2017 ABOG Fellows Hello Velocity
Gradient: New York, NY
Field Research Report
Josephine Devanbu
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Abstract

The artist collective Hello Velocity used their A Blade of Grass Fellowship to develop *Gradient,* an online service that will allow online vendors to sell their goods on a sliding scale according to income. This final report builds on a mid-award report on *Gradient* completed in November 2017, adding developments and reflections from the second half of the collective's fellowship year. Mid-way through the report, the voice shifts from that of an omniscient observer to my own. This shift corresponds to a collaborative turn in my role as the collective's Field Researcher.[1] The text that follows is written for the artists—JS Tan, Lukas Bentel, and Kevin Wiesner—as well as for A Blade of Grass.

Overview and Context

In a pitch deck[2] aimed at online retailers, Hello Velocity describes *Gradient* as an "online platform that sets pricing according to people's ability to pay. Those who have more pay more. Those who have less pay less." After selecting items for purchase, online shoppers at participating vendors would have the opportunity to "checkout with *Gradient*" and have their price adjusted for their income. The pitch deck goes on to describe the product's ability to increase equity between customers while preserving—or even increasing—profits: revenue lost from products sold below standard price would be counterbalanced by business gained from customers who would not have made the purchase had the price not be lowered.

"The only way *Gradient* is even a thing is if it's selling product," Kevin Wiesner said in August 2017. "It has no choice but to work or it straight up is not *Gradient.*" As Hello Velocity moves to take *Gradient* from pitch to reality, its members come face to face with the myriad questions that lie between their original idea and its real-world execution. For whose needs should *Gradient* be optimized? How much can the idea be adapted for real world viability before it's no longer *Gradient*?

At the core of many of their questions lies Hello Velocity's desire to create a platform that defies norms of capitalist conduct yet is viable within a capitalist marketplace. "At face value [*Gradient's*] focus on equity questions capitalism and communicates that you *should* question capitalism. On the other hand, if *Gradient* works, its greatest tangible benefit is to the business," Wiesner said.

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[1] As part of its mission to nurture socially engaged art, A Blade of Grass developed a practice of hiring "Field Researchers"—usually writers with background in ethnographic methods— to follow each artist through their fellowship year and write about their unfolding process.

[2] A short slide presentation designed to communicate a vision and business plan for a start-up.

Market feasibility hasn't always been a priority for Hello Velocity. The collective made a name for itself when the three artists were still in college, through satirical start-ups designed for virality, not viability. The 2013 launch of "Bite Labs," a fictional tech startup that promised to make artisanal salami from the lab-grown meat of celebrities, marked the group's first foray into baiting fake news. Dozens of hours spent cold-emailing journalists paid off—*Time Magazine*, *Wired*, and *The Los Angeles Times* were among those who covered the story, and 22,000 Twitter users used the hashtag #eatcelebritymeat to ask celebrities to donate tissue samples for Bite Labs to clone and turn into sausage. All in all, the project generated 12 million Twitter impressions.

The group replicated their success in generating viral content with "McMass," a crowdfunding campaign to build a McDonald's inside a functioning church in order to "help churches reverse falling attendance rates, and revitalize their public perception." The McDonald's corporation eventually caught wind of the project and forced the artists to remove all brand identifiers, but not before McMass rose to the number one Google search result for McDonald's, and garnered letters of interest from six churches and an offer from Subway to take McDonald's place.

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Since graduating three years ago, the artists have endeavored to translate their success parodying late capitalism into a means of surviving in it. Design work for hire has been the collective's bread and butter, often requiring Hello Velocity's own projects to take a back seat. The A Blade of Grass Fellowship has offered a modest break from the client work, and, as JS Tan put it, the "validation and resources" to bring *Gradient* into production.

