

Care, Trust and Laughter: Strengthening the Collective Model

A conversation with Patterns Collective where they discuss the importance of friendship, love, and care as critical parts of the collective experience.

By Patterns Collective - November 7, 2022



In May of 2022, I sat down for a conversation with Patterns Collective (Shaneela Boodoo, Mahlet Cuff, and Chukwudubem Ukaigwe) to learn more about how the collective formed and about their strategies for working collectively. Through the conversation, I came to appreciate the generosity and care that they offer—not only to one another, but also to the artists that they work with. Our conversation was filled with laughter indicative of the joy and love they bring to their collective practice—and at times a reminder to read between the lines. Through their attitude and approach, this conversation revealed the unique lens the three artists—individually and as a collective—bring to navigating Canada’s artistic sector.

A transcription of our conversation over Zoom follows. Endless thanks to Chukwudubem, Mahlet, and Shaneela for taking the time, and for sharing their insight on collective models and the role they might play in the future of curating in the arts.

Christina Battle: I thought maybe a good place to start, by way of introduction, would be to hear what you’re up to, especially now that the collective is a couple years old.

[Collective laughter]

Mahlet Cuff: Wait a second.

Shaneela Boodoo: Yeah, what the hell? Wait, when did we start?

Mahlet: 2020

Shaneela: OMG

Chukwudubem Ukaigwe: We should celebrate an anniversary.

Mahlet: Yeah!

Shaneela: But we’ve been so busy.

Mahlet: Sorry, we need a moment.

[Collective laughter]

Shaneela: We’ve been meaning to take a day trip together and go to the spa and stuff like that.

Christina: Is there an official day for an anniversary?

Mahlet: Yeah, our first event, right?

Shaneela: Yeah.

Chukwudubem: What date was that?

Mahlet: It was April 6, or something? Let me check [our Instagram](#). It was with [Chim Undi](#). The First one took place April 18th.

Chukwudubem: But when did we put it on Instagram?

Mahlet: April 14th.

[Collective laughter]

Christina: You’ve just passed your two year anniversary! Can you speak a bit about how you came together as a collective in the first place?

Chukwudubem: I think it was just this wild idea we had because of the pandemic. Funny enough, the collective has actually been around way longer than this. It started in Shaneela's house, years ago, without being a formal collective. We're friends and have had these moments of bonding outside of the arts, and I think that is the foundation of the collective. But Patterns Collective came about as the result of me sharing my ideas with Mahlet. I was like, *Oh Mahlet, I have this idea of, you know, poetry readings, where we get people to read a couple of their poems and we have people talk to them and discuss with them.* The collective came to be because Mahlet believed in that idea. It's one thing to have an idea that seems wild, and then another to share it with someone who says, "I see something in that, let's do it." For our first event, Shaneela designed the poster and it was just like—*why is Shaneela not part of this?* It became solid as a collective with the three of us, and we just ran with it. After doing a couple Instagram Lives, we saw the vision and the capacity of what we were capable of doing, and we started dreaming bigger.

Mahlet: We had this conversation, and were talking about these different ideas we had, and I think because it was in the pandemic we were just like: *well fuck it, I guess, we might as well do it, right?* We're all stuck in our houses and I really trust the work you do, Chukwudubem, and being able to work with you felt really fun. I think you push us to think bigger, and we were like: *we can do this, we can apply for this, we can do things online outside of Instagram and in different spaces.*

Chukwudubem: I think we have a good balance between vision and reality, along with putting things into action.

Christina: I completely understand and identify with this sense of leaning on a group of others to help make ideas a reality. Is that something that differentiates the benefits of being in a collective compared to working independently as artists?

Chukwudubem: The three of us are artists, but we are also people who are really interested in other people's work, so we're kind of all already involved in curation in different ways: directly and indirectly, before and outside of Patterns Collective. I think my relationship with Mahlet and Shaneela before this collective was one where we'd share other people's works who we loved among ourselves. And we'd be like, *oh, this is cool and look at what this person is doing,* and I remember this one day when Mahlet and Shaneela came to my house and we were watching [Michelle Pearson Clarke's](#) work.

Mahlet: Oh Yeah!

Chukwudubem: We were just watching her work with admiration. I think our relationship as artists is number one but also as admirers of other people's art. So yes, I think our practice is collective, but we also have individual curatorial backgrounds: Shaneela worked in a curatorial position at the University of Manitoba and is doing a Masters in curatorial studies there now; Mahlet and I had both done some curatorial work prior to Patterns Collective, as well.

