

Leading otherwise: feminist instances from the arts

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Women and Leadership in the Creative Industries

Leading Otherwise: Feminist Instances From the Arts

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how feminist artists enact leadership through artistic organizing in the creative industries. Drawing on two case studies—Company Drinks and Homebaked—it examines how leadership emerges not through formal roles or strategic vision, but through practices of care. We highlight the interwoven dimensions that constitute feminist leadership and create infrastructures of belonging and continuity. To capture this, we propose the analytical device of the *assembler*: a feminist subject position through which leadership is enacted, and this involves the careful composition of relationships, materials, and conditions. Our analysis contributes to leadership studies by grounding calls for critical postheroic approaches in concrete feminist practices and to creative industries research by challenging dominant metrics of visibility, scale, and entrepreneurial charisma. We contend that the problem is not only the underrepresentation of women in leadership, but also the lack of feminist orientations to leadership. Artistic organizing demonstrates how leadership can be enacted otherwise while rehearsing alternative futures.

1 | Introduction

Leadership in the creative industries is structured by persistent myths of individual genius, heroic authority, and self-reliant entrepreneurship, narratives that continue to obscure the contributions of women and minoritized practitioners (M. Carr and Van Raalte 2025). In this context, leadership is often discursively framed through masculinized, heroic tropes. Large-scale media analyses find that women are less frequently associated with leadership roles and, when represented, are often described through affective and embodied terms such as “smiling” or “laughing,” whereas men are linked to active, authoritative verbs such as “directed,” “managed,” “founded,” etc. (PEC 2019, 2020). Khan et al. (2022) similarly show how ideals of leadership remain deeply gendered, with media narratives continuing to cast leadership as the preserve of exceptional male figures.

Such portrayals of leadership echo Binns's (2008) observation that the heroic leader is imagined as a tough, self-reliant

individual who eschews dependency, and D. Collinson et al.'s (2018) critique of leadership romanticism that continues to privilege heroic figures. In the creative industries, this calls for attention to the “privileged precarity” that characterizes creative labor—a condition where instability is romanticized and informal leadership remains invisible. Rutherford (2001) further cautions that organizational discourses actively produce categories of masculinity and femininity, underscoring the need to avoid conflating “women” with supposedly feminized practices. These discursive constructions tend to reinforce structural imbalances when it comes to women in leadership, making clear the need to rethink how leadership is theorized and enacted in the creative industries.

Recent data underline persistent gender inequalities in the UK's creative and cultural industries. Dodd's (2012) baseline study showed stark disparities, with around 32,800 women compared to 82,450 men in leadership positions. Updated statistics reveal only partial progress. For instance, in 2024, women in the

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cultural sector earned a median salary of £29,434 compared to £35,424 for men, equivalent to just 83 pence for every £1 earned by men. In the creative industries more broadly, the gender pay gap remained stark at 18.3% (Arts Professional 2024; DCMS 2024). Workforce data show that less than half of those employed in funded arts organizations are women, with women's representation declining slightly in recent years (Arts Council England 2022). Parliamentary reviews continue to highlight systemic barriers to women's progression, including informal recruitment networks, precarious work, and gendered harassment (POST 2025).

At the margins of these dominant narratives, alternative approaches to leadership have emerged. Postheroic leadership theories (PHL) shift attention from individual charisma to collective practice, emphasizing interaction and negotiation (Crevani et al. 2010; Denis et al. 2012; Gronn 2002; Larsson et al. 2025). Critical leadership theory (CLT) has further challenged the idealization of individual leaders, proposing more contextual understandings of leadership and followership (Alvesson and Spicer 2012; Ford and Harding 2007; D. Collinson et al. 2018). Yet these accounts remain incomplete. If the former shows how several actors contribute to realizing leadership (Empson and Alvehus 2020; Ospina et al. 2020), it can still align postheroic leading with behaviors culturally associated with feminine gender norms (Khan et al. 2022) and sometimes assume it is less masculinized than it is in practice (Prowse et al. 2022). Although CLT examines how power renders some practices legible as leadership while obscuring others (M. Collinson 2018), it often overlooks the affective labor that makes this legibility possible (Picard and Islam 2020; Larsson et al. 2025). Taken together, these strands risk leaving unresolved the question of what practices come to be recognized as leadership and for which purpose(s).