Lukas Bentel cites the 2016 presidential election as precipitating Hello Velocity's interest in making work that engaged the psychology of economic inequity. America's wealth gap was by no means a distant thought to the three artists; the Occupy Movement had been the backdrop to their college education, the 2008 bank bailout a landmark of high school. But, Bentel told me, there was something about the way economic disparity and distress took hold of the 2016 election on both the left and right, particularly the way he saw it contributing to people's receptivity to Trump's incendiary rhetoric, that made them want to enter the conversation directly.

"Lukas is thinking about spreadability—how much *Gradient* can spark a discussion in the public sphere," Tan told me, noting that this aspect of the project is built into "the DNA of Hello Velocity." In Tan's view, *Gradient* is "about using the tools and language of capitalism to talk about something" in this case, to call into question whether an income-blind manner of determining pricing is fair and/or inevitable. But just as importantly, if not more so, it's also about making products more accessible: "Very tangibly, [*Gradient* is] for people who can't afford to pay the full price but would like to have the product anyway."

Definitions of Success

In separate interviews in August 2017, all three artists articulated building a real product as their primary goal in working on *Gradient*. For Wiesner and Bentel, "realness" was intimately tied to market viability. Wiesner told me that though there was "always potential for [*Gradient*] to be viable as a one-off that would lose money

but be an interesting image," it was when it started to look like *Gradient* could maintain product revenue that he became really interested. Bentel said it was important for *Gradient* to operate as a business so that it can keep pushing and sustain itself. Tan, however, saw profitability as a potential, but not integral, part of the project: "Ideally we can figure out a price point where they are not losing money," describing partners as "people who care about accessibility."

Strategy and Challenges

Trying to bring a functional product into the world presents a different set of challenges than perfecting a click-bait worthy story. "As opposed to all the speculative stuff, *Gradient* has to concretely interact with the world around it. It's so much realer in that regard," Wiesner said. "I'm not sure we really know how to work on this kind of project."

Whereas on past projects the three artists had worked in parallel on design problems, *Gradient's* larger scope and applied nature has lead the team to try dividing responsibility so as to be able to progress on multiple fronts in parallel. Tan, who has a background in Computer Science, leads the development of the site, while Bentel and Wiesner have divided up outreach and communication with potential partners and design research and strategy. Still, the collective perceived a mismatch between work required and capacity. "I'd way rather get an MBA and two developers than two designers with no real-world experience and a developer," Wiesner told me. The collective decided to allocate $10,000 of their $20,000 A Blade of Grass stipend to hiring developer and artist Francis Tseng to assist Tan with building out the back-end of the site, including building the server for the site, checkout flow, login and logout.

Even for a conventionally equipped team, building a product without clear precedent presents strategy challenges. That *Gradient* operates in a two-sided market only makes things more complex: for *Gradient* to succeed, it must offer an experience that meets the needs of both vendors and their customers. Since securing partnerships with vendors precedes having direct contact with their customers, Hello Velocity focused its early efforts on the vendor side.

Flexibility of Concept

From the onset, finding vendors willing to partner with *Gradient* demanded flexibility of concept. "Initially I was very convinced that *Gradient* should be a pure system where there is a midpoint and then there are people on the high end, and people on the low end," Bentel told me. But a conversation with friend and small business owner Jamie Wolfond pushed him to begin considering other pricing options. Wolfond told Bentel that he suspected the charging higher income customers above market rates would alienate key customers, a risk he couldn't imagine given his existing struggles with small profit margins.

Working on a whiteboard at New Inc.,[3] Tan sketched various supply and demand curves and projections of how they would shift under sliding scale pricing. In response to Tan's sketches, and feedback like Wolfond's, the collective shifted to a new model: rather than the original idea of sliding the price up and down from a

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[3] A co-working space run by New Museum and home base to Hello Velocity from when the artists graduated from college in 2015 to August 2017.

market rate midpoint, they would cap prices at the product's market rate and offer sliding scale discounts to those whose incomes qualified them.[4] Bentel explained that this pricing system is more appealing to businesses because it mitigates the risk of turning higher-income people away and, theoretically, offers discounts to people who are more likely not to have been able to afford to make the purchase at its standard price.