Shaneela: Did you guys want me to tell the story of when we were together at Christmas? I had a party at my house around Christmas or something—pre-pandemic. And it was so funny because it was blizzarding outside and Mahlet drives but Chukwudubem doesn't, and he didn't come with anyone, so I thought: he's not coming. But no, he showed up in the blizzard—he took the bus there. I don't even know how he found my house, but he got there. And then we hung out and had the party or whatever and then I was like, *you can't go home like this it's literally blizzarding out*. So he and Mahlet both slept over, and we all slept in my bed.

[Collective laughter]

Mahlet: And then we woke up in the morning and we cooked breakfast together, and we all had different ideas about what to eat together, and we were able to really bond that way.

Shaneela and Chukwudubem: Yeah.

Mahlet: I think that's so important with collectives – to learn each other's ways. I think it's more important to bond over basic stuff like life and relationships before you ever talk about art. I think that night we didn't talk about art at all.

Shaneela: Yeah, we were just talking about life and stuff.

Chukwudubem: And that was before we ever talked about a collective.

Shaneela: I think that helped because we want to work on our relationship with each other, because even during the [Sanctuaries exhibition](#), it was a stressful experience, and we were kind of at odds with each other at times.

[Collective laughter]

Shaneela: But then, you know, we would come together and it was like, *okay, let's talk about our feelings*.

Mahlet: Because it is about the art, but it also isn't, right? If I couldn't have a normal conversation with either of them about my personal life and how I'm doing and how that transcends into working with one another, I think I would feel uncomfortable. I would feel like I was just going to my nine-to-five job. But this is a friendship, a relationship. It goes beyond being able to communicate with one another and making sure things get done and that we're putting something out that we all love and appreciate. If I get an email about something or a request for something, I have to ask them about it first. I'll never say yes on my own without their permission.

Shaneela: I love how we always ask each other.

Chukwudubem: Any email we get we bring to the group chat.

Shaneela: We're like—*what is this?!*

Chukwudubem: Because we get some wild emails! In the chat, we'll be like—*do you know the email we just got?*

[Collective laughter]

Mahlet: Even today we got one of those emails! I think we go beyond what people expect a collective to look like, so I think people are like: *what is this, why do you guys do things like that?* I think people are confused sometimes, that we go so outside of the box, and I think that interests people – even in a bad way sometimes, where people don't fully understand what we're doing.

Chukwudubem: I think there's a transcendence that happens when the three of us come together. There's what we bring in individually, but there's also that collective voice that we have that goes against the idea of the individual in a way. And there's just something about how we work together; it's something that there's no real formula for because we're learning how to be better at it, and there are mistakes we've made in the past. We try to work on it, and to make sure that we're not putting the load all on one person, and also to communicate when one of us cannot participate, because, you know, sometimes somebody is just kind of going through something very hard in their life and they just need a break. We're able to shift and adjust for the time or the situation.

Shaneela: I just think that the love that we have for one another makes it work and makes it easier.

Christina: When reading about collectives, often this conversation around consensus comes up. I feel like this idea of collective decision making is often unique to the group, and that consensus differs depending on how a collective identifies itself. Can you talk a bit more about how you approach decision making together? Do you feel like that sort of method of working is understood generally across the arts?

Mahlet: I would say that it's been relatively easy. I feel like we're all very different but I think we have similar morals and values and what we want for ourselves and what we want for the collective. If we ever have a misunderstanding, we've taken time to think about it, give space to it, and then come back and have a conversation about it. There have definitely been things that we've learned, especially when we're working with an institution. Not everything comes easy, but I feel like we've been able to still find a way to change or try to be accommodating for the artists we work with. I feel like we've had conversations that are meaningful and are trying to understand the full picture and not see things just through our own individual brains, but trying to see how each other feels about things in a way that tries not to invalidate other people's feelings.

Shaneela: I feel like, with those kinds of things, we'll be on the phone for hours. Having conversations and dialogue around what kind of decisions we want to make and asking each other: *what's your opinion? How do you feel?* I feel like, when we make decisions, it never feels like peer pressure; I never feel like I should say yes just because you guys said yes.

Mahlet and Chukwudubem: Yes.