To resolve this gap, we show how a feminist practice lens extends the extant literature by foregrounding how leadership is assembled amid precarity and partial visibility, enabling us to move beyond both heroic individualism and the conflation of women with “feminized” styles. Within the creative industries, feminist artists lead in ways that remain largely unrecognized (Creative UK 2025), not because they are absent from leadership, but because the practices they engage in are rarely named as such (Page 2011; Fletcher 2001; Ely and Meyerson 2000). Recent contributions (De Amicis 2025; Holt 2023; Holm and Beyes 2022; Böhm and Kuba 2020) add to this conversation by showing how artistic competence in organizational settings enables nondominant forms of leadership that are anchored in care as ethical–political practice (Tronto 1993, 2008). Leadership in artistic organizing is less about guiding others and more about assembling temporary alliances, mutual relationships, and practical infrastructures that hold space for new forms of knowing, doing, and being together (De Amicis 2025). This work is often embedded in conditions of exhaustion and precarity and unfolds outside formal roles or institutional scripts (Holden 2015), making such leadership both consequential and frequently invisible.

We therefore argue that artistic organizing provides fertile ground for reimagining “leading otherwise,” not as heroic achievement or a feminine counter-style, but as a set of feminist

practices. Here, care becomes central, not as a sentimental virtue but as a political *and* ethical practice involving attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness (Tronto 1993, 2008). Cornejo-Abarca et al. (2025) likewise underscore the need to distinguish “feminist” from “feminine” leadership, whereas others suggest that leadership practices can be resignified beyond binary gender categories (Fine 2016). Together, these contributions open up ways of conceptualizing leadership as a feminist practice of care, rather than as identity or style, and challenge conventional definitions of who leads, how, and to what end. Rather than seeking new models, we value the practices that already exist, those that resist capture, remain provisional, and hold open space for collaborative doing. Moreover, by bridging PHL and CLT with the ethics and politics of care, we extend these perspectives and illuminate underexplored ways in which leadership is pursued in creative settings.

We are guided by the research question, “*How do feminist artists enact leadership, and what do these reveal about alternative ways of doing and leading in the creative industries?*” To empirically explore this phenomenon, we ethnographically engage with two artistic settings—*Company Drinks* and *Homebaked*—projects instigated by feminist artists that work across art, community, and economy. These are not merely socially engaged art initiatives, but also long-term feminist infrastructures where leadership emerges through shared authorship, distributed responsibilities, and the use of esthetic and material artifacts. Moreover, we study these initiatives not as instances of entrepreneurship in its conventional, masculinized sense of heroic risk-taking and market exploitation, but as forms of artistic entrepreneuring. Artistic entrepreneuring denotes practices of commoning and public assembling, where artistic materialities are mobilized to generate organizational alternatives that are ethical, situated, and collective (Holm and Beyes 2022).

In the projects studied, artistic entrepreneuring becomes a mode of enacting “alternative futures” (Gümüşay and Reinecke 2024) through feminist leadership and can provide lessons not only for the creative industries but also for how we understand leadership at large. Using our feminist lens, we begin with a provocation that builds on but also challenges scholarship to stop looking for leadership in the expected places and instead ask where leadership already is although practised differently. We call this *leading otherwise*. In the sections that follow, we develop a conceptual framework grounded in postheroic leadership studies, critical leadership theory, and the ethics and politics of care; we then introduce our methodological approach and examine each case vignette in turn. Through this, we propose a reorientation of leadership in the creative industries, introducing the analytical device of the act of *assembler*, a feminist subject position through which leadership is enacted via assembling relationships, materials, and conditions.