Still, the team is up against businesses sensitivity around losing profits if too many people pay at a lower rate. Originally, the team had looked to external income verification as way to regulate *Gradient* and bolster vendor confidence. However, logistical and legal challenges demanded that the team adjust their expectations. In July, the team decided to table the goal of external income verification and shift their attention to developing a Minimum Viable Product (MVP) version of *Gradient* with self-reported income.

Forming Partnerships

The collective's first serious conversation with a potential partner came later in July. Verso, a publisher and online vendor of radical texts with a strong history of e-book sales, stood out as a good fit for its leftist values and low marginal costs. The collective worked for two weeks on a pitch directed specifically at Verso. While Verso expressed potential interest in using *Gradient* to sell a subscription service they will be rolling out in the future, the company ultimately felt that incorporating *Gradient* into their standard pricing would be too risky. The company cited sales made during windows when they offer flash sales as critical to their viability and that bringing *Gradient* into the equation would risk diluting the draw created by flash sales.

Managing the development side's time and direction presents challenges of its own. In July 2017, the team had decided to focus Tan and Tseng's time on building out a functional MVP with self-reported income. However, the team's limited information about the feasibility of finding partners willing to use this MVP opened questions about whether pressing forward was strategic. One of Hello Velocity's mentors, Jason Madhosingh, an entrepreneur with experience in online banking and two-sided markets, argued for working towards proof of concept prior to building out a functional MVP. In a late August meeting, Madhosingh told the collective that without proof that it increases profits, **"**no retailer in their right mind is going to sell this deal."

If, however, Madhosingh said, the team could run a test to get proof of concept showing that *Gradient* can help retailers make sales that customers otherwise would have abandoned had they been at full price, then they'd really be onto something. As a test, Madhosingh proposed a version of *Gradient* initiated by a chatbot that would pop up after a customer exited an online shopping cart without making a purchase. The chatbot would prompt the user to input their income, and if eligible, would then offer them a lower price for the product.

Madhosingh's suggestion to use test cases prior to investing in an MVP and to strive to "build an engine that will maximize the amount of money that people spend" left the collective feeling ambivalent.

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[4] This difference is consequential for products with clearly defined market rates or products that can be purchased without going through Gradient. For products available only via Gradient this is essentially a semantic difference.

Though they briefly entertained redirecting developer time towards building a chatbot like the one Madhosingh had proposed, by mid-September the team opted to set aside the chatbot idea and press forward, keeping both Tan and Tseng on the MVP, and Bentel and Wiesner on partner outreach.

As Bentel and Wiesner continued reaching out to potential partners, the process became smoother and more efficient. By October, the pair had reached out to a few dozen potential partners, spending on average thirty minutes tailoring each letter—much faster than the pitch they developed for Verso back in July, but slower than the form emails they sent out to journalists when seeking coverage of earlier work like Bite Labs and McMass.

While the majority of inquiries went unanswered, the collective engaged in conversation with several potential partners and supporters. Pioneer Works, a non-profit cultural center based in Red Hook, Brooklyn, expressed interested in using *Gradient* to offer sliding scale tuition on their arts programming and classes given their interested in making their programming more accessible to lower-income Red Hook residents. Pioneer Works' Education Coordinator Rachel Haberstroh had a positive response to the preliminary pricing mock-up that Wiesner put together, and let him know she would reach out to leadership about moving forward with the partnership.

NYC-based consulting agency Purpose also expressed support for *Gradient's* work and a willingness to keep an eye out for potential retail partners amongst their socially minded business clients. A cold email to the Oakland-based Museum of Capitalism started a conversation about them potentially using *Gradient* to price tickets. Moving forward, Bentel and Wiesner planned to continue "plugging away" at reaching out to potential retail partners.

On the development end, the team said that the site is "90% built out"[5] and close to being ready to integrate with online retailers that handle their own checkout. In early November, Tseng, who the team had hoped would stay on as a collaborator on the project, decided to focus on other work after completing the portion of the build that he was explicitly contracted to finish, leaving the team with less developing horsepower than hoped.

Gradient as Art

The collective regards Gradient's status as an artwork somewhat casually—something to claim when useful, but not fuss over. In a conversation in mid-October, Bentel said Hello Velocity addresses doubts about how *Gradient* operates as a work of art by contextualizing the project with the collective's past work, and by explaining how the pursuit of the strongest format to express their ideas has again and again lead artists to forms outside the canon.

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[5] In retrospect, the team says this figure was significantly off. In conversation in late May, 2018, Tan said development may still not be 90% done.

"If you have the belief that art and art conversation has the ability to effect change, it's important to find a medium that works best in communicating what you are trying to communicate," Bentel said. "For us, making a company is the most effective medium to have a conversation about equitable corporate pricing of product."

I'm on board with Bentel's assertion that a business can operate as an artwork, but I still have questions about whether *this* business operates as an artwork. To me, Bite Labs and McMass succeed as artworks by setting up a kind of symbolic trap that reveals something about the systems in which they go viral. The interest real churches showed in participating in McMass transformed what could have been an absurdist gag into a sobering portrait of the state of Americans' spiritual hunger. What, if any, is the equivalent trap or twist in *Gradient?* What new meaning will be created if *Gradient* succeeds as a business? Alongside the question of whether *Gradient* is art or not, I ask: is *Gradient* subversive or not?

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"Why would we want to build traps? I'd rather build a business." Wiesner said, responding to my question about *Gradient's* equivalent to McMass' symbolic trap. "Not to say *Gradient* couldn't do both."

It was early January 2018, just a few weeks before the A Blade of Grass mid-fellowship retreat in NYC and the first time we'd talked about their progress since they read the mid-term report I finished in November.

"Bite Labs and McMass were ways to formulate pre-existing critiques" Bentel added. "*Gradient* is more ambiguous. It has to be usable and understandable to business owners." He went on to say that while the team could make a splashy, aggressive website about income inequality that takes more of the McMass/ Bite Labs approach of "holding up a mirror pointing to a problem," this would likely forfeit the opportunity to build public empathy through the project.

Watching fake news wreak very real havoc on American electoral politics changed the way the collective thought about their work. In post-Trump America, satire seemed ineffective at best. Wiesner summed up the emerging consensus among pundits on the left that satirizing Trump was counterproductive: "You're never going to make something that's going to dramatize [this presidency] past how horrific it actually is," he said. "But you might desensitize people to the horror." He continued: "Satire only really reaches audiences who agree with you, audiences already making fun of [what you are parodying]"—a particularly damning limitation in a nation so divided along political lines.

Still, Bentel felt they could be bolder with *Gradient.* "We've been really practical. I'd almost like to prod us in the other direction. Maybe we do try something provocative."

Ideating Applications
While *Gradient* consistently met initial enthusiasm from potential partners, the team wasn't getting in the room with decision makers. Pioneer Works had fallen through, as had the Museum of Capitalism. Purpose was supportive of the work but didn't deliver any promising matches.

Bentel and Wiesner were up to their necks with leads for client work and couldn't afford not to follow them. Between Tseng's departure and Tan changing day jobs, development bandwidth also took a hit during the winter months. Without a committed partner pushing deadlines and structuring priorities, the team took a pause to reassess strategy.

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At the mid-fellowship retreat hosted in January, I had a chance to sit down with the collective and Jan Cohen-Cruz, Director of Field Research at A Blade of Grass. Cohen-Cruz encouraged the artists to think about ways that they could take the momentum of the project into their own hands, and to reflect on ways that A Blade of Grass and I, as their Field Researcher, could be more supportive in the second half of the fellowship. The collective agreed that while their conversations with me had been useful, they would be excited to direct my thinking and writing towards fleshing out and disseminating the project. Cohen-Cruz was on board.

Hello Velocity reached out to me about collaborating on an open letter to the Metropolitan Museum of Art just as the museum's new fixed-admissions policy went into effect. As of March 2018, out of state visitors to the Met must pay a fixed $25 admission fee, ending a decades old pay-what-you-wish policy in place for all visitors.[6]

Since its announcement in January 2018, the new policy has drawn consistent negative press. Ai Weiwei compared the change to "taking the jacket off a poor man,"[7] while Roberta Smith cited it as evidence of "the continual degrading and privatization of public space."[8] A citizen-organized petition against the new policy gathered over 20,000 signatures.[9] In defense of the new policy, Met President David Weiss points to the fiscal unsustainability of pay-what-you-wish in the face of low admissions contributions, decreasing membership rates, and cuts in funding from the Mayor's Office—all in the face of increasing numbers of visitors.[10]

Hello Velocity saw a major step back for public art access, and an opportunity to instigate a high-profile conversation about sliding scale pricing. Their idea: instigate a high-profile conversation about sliding scale pricing by proposing it as a solution to the Met's revenue loss without cutting off access. Seeking a collaborator engaged in arts access issues, the collective suggested producing the project as a joint effort

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[6] Those able to demonstrate New York state residence or student status in the tristate area are still admitted under the old pay-what-you-wish policy.

[7] van Straaten, Laura, "A Right or a Privilege? Artists Speak Out on The Met Policy" *The New York Times*. 1 March 2018.

[8] Smith, Roberta, and Holland Cotter. "The Met Should Be Open to All. The New Pay Policy is a Mistake" *The New York Times*. 4 Jan. 2018.

[9] See: The Met Should Remain Pay as You Wish

[10] Vartanian, Hrag, "Met Museum President Daniel Weiss Answers Questions About the New Admissions Policy", *Hyperallergic.* 8 Jan. 2018.

between *Gradient* and my own project, Look at Art. Get Paid.[11] This collaboration marked a shift in my role as field researcher, both increasing my access the collective's process and complicating my understanding of it.

In all, we produced a standalone website hosting the proposal itself (see equitablemet.com), an illustrated Medium post breaking down the process by which the *Gradient* team arrived at the proposed scale (see here) and a second Medium with a statement on our position and intent (see here). This report assumes a readership familiar with these three texts.

I worked closely with team on the text for the Equitable Met home page and accompanying statement. Hello Velocity handled the bulk of the project's production, from developing the scale we proposed to designing and coding the site. The team wrote to approximately fifty journalists, including folks who had covered the Met's change in admission policy as well as writers focused more broadly about arts access, social practice, sliding scale, and alternative economies.

As of May, six stories[12] have come out about Equitable Met. The interviews leading up to them offered the opportunity to hear the collective answer other writers' questions. Thinking back to Hello Velocity's history of making work that operates in symbiosis with online media, I began to see how members of the press are a critical audience and stakeholder group for the collective's work. In the space of these interviews, the pressure to demonstrate business viability gave way to the urgency of delivering a convincing motive and backstory.

Interviews ranged from ten minutes of terse questioning by ArtNet News associate editor Henri Neuendorf, to an hour of sprawling conversation with New Yorker contributor Daniel Penny.

Neuendorf ran an article about us the next day under the headline: "An Activist Group Thinks the Met's Ticket Price Should Depend on Your Tax Bracket. Would It Work?" Neuendorf's take? In a word: No. Neuendorf's

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[11] Look at Art. Get Paid. is a socially engaged art program that pays people who wouldn't normally visit art museums to attend one as guest critics. By paying cash to visit a museum, the program compensates (and calls out) non-monetary barriers to access, allowing people to critique dominant art institutions without donating their time.

[12] List of Publications:

Peter, Adele. "What if the Met Cost More for Rich People?" *Fast Company.* 3 March 2018.

Neuendorf, Henri. An Activist Group Thinks the Met's Ticket Price Should Depend on Your Tax Bracket. Would It Work?" *ArtNet News*. 3 March, 2018.

Anstey, Tom. "Campaign group calls on Met to introduce "inclusive" sliding entry scale" *Attractions Management.* 20 March 2018

Valentine, Claire. "One Group's Mission to Halt the Met's New Pricing Model" *Paper Magazine.* 18 April 2018.

Albanese, Robert, "Alumns Lead Equitable Met Campaign" *RISD Media*. 3 April 2018.

Penny, Daniel "How Much Should the Met Cost You?" *Paris Review.* 30 May 2018

article concluded with a mock nod to the elite ". . . breathe easy, One Percenters. The Met won't be demanding your pay stubs or 1099s just yet. For now, $25 tickets for out-of-towners are here to stay."

It was late May by the time Penny published his story about Equitable Met. The piece, published in the *Paris Review,* discusses Equitable Met in context with the institution's history of shifting admission policy.

Penny discusses a former social pressure amongst upper class families in New York City to purchase museum memberships as a kind of historical precedent for sliding scale—membership fees offset lower-income visitors who might choose to pay less in admission. Penny sees Equitable Met as a way to re-establish some of this lost sense of obligation by drawing visitors' attention to their own financial position. He quotes Wiesner: "For sliding scale to be sustainable, it needs to not feel like charity but instead like a civic obligation."

Adele Peter, staff writer at *Fast Company,* also closed her story on the project with a look towards its wider context: "As *Gradient* builds out its own product, the startup is hoping that people begin considering the broader potential uses of sliding scale policies as well." She went on to quote Tan: "We wanted to get folks thinking about the applicability of sliding scales in places like the Met, but also eventually in places like a restaurant, or online."

Reflecting on the project over Skype in May, the team agrees Equitable Met fell short on this goal. "Equitable Met looks like a cool project. It's going to be great to tell people about. But it was in no way an effective outreach tool for *Gradient* itself," Wiesner said. Equitable Met drew little traffic to its own website, and almost none to *Gradient's* homepage—Tan reported less than 10 new visitors, half of whom he guessed were family and friends.

Tan thought the explanation for the lack of traffic back to *Gradient* was simple: "Equitable Met wasn't really about *Gradient* in the end." Bentel explained that while working with *Look at Art. Get Paid.* had brought ethical urgency to Equitable Met, it had also complicated the project's message. Unsurprisingly, he said, a proposal addressing a complex problem, co-authored by two complex artist projects, each with their own agenda, didn't produce the digestible media hook the collective had hoped for.

Indeed, a version of Equitable Met focused on the viability of sliding scale as a solution to the Met's financial problems and public backlash might well have generated press more useful to the collective. If executed in a less confrontational way, this approach might have also allowed for more direct support from A Blade of Grass. While A Blade of Grass promoted the project over social media, the collective told me A Blade of Grass staff had communicated that the organization needed to be mindful of Equitable Met's direct call out of another arts institution when promoting the project. The collective said staff were candid about this situation and creative about ways to support the artists in the project. It is worth noting that I have not spoken directly with any A Blade of Grass staff about their experience communicating with the collective about Equitable Met or their approach to navigating the challenges it presented. [13]

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[13] I am very much open to suggestions about how to balance this account with staff perspectives should A Blade of Grass staff have the interest and bandwidth to connect about this.

For me, Equitable Met points to the challenges that come with trying to make socially engaged art that critically engages one's own community. What strategies can artists and their funders employ to realize projects that critique the art world while maintaining the community and relationships that future funding will depend on? How can institutional call-outs honor the work of staff who pour themselves into bettering them from the inside? How might call-outs make space for organizations to engage without losing face?