Shaneela: If I don't agree, I feel like I can be like: *I don't agree and these are the reasons why.*

Chukwudubem: Also, sometimes we sit on things: we don't always reply immediately to requests and whatnot, we take some time and come back to it. I think another thing that helps is actually listening to each other and respecting each other. I think things straighten themselves out through conversation, listening, and reasoning. Compromise is really great in relationships. When I mean compromise, I don't mean compromising your values or your ideas, but compromising your ego and pride, you know? Because I think, if we have three contradicting ideas, we come to a consensus on which is best. I think we leave our individuality at the door and we make the decision as a collective.

Shaneela: And also, I feel like, for me, our friendship, our relationship is more important.

Mahlet: Oh, 100%!

Shaneela: I don't want to argue about something and then ruin our friendship or something over like, probably money or something.

Mahlet: I think that's what it is, and now I'm thinking about your original question, Christina, in terms of what other people don't understand, or how other collectives are doing things. I think they're often more invested in the institutionalization of what the collective is rather than the actual relationship itself. I'm more like: *if we weren't friends anymore then that would make me more sad than if Patterns ended, you know.*

Shaneela: Yeah.

Mahlet: Our friendships were more intentional., When I met Shaneela the first time she was doing a talk and I was like, *this person is really cool and doing really cool stuff and I kept seeing her around and we became friends.* And with Chukwudubem, our relationship has shifted over a long period of time of seeing each other around but not really knowing each other, and then becoming really close and then really admiring one another's work as well. I appreciate that our friendships are very open and very honest, and I don't feel uncomfortable mentioning anything. And I also don't feel any judgment either. I feel like with the collective itself, of course, we're invested in the artists we work with as well, I think that's really important, but I think our friendships mean a lot to us. Because we started during COVID, we didn't have sit down conversations face to face, and all this decision making was through FaceTime, text, email or through Zoom, and I think that's so different from everyone else where people meet in a place. Our place was online or over a phone call and that was the only option.

Chukwudubem: We're not in a formal place where we're trying to be smart or trying to prove a point or trying to be right. We can just bring our ideas the way they are, even if they are wrong, and then together, we can poke holes in it. Sometimes, you have this little idea and—I don't want to speak biblically but—[collective laughter] you know, it's sort of like sometimes you can turn water into wine, you know, and suddenly be like, *oh, I didn't even think about that.* You bring your own idea and somebody else transforms it. There's that respect that we have as friends but also respect for our practices too as professionals, and respect for our work.

Mahlet: There's no ego involved. I agree, having respect for both of them as people and in their practice, the way that they think, the way that they push. I think that we are all able to push each other in different ways, and I think that's what makes it also really fun. Because Patterns—even though there are hard parts, it's always fun to make stuff with your friends. It's a huge privilege to make stuff with your friends and to be in a collective.

Chukwudubem: Yeah, and also being able to empower other people. I think it's really fun, and we're so happy to be able to pay artists and pay website designers and pay photographers and pay more creative people and meet new people. It's fun, and I think the impact we've made on people's lives is something that also gives us joy.

Shaneela: Yeah, doing this has also given me a lot more confidence. I've gotten to practice so many skills like public speaking, graphic design, and budgets and all that stuff. It is the best kind of training for baby curators and arts administrators.

Mahlet: And, you mentioned this before but, the number of people that we've brought together—some of them have become friends; they're like besties. A lot of relationships have been formed.

Christina: Can you talk a bit about how it is that you came to decide that sharing other people's work was what you wanted to do, and also what it means to bring in other voices from outside to Winnipeg, and sharing in that way.

Shaneela: I think because we're all doing so much work in the local community already, it was important for us to bring international and national voices in for ourselves and our community, because we'd been seeing, kind of the same things over and over and over.

Mahlet: I want to mention again that we started during the pandemic, and I think that was a perfect opportunity. Some people saw it otherwise because you couldn't meet in person anymore and you couldn't fly artists in, but we realized that it's a lot of money to do those things. We realized we could just go on Instagram Live and bring someone from Toronto together for conversation with someone from Winnipeg for an hour—those two people could meet one another, and be in conversation with one another; that's so fruitful. I think it was a good opportunity to be able to bring different people together from different places. Even someone from the UK talking with someone from Winnipeg, and then thinking about what it means to have those two people from different communities be in conversation with one another. I think that was so cool to be able to bring different people together who didn't think they could be together because there were restrictions, and you know even before the pandemic, not everyone could travel either—people have different situations, accessibility, and all of the different things, you know.