2 | Theoretical Framework

Building on PHL and CLT, we engage with feminist organization studies while ultimately reframing leadership through the ethics and politics of care. This framework allows us to foreground how leadership can be conceptualized as a feminist

practice within organizational settings. PHL perspectives shift attention from individuals to relational, processual, and collective accomplishment (Crevani et al. 2010; Denis et al. 2012; Gronn 2002). Larsson et al. (2025) synthesize this move and make it methodologically tractable: Rather than treating leadership as a property of persons, they analyze how “moments of leadership” are realized in situ through interaction, showing leadership as an emergent, temporally situated practice. This reframing aligns with distributed, shared, and plural conceptions (Rippin 2007; Kioupkiolis 2023) while insisting on microlevel analysis of how leadership actually gets done (Kelan and Wratil 2018).

However, several studies caution that postheroic ideals can be reabsorbed into heroic/masculinized frames. For instance, Khan et al. (2022) show how media industries construct frames that validate traditional heroism by recoding “feminized” traits into softer masculinities and casting postheroic forms as a new kind of heroism applied almost exclusively to men. With this move, the sector effectively remasculinizes the postheroic. Prowse et al. (2022) similarly find that although women and men may endorse communal, postheroic styles, leadership cultures still privilege agentic, masculinized repertoires, reproducing the familiar “women take care; men take charge” split. A further caution concerns the “romance of postheroic” itself. Picard and Islam (2020) interrogate the postheroic discourse of liberating leadership and show its ambivalent effects. Here, decentering the leader can destabilize symbolic authority, but also scapegoat those who reintroduce limits. Their analysis complicates celebratory narratives of emancipation by revealing new demands and vulnerabilities that postheroic arrangements may produce.

Postheroic lenses are crucial for our context, but they require a critical approach to avoid reromanticizing leadership. We thus draw on CLT, which begins from a refusal to take leadership as self-evident, benign, or heroic. Instead, it explores how leadership is embedded within complex relations of power, identity, and meaning-making (M. Collinson 2018). It seeks not to refine leadership competencies but to interrogate the assumptions that make some people legible as leaders while rendering others—and other forms of leadership—invisible (Alvesson and Spicer 2012; Ford et al. 2008; D. Collinson et al. 2018). These critiques resonate in the creative industries, where the “romance of leadership” (D. Collinson et al. 2018) is reproduced in the myth of the creative genius (Gill 2002; Taylor and O'Brien 2017), which continues to attribute success to individual visionaries while obscuring the infrastructures that make creative work possible. This approach foregrounds several interwoven themes: that leadership is always contextual and contested; that it is entangled with the discursive politics of gender, race, and class; and that it involves ongoing negotiations, particularly for those leading without access to positional authority or institutional recognition (Chandler and Kirsch 2018; Liu 2017).

From the theoretical perspective of CLT, power is not understood as an individual asset but rather as a dynamic phenomenon that circulates through contingent relationships characterized by paradoxes, tensions, and situated accomplishments (D. Collinson et al. 2018). Power influences the legibility of practices as “leadership,” the uneven allocation of visibility and voice, and the continually produced, policed, and contested

boundary between leader and follower within organizational settings (Gilani et al. 2019). This strand of literature provides a substantial body of scholarship on followership, further shifting attention away from the centrality of the leader. Followership studies explore how followers co-construct leadership and influence outcomes (Schedlitzki et al. 2018) or how leadership functions are distributed across teams and contexts (Van Roekel 2023). Although these perspectives align with our empirical cases, where leadership emerges collectively and informally, our focus is rather on comprehending how leadership is constructed through practices. As Kioupkiolis (2023) points out, counter-hegemonic leadership necessitates humility and democratic practice, qualities that resonate with our feminist practice lens while avoiding the need to reproduce a leader/follower binary.

What CLT leaves underexplored are the affective dimensions of leadership that make discursive power legible in practice. Critical framing can obscure the emotional labor, exhaustion, and vulnerability that underpin organizational settings (Picard and Islam 2020; Larsson et al. 2025). In the creative industries, these dimensions are not incidental but constitutive: Collaborative projects and precarious networks are held together by acts of care that remain absent from most CLT accounts. Equally, although CLT interrogates the discursive politics of leadership, it does not fully grapple with how relational leadership practices are continually recoded as masculine when performed by men (Khan et al. 2022), nor with how expectations that “women take care” reproduce inequalities in recognition and value (Prowse et al. 2022).

Both PHL and CLT have been pivotal in unsettling the discourse of heroic leaders. