cultural work, much popular culture, and art in everyday life? Can we see a path towards funding ‘unprogrammed space’ – sites of more organic, democratic, and popular gathering, making, curating and expression, side by side with more direct support of professional artists – rather than the current project-outcome grants hamster wheel and highly instrumentalised frameworks of “community arts?”

Will there be a new social democratic conversation about the role of culture that exceeds the mendicant/ entrepreneur mindsets that are such an anathema to the cultural legacies of places like the Waterside Workers Hall and the cultural work that has – and continues – to occur here?

And how will cultural organisations who operate bricks and mortar spaces consider their mutual aid role in the climate emergency? A six-year project called Refuge,¹⁴ by our colleagues Arts House, asked this question. Arts House operate from North Melbourne Town Hall, and Refuge saw them work with artists alongside First Nations leaders, emergency services, climate scientists and nearby residents, to image how they might collaborate in crises and displacements.

This is a big question for us too – Port Adelaide is ranked 10th at risk of climate disaster out of 151 Australian federal electorates. So, we need to consider the mutual aid and emergency response role that we and Waterside will no doubt play in the future. “Communal luxury” (read, necessity) looks very different in the era of continuous climate crisis cascade, as



we have recently seen in the Riverland (South Australia) and the Northern Rivers (New South Wales) where voluntary emergency services, cultural organisations, clubs and associations, were all crucial to flood responses.

BREAD AND ROSES, AND THE DOING OF COMMUNAL LUXURY

With deep roots and long branches, we look to our histories and towards to the future here in the Port.

For over a year during pandemic restrictions, Waterside’s resident choir Born on Monday (BOM) was unable to sing inside the hall. Instead, they would gather under our veranda with the geraniums, then find a place along the waterfront to hold their rehearsals. Often this was on the landscaped public lands around another heritage listed site, Hart’s Mill, spitting distance from Waterside.

This site remains public – there for singing, for site-based contemporary performances we often program there, and for many other community activities – because of a decades-long community campaign to save it from a private housing development.

The campaign involved many of the usual strategies (lobbying, protests, public meetings) but one of its most effective activities was holding regular long-table, shared dinner parties along the Port River. This demonstration of communal luxury and cultural action was used again in the 2019 campaign to save a building called Shed 26,¹⁵ with community pétanque matches held on the site plus a singing sit-in at the office of the wealthy architecture firm involved in the site’s redevelopment (Malvina Reynolds’ Little Boxes, of course) alongside many other actions like union bans.

We won Hart’s Mill, but we didn’t win Shed 26. It’s an ongoing fight for every public space and site of cultural importance, to stop the privatisation of the waterfront, and it sometimes feels never-ending in the Port. Next up is another fight to stop the demolition of the old Port

Adelaide Sailing Club and the remnant boat slips and yards of Jenkins St. So, there's been a lot of crying through our singing. It's not called the struggle for no reason.

During the pandemic, BOM rehearsed Bread and Roses. They sung it at a rally for women front-line and hospitality workers. "Ps, we changed the lyrics," I'm told by a choir leader, a woman I've known since she was a child, who grew up around Waterside singing with her high school band.

"As we go marching, marching/ We battle too for men / For they are women's children / And we mother them again" had now become "As we go marching, marching/ We battle too for all/ For we're all in the struggle/ And together we stand tall."



Anti-Poverty Network SA with Born on Monday singing It's Time, for the Raise the Rate campaign, in 2018. This version of It's Time is a remake of the old Whitlam (Labor) campaign song of 1972. Filmed at Waterside, images by Alex Frayne. In the May 2023 Australian Federal Budget the poverty rate paid to unemployed people in Australia ('JobSeeker') was raised by just under \$20/week – still well below the poverty line, and far less than the Raise the Rate campaign for \$76 a day.

So, we keep fighting (and singing) for bread and roses. Justice for First Nations Peoples and time on Country. Affordable water and energy services and kayaking through healthy Port River mangroves. Thriving, local small businesses (paying award wages!) with library services next door. A public health system and an accessible local recreation club. A respected workforce of practising artists, a future for organisations like Vitalstatistix, and places for the

cultural and recreation practices of all.

Dedicated to my comrade and sister in struggle, Michelle Hogan, rest in power and peace.

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