Chukwudubem: We've had artists from Nigeria, the UK, the USA, and all different parts of Canada, all in one Instagram Live event. I think the idea came pretty quickly at the beginning of our collective that we needed and wanted to break the barrier of location in an experimental way that is post-colonial. Because when you think about it, there's a material aspect to colonialism: there's the land, and the water, you know, and we felt like we had an opportunity to work beyond that. I think it's also very contemporary because, the way that contemporary art is right now, I can be part of a show in Belgium without having to be there. I can just send my work there, and there's going to be Instagram and a web presence and people are going to write about it. So, we knew that location was something that was being reconsidered when it comes to contemporary art. The internet is a location in a way, and we wanted to explore that and break those barriers. We showed "[A beautiful struggle](#)" by Nigerian filmmaker Dafe Oboro with Plugin ICA, and it was so good! All the filmmakers were so thankful that we introduced them to Dafe's films. I had been a big fan of Nigerian experimental films, but people don't know a lot about them here, and it's good to cross pollinate ideas from different places and different people. Thinking about the art world as a global field is something that we are positioning the collective as focusing on, and I feel like in the physical world, the material world, there are a lot of barriers and a lot of those barriers are colonially controlled. I feel like there's a freedom that comes to virtual spaces for us to dream and for us to say, *let's create a big show!* If we tried to do [Sanctuaries](#) in person, that would have taken millions of dollars!

[Collective Laughter]

Shaneela: And years, ten years of work.

Chukwudubem: For us, we can dream and say, *we're going to do this virtually*, and people can connect with it in a very palpable way.

Shaneela: We had that little tagline for a while. Do you remember that? It was like: bringing artists together from near and far, or something like that.

Chukwudubem: Yes. Our first bio.

[Collective laughter]

Chukwudubem: Yeah, that idea of the global, you know, and also how that can also help to promote local artists. For example, if a local artist was to do something in collaboration with another artist based in London, then people who follow that artist in London are also discovering this work in the same way people from here are also discovering the artist from London's work. There's this cross pollination of ideas, and also increased visibility and reach that I think helps make other local artists dream bigger than having a show within four white walls. How many of those do we have in Winnipeg? You can count them on one hand; it's very limited. And whatever programming we do, we also have sub-collaborations with other local institutions, and those institutions don't have to all be here in Winnipeg. They give opportunities to marginalized communities so there's that trickle-down effect to what we're doing, where people can actually engage with it indirectly.

Shaneela: Yeah, we've been approached about having a space and stuff like that. And we're like, *no, we're good*.

Mahlet: Because having a space is both good and bad, right? It can limit you to be in that *one* place. But the fact that we're online—I like what you said about the internet being a location, because it can go so many different places and even thinking about the groups that we've worked with, maybe we wouldn't be seen as in collaboration with art institutions and kind of breaking that idea of who can see art and who can engage with it and who can have conversations about it.

Shaneela: Also, who can be an institution?

Mahlet: Yeah, exactly.

Chukwudubem: A lot of people wouldn't take us seriously when we started.

Mahlet: It's true.

Shaneela: Well, we were just like three babies with a dream...and an Instagram account.

[Collective laughter]

Mahlet: A lot of people thought, *oh this is cute, this isn't going to last, after the quote-unquote pandemic is over, that's it*—but we kept doing things and people we're like—*Oh*.

Shaneela: We kept building on it like, *yeah, we're online, we don't have a website but we're working on it*. This is our next big project that we want to do for ourselves is make a website.

Mahlet: The fact that we don't even have one I think shows that there's something there. Obviously Instagram is not accessible for everyone, but word of mouth still exists, right? People have conversations, people email each other. I think that's still important as well. And even without having a website we're still able to share what we're doing to large groups of people.

Chukwudubem: The internet is a medium that allows us to make things possible; in the future, however, we're also thinking of effectuating programming physically in collaboration with others.

Shaneela: You're gonna see us up in those grants!

[Collective laughter]

Chukwudubem: Maybe guest curating, or maybe curating site-specific work—public art that is not only within galleries. Our ethos and our foundation is to look at things outside of the formula of the four white walls and to always ask the question: what is the gallery? We're still going to do a lot of things that are outside the box, and not tied to location. The fact that we don't have a physical space gives us that ability to go anywhere.