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Perhaps because I worked on it, perhaps because it recalled the collective's media facing strong suit, perhaps simply because it was time to wrap up this report and the collective hadn't completed their original goals, I looked to Equitable Met as a potential turning point in the collective's A Blade of Grass experience. A group Skype in May set me straight. Not only did the collective agree Equitable Met wasn't the turning point I was looking for, they didn't offer up any plot twist or shift in their aims for the fellowship to take its place.

"Is the goal not just the same, but taking longer?" Bentel offered. Wiesner & Tan voiced their agreement.

Reflection

Concerned about a final report that culminated in an announcement of a delay, I reminded the collective that I'd be writing about the project as it unfolded during the grant period in relation to their original goals. In response, Wiesner put forth two proposals for how I might proceed. I have quoted them in full—along with Bentel and Tan's immediate reactions—because they effuse the collective's particular brand of sardonic vulnerability, and because they are genuinely good stories.

Wiesner: Josephine, I can give you two really pithy, oversimplified narrative arcs to get to where we are now. Alright, ready?

Here's storyline one: Hello Velocity starts working on *Gradient* coming out of making things that are objectively fake, wants to make something that's objectively real, gets really sucked down that rabbit hole, encounters unforeseen complexities (this is, like, the bottom part of our Heroic Cycle, you know?) and gradually realizes that their obsession with the notion of 'what is real?' is causing them to stagnate and that they need a blend of storytelling as well, and so goes to do Equitable Met which is recalling some of this vaporware proposition based work and going forward they hope to find a synthesis of two. OK, storyline one ends. Storyline two—

Tan: Great story by the way.

Wiesner:—Oh yeah, it's rad, I know, wait for the second one.

OK so the second one says, we've always said that we are a digital arts studio that uses the language of web commerce and business to do satire but (until now) we didn't really know what that meant. We thought, "Gosh, it's so easy to make things that look like businesses, it must be easy to make a business." Now we're

trying to build a commercial thing in more than form to really try to own the tools that we've previously appropriated the aesthetic of, and . . . it's harder. This one doesn't actually end up at a convenient end point for where we are now.

Tan: I like that narrative less.

Bentel: It's a good story.

Wiesner: I think the first one is more digestible.

Devanbu: What parts of those stories ring true? What do they leave out?

Bentel: I think the first one is a more compelling narrative arc, and the second one feels probably more real but is a little more frustrating to deal with.

Wiesner: And they both leave out the part where we get slammed with client work through the winter and then run out of money in the spring. And the part where JS is consistently busting his ass in the background working on the platform.

Beta Testing and Next Steps

Around when we started working on Equitable Met, Tan picked back up on the development work. Looking back on progress made in the fall, Tan noted, "Francis and I got to a working proof of concept, but a lot of the features you would actually need to launch the site, like something as simple as the ability to change a password, didn't exist." Since early March 2018, Tan has been building the behind-the-scenes features—such as the ability to audit data should a customer complain about a transaction—that separate a mockup from a launchable product.

In late May, Tan and I met up in person for a live walkthrough of the site. The customer experience begins with a prompt to sign in or create a profile. Tan types in a sample name, email address, and password and we're on to a brisk yet heavy-hitting *Personal Information* section: Marital Status? Income? Number of Dependents? He puts in dummy data and we're registered.

The vendor registration is involved but not so personal. Tan has drafted an *Integrating with Gradient* page that spells out all a developer on the vendor's side would need to insert a "check-out with Gradient" button and to establish the communication flow by which *Gradient's* API would send notifications when purchases are made. For the demo, Tan has already mocked up a test vendor with two sample products—an upholstered armchair and simple wooden dining chair. As we've already registered for *Gradient,* when we click the "check-out with Gradient" button we are taken to a window where we can view our income-adjusted price for our seat of choice and proceed to payment. Non-registered customers would be directed to sign up for *Gradient* before checkout. Credit card transactions are handled through Stripe, a widely used external plug-in that charges a modest fee.