Christina: I loved the question you posed earlier, Shaneela, about who can be an institution, that got me thinking about something that you also said about how working as a collective provides a space for building up one's confidence. I started to think that maybe there's something about working online that might also help with that confidence building, as you've all been saying: if you have Instagram you can just do it, you don't need to ask permission. Maybe there's something in there that allows this new definition of what an institution could look like take hold, and without that experience of having started online, maybe it's hard to imagine what you might be doing as a collective otherwise.

Shaneela: Yeah, that's really true. If it wasn't for COVID we might have not become a thing, but if we did, we might have approached it completely differently.

Chukwudubem: We'd be going from gallery to gallery asking them to give us space.

[Collective laughter]

Shaneela: Please give us one room.

[Collective laughter]

Mahlet: I think it has also given us our own self-autonomy. I mean, we're starting to apply for grants now, but in the beginning, we often did stuff for free because we wanted to work without restriction and without someone telling us what to do or how to do it. It gave us this level of freedom.

Shaneela: Yeah, we were just living on the edge.

Chukwudubem: And nobody cared, I think we even tried to apply for a grant once and no one would give us a grant.

[Collective laughter]

Chukwudubem: Then people saw what we were doing and were looking forward to our next Instagram Live event, because we were bringing people together bi-weekly. We were going hard. It was a lot of work. I think some of the institutions we worked with saw that we were tapping into something, and when our first time working with an institution went well, the next institution wanted that too. After Sanctuaries, we organized Deconstruction of Being, and the next institution wanted that too and was kind of like: *what's happening?* It was like we were a hot rapper: everybody wants to feature. Then the granting bodies also caught note of us too and that's when they started to take us seriously. But in the beginning, nobody took us seriously.

Mahlet: What does that mean, right? It's really interesting to me because, for example, if an artist only has 80 followers on Instagram, but their work is amazing, I'm gonna follow them and watch the work and engage with them. But for institutions they're just kind of like: I don't know about this, even though these names are well known artists in the city or across Canada. The fact that they're so unsure about it and that they have no belief in it—that's what makes me question. And as you're saying, now they're like *okay, now I believe in it*, and I wonder why. Now they're watching our stories, checking out what we're doing, and we're wondering *oh, so you understand the vision now?* It's conflicting.

Chukwudubem: It's quite interesting. I think it gives us a strategy for the way we also navigate institutions and decide who we want to work with, how we're going to work with people, what kind of boundaries we're gonna set, and what our values are. I think those are the kind of things we factor in these days when we consider what extent we want to work with institutions. With institutions, we also try to get full autonomy for our projects because there's a tendency for them to try to get you to do something in the way that they want. And we're just like: no, we don't do that, in everything we do, we come up with the concept, and the artists we want to work with. We're very strategic about it.



Feature image: Patterns Collective (L-R): Chukwudubem Ukaigwe, Mahlet Cuff, Shaneela Boodoo. 2022. Image courtesy of Patterns Collective.

Image description: Patterns Collective (Chukwudubem Ukaigwe, Mahlet Cuff, and Shaneela Boodoo) stand close together with linked arms, holding onto one another's shoulders. Trees fill the frame behind them.

Above: Poster for Instagram Live event: "A Virtual Poetry Performance by Victoria Redsun," Patterns Collective, May 19, 2020. Image courtesy of Patterns Collective.

Image description: A black poster for a Patterns Collective event. An image of Victoria Redsun on the bottom left is inset within a frame filled with colourful, floral beadwork. The text, in large pink font, reads: "Patterns / Chillin' With Victoria / A Virtual Poetry Performance by Victoria Redsun / Featuring Selected Poems With Special Guests: Lori Blondeau, Mariana Munoz Gomez, Jaimie Issac, Shanese Steele, Christina Hajjar / May 19, 2020, 6pm CST."

Christina: I love and appreciate that you're honest about the different ways you work with institutions. I'm curious to hear what you think collectives are able to do that some of these more formal institutions aren't. Whether that be artist-run centers or museums or academic institutions; what is it that they're not so great at doing that you think is much easier for you as a collective to tackle?

Mahlet: I think community building.

Shaneela: It's awesome because, after a lot of our events, you can see that the artists follow each other on Instagram and that creates new relationships. And that's so cool because we sparked that relationship.

Chukwudubem: We're kind of creating an ecosystem.

Shaneela: Also, within institutions there is some kind of formality and bureaucracy and system of work that we don't subscribe to.

[Collective Yes]

Shaneela: We don't have that. We're just three people that want to have a relationship with you.

Chukwudubem: Yeah, we can wake up and do something that is urgent and has to be done—we'll do it. The institution is gonna take time, wait a couple months, and something that's urgent is going to pass by.

Christina: It's interesting, though, because at the same time, you are also engaging with slowness and conversation with one another and really building up this relationship that you have as a collective. When you mentioned bureaucracy, I was thinking: *oh, that's maybe the part of bureaucracy that's missing, because they do spend a lot of time on some stuff.* You know, look how many meetings there often are in institutions that just go nowhere. Whereas you're engaging with a lot of conversation with one another, but it goes somewhere.

Shaneela: We've had conversations about this before because we have each been part of other groups where there's just too many people; it's difficult to navigate, and you just end up going in circles. Whereas, we're like: *oh, we want to do this. Boom. We do it. We get it done.*

Chukwudubem: You know sometimes those bureaucratic meetings are just a show—people trying to be politically correct just to look good. They waste a lot of time trying to do that, so it goes nowhere most of the time. Or sometimes it just takes too long. I think we have a direct connection with community, and we work with people who have direct relationships with their own communities so it's more intimate in that way. The institution is not going to have that same interest.

Mahlet: They're just checking off a box. I think sometimes with institutions you don't know what their intentions are. And that's the hard part, but even probably for us individually when someone reaches out to us it's like *oh—it's a great museum, but what is their intention with my work and with my time?* And for us, there isn't a secret motive behind it—we like their work, we like what they're doing. I think there's already that immediate relationship of trust because we've already been a part of the community in separate ways and as a collective. I think there is a trust that people have for us.

Chukwudubem: With all the different kinds of institutions we've worked with, there's one common theme: they give us some money and we have to hustle more money to pay the artists. Even when we did the Sanctuaries exhibition, they gave us some money for artists and we were like: *no—you have to double it.* They force you to have to ask them to pay more. A lot of the time we are pushing them to pay, and sometimes it's double, or triple the amount they initially offer. We respect the artist's time and work, and I don't think institutions do. Most of the time we're pushing institutions to pay more.

Mahlet: Thinking about Deconstruction of Being, some of the artists were in different countries, so they're up at two, three in the morning talking to us. How do we accommodate and compensate for someone's time and energy? When people feel they're paid appropriately and treated properly, I think they feel more open to share and be honest within the conversation. The conversations were so intimate and so honest, I think because they had trust within one another and trust within us. I think they felt like they were being paid appropriately for their time and energy. We're invested in their work as artists and we understand where their work is coming from.

Chukwudubem: There's also care in curating who we bring together and the connections across their work.

Shaneela: It's always intentional.

Chukwudubem: And those connections may not be conventional sometimes. There's a way to how we approach logic and reason that is not academic.

Christina: I want to also talk a little bit more about funding because you brought up this idea of respecting artists in terms of compensation, but also how funding isn't always accessible to gain access to. I'm curious about how you think about grants and if you think that access to them has shifted at all over the last couple of years?

Shaneela: I feel like we haven't really thought about it, honestly. I don't know what you guys think.

Mahlet: I think we talk about it, but not intentionally; it just comes up in conversation. I think we all have similar opinions about grants and about how we're able to function and what makes sense for us. Because I think we've all been on the other side of it as well, on juries. We understand how things work, and know how so much of it is so up in the air, and often depends on who is on the jury and whether they like the application or not. Sometimes it's not based on the actual work itself; sometimes it's based on people's different ideas of what art is and what it's not. For example, when you're working outside of the box of what's typical, that can be scary to someone and they think—*oh, this can never happen, this is not realistic*. Whereas, I think you have to give people a chance, and I think if they have the drive and they have the energy and the ideas—I believe in that. Often, thinking about the arts here in Winnipeg, it's hard to push people to be uncomfortable. Oftentimes, we work with people who don't see it, and we're like, *no, it's gonna happen, it's gonna work; believe in us*. And then they realize, *oh, yeah, it worked*. I think that kind of plays into grants too, and maybe people don't always understand that it's okay to push boundaries and trust that it will work.