Scrolling through his github task list, Tan tells me he thinks the site will be ready to launch by the end of summer. While an external partner would be ideal, he's open to ways to launch without waiting for a partner. Rather than gain reach through another media stunt, Tan thinks paid advertising is a more cost-effective way to get the word out.

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As Wiesner put it, the challenge is that "Everybody is unconvinced by a different piece of *Gradient*."

While a handful of people have named income-verification as a condition for being able to trust *Gradient*, just as many have described it as an invasive and impractical deal-breaker. And while some have doubted the project's business viability, others have criticized it for not being subversive enough to capitalist norms.

In this sense, *Gradient* is already "holding up a mirror" to use Bentel's phrase for the way Bite Labs and McMass operate. In the composition of our impression of the project, the way we sort its strengths and weaknesses, we can see reflected back our own values and anxieties about the economy we live in, and what it takes to survive in it with dignity.

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Hours after Madhosingh told the collective that without proof *Gradient* increases profits, "no retailer in their right mind would sell the deal," I had the chance to talk one-on-one with Rasu Jilani, director of recruiting and community engagement at New Inc. It was August 24th, 2017: Hello Velocity's last day at the New Museum-based co-working space.

Jilani spoke of the collective's growth over their past years at New Inc., from members he "barely noticed" to key members who embodied New Inc.'s values of collaboration, mutual support, and experimentation—values Jilani saw "activated" in *Gradient.*

"With *Gradient,* I think where the possibility of an audience or a user could be is people who do not believe in the traditional capitalistic approach to consumerism, or just don't believe in consumerism at all." Jilani said these "post-capitalist" individuals are right here in New York City, from the Greek community in Astoria to the Polish and Russian communities in Brighton Beach. Gradient could be a way to "reinforce and facilitate" the values they already engage through bartering economies.

Learning from those who live and breathe alternate economic structures would be key building *Gradient.* "It's one thing to criticize capitalism as a theory and it's a different thing to actually see it play out in practice within a community that operates differently." Jilani said.

These engagements would also build the user base for *Gradient* when it did launch. Jilani could imagine people who the collective had interviewed choosing "check-out with Gradient" when given the option: "They'd think, 'Oh yeah, those guys from Hello Velocity talked to us and we know they have our insights and our values built into this technology.'"

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Conclusion

Early in the fellowship year, Wiesner defined *Gradient* as inseparable from its functionality: "'The only way *Gradient* is even a thing is if it's selling product. It has no choice but to work or it straight up is not *Gradient*." How, I couldn't help but wonder, did the collective understand this relationship now? Crudely put, does *Gradient* exist?

"Yeah sure, it exists. It's not done, but it exists," Wiesner said. Bentel expanded: "It exists as a concept, it exists as a website, it exists in press as a group that is advocating for sliding scale and will eventually have a sliding scale payment plug-in."

Tan turned to audience by way of answer: "One metric that I am interested in is: do people want to use it today? How many? By that metric, it doesn't really exist to me yet." He added: "This should be at the forefront of our effort going forward."

Postscript

As Hello Velocity sees *Gradient's* story as unfinished, I wanted to make space in this report for meaning yet to come. In late May, I wrote to the collective asking them to imagine potential gestures that might emerge from widespread adoption of *Gradient.* I've included Bentel's reply below:
Hey Josephine,

If *Gradient* blew up that would be great. Funnily enough, if it did become a viable sustainable company we could see people asking, "What stage of late capitalism are we in? Are we really monetizing equitability?"

Possible reactions:
Expected (Desired)
Small community organizations use it. People implement *Gradient* on their web stores without needing direct help from us.

Surprising
Get acquired by PayPal.

Fuck yeah
[Swedish Banking Company] Klarna, Italy, Norway say they want to implement it in their countries where people are more open to concepts like *Gradient.*

What the hell
Gradient becomes big and gets owned/dragged by the activist community or sued by the government for unlawful price discrimination.

Lukas