Shaneela: I feel like we're also always learning and growing and I like that we're comfortable with just growing. We're comfortable with taking time for stuff and sometimes we're like, *oh, this is not the right time for this, there's no rush*. The time for us to get bigger grants without an institution, that time is gonna come for us, you know?

Chukwudubem: I'm thinking, if we were to apply for grants right now, we may get them. It's funny, right? Because we've had terrible relationships with arts councils in the past. As emerging artists we had the same kind of potential we have now and they never saw it and we were always rejected. I remember approaching someone a long time ago, before Patterns Collective, who we're working with now, and they were kind of like: *what are you trying to say?* And because we've done a couple things now, and laid the tracks, there is more response. In Ken Lum's book, *Everything is Relevant*, he talks about the granting system and how there is no artist of consequence in Canada who has not been funded by the government, and he kind of talks about that in terms of control. It means that both indirectly and directly, the government controls what art is, and if the government controls what art is, then what do we think about subversion? Art is just an extension of the government's voice in a way. The fact that all the grants we've gotten were through institutions is telling: like, we apply on our own, and we don't get it, but we apply with the university and then we do.

Mahlet: There's this familiarity and trust in institutions. Juries are like: *I noticed they've applied, you know, ten different times, but I'm not sure about you, you've never applied before.* From my view, it should be like: *oh, they never applied before, this is new and different and should be supported,* and when it's an institution applying then, it's like, *oh, we know what their programming already looks like.*

Chukwudubem: And our CV and what we've done in the past is more than sufficient to be funded, you know.

Mahlet: Yeah, both individually and as a collective.

Chukwudubem: There's this convincing you have to do for them, because they're like *hmm, who are these people who don't look like us?*

[Collective laughter]

Shaneela: I feel like we come from a place where, when these institutions help us to write these grants we're like, *yeah, you should be helping us write these grants!* There's already a barrier of entry for all of us as racialized people, and you should be helping us access these funds.

Chukwudubem: Absolutely. When we started, we didn't want any of their money at all, and we were just going to do this without their money, we we're just going to hustle and scrape it together. When we started, we were not getting paid at all for days and days of work. And the first time we got paid for something, how much did they pay us? Like 300 bucks?

Shaneela: It wasn't even that much.

Chukwudubem: And all the money went to the artists, and it wasn't that much so we had to add more money from what they paid us to be able to pay the artists. We had to look for money from somewhere else so that we could give it to the artists. So, from the beginning, we had this way of scratching out money from nowhere. I think that really helped us get off the ground. I imagine a lot of artists and a lot of collectives in Canada are so dependent on these funding bodies. And I think there's a problem with that, personally.

Mahlet: Some people can apply for grants every single year, get them, and live off them. That's not the case for us, you know, we have to have regular jobs. I think there's a privilege within knowing how to write a perfect grant from start to finish and know you're gonna get it.

Shaneela: And being able to use the specific academic language that they want, that's just such a big barrier of entry for a lot of people.

Mahlet: And having to convince people: *please give me this money so that I can live and do things I want to do*. It's very conflicting, I think, with government funding—even sometimes I'm still against it. Because they ask about using our work to promote them as if it's something they did. And they didn't do any of the actual work. They give money, which is great. But like all the work was ours.

Chukwudubem: And they wouldn't have even given us money if I wasn't for the institution attached to it.

Mahlet: That's the thing. You want to use our work for Instagram to show off? Like, look what we funded, but knowing that if we applied by ourselves, we wouldn't have gotten that money.

Chukwudubem: I think that Sanctuaries was the best thing to come out of Winnipeg or even Manitoba, last year. So, they wanted to put that everywhere on their page, and we were like, *No*.

[Collective laughter – Nope].

Mahlet: I think people can find their own ways to fund art practices—seeing people doing fundraisers and selling things to be able to fund their projects later on. It's a lot of hard work, but I think there's some type of power within that too—to reject the institution and reject government funding as well.

Chukwudubem: I think, in the next few years, it's possible that we might apply for grants and get them to create programming. However, it'd be cool to get to a stage where we're generating revenue by, like, creating tote bags or T shirts or stuff like that, you know—just funding from the public and having that self-autonomy

Shaneela: That self-sufficiency.

Chukwudubem: Yeah, it's something we're really interested in.

Collective back and forth: Fundraisers, galas, parties. Yeah!

Christina: Is there anything that you'd like to share with other artists about what they might not be thinking collectives are capable of doing or even struggle with? Because, I know that it's a lot of work and takes a lot of time, energy, and effort. I'm just curious what else you would like to share with other artists about it.

Shaneela: I think that I would say to be cognizant of who you're doing this collective work with and whether your relationship can survive stress on it. Because if you can't work through that, then it's doomed, man. You're not going to get anywhere.

Chukwudubem: And I think it's important to ask yourselves *why* you are going to be a collective. There are a lot of collectives that I've seen in the past where heroism comes into play and that destroys a lot of things. There's that individualism that you have to drop, you know, for the interest of the collective, and not, you know, try to be the Duke Ellington of the band.

Shaneela: I think about Patterns in a different way than I think about my personal practice. They're two very different things.

Mahlet: They're two different things. I think even thinking about curation—I feel like working with you guys has pushed me even harder to think beyond what I can do. Like we've all been saying about our relationship: how can we support other artists if we don't support one another? We can do all this amazing programming and put all this love and care into other people, but if we weren't close, I'd feel so uncomfortable, it wouldn't feel right.

Chukwudubem: I also think one other very important thing is the fact that our roles are not rigid.

Shaneela: Except, I do all the graphic design. Other than that, everything else is all of us.

Chukwudubem: Whatever Shaneela is designing, she always consults us, asks us what we think, and asks for feedback and stuff. And that's how we approach everything. For example, if somebody's writing an essay, then we all read it and make suggestions. I think it's a collaboration, but also selfless—Shaneela has done a lot of graphic design work for Patterns, though, damn.

[Collective laughter]

Mahlet: Unpaid! All those Instagram live posters were so good! But it worked out; we're getting paid now, which is nice.

Shaneela: Oh, it was fun. You know, we were just hanging out.

Chukwudubem: Yeah, we were just doing it. I think some people were genuinely invested in what we were doing, and that was enough for us.

Shaneela: There were, like, twenty people watching our Instagram account and we're here for those twenty people!

Chukwudubem: Those twenty people who always returned and would come back. And then we had people who would come and go, or people who are interested in maybe just one of the artists, and they just come for that session. We had a growing base of people and from time to time those numbers increased and people were like, *oh, when's the next Patterns Collective stuff happening?*

Mahlet: We're always growing; it never stays the same.

Shaneela: Yeah, even being on a hiatus right now feels like growth because resting is doing something. Resting is still being productive.

Mahlet: Yeah, we've all had two wild years—mostly the last six or seven months. We've all been busy. And even though we're on hiatus, I think we're always open to having conversations and to not saying yes or no.

Chukwudubem: During the hiatus, we're trying to do a book club to read bell hooks' *all about love*, chapter by chapter. And that's our programming for ourselves.

Shaneela: Yeah, I really want us to do a little retreat or residency too. I feel like we need it.

Mahlet: I think that's also part of the question of what collectives should think about when they're doing these types of things: resting is so important. You can't just work the entire time, it's just not realistic because your body catches up to you and it stops being fun.

Shaneela: Something else that I feel is important for people to know is to have specific work time. We would have meetings every Saturday, it was our Patterns time.

Chukwudubem: And maybe also, taking care of artists' works.

Shaneela: And caring for each other. When we were doing some of our programming, some of us were burnt out. And, you know, just holding space for care to be in those conversations, and having the space for one person to be like, *I'm like, not doing okay right now, this is too much and I need you guys to do more*. Just being open and having that space is really important.

Mahlet: And there's no resentment behind it, either. I think sometimes in collectives, when you have to shift, people are not happy with it.

Christina: That care really shows, taking that time to know how you work with one another really shows in the end, whether you make that visible to others or not.

Shaneela: We haven't been perfect, and it's always a learning process for us. Just establishing that space of care and then being like, *it's okay*. If you didn't ask for help before, but you want to ask for help now, ask for it—the space to ask for it is here.

Patterns Collective was initially founded on the idea of curating performances via virtual platforms, our goal is to bring communities together and also connect artists from far and near, by breaking the barrier of location. Patterns Collective is composed of Chukwudubem Ukaigwe, Shaneela Boodoo, and [Mahlet Cuff](#).
[instagram: [@collective.patterns](#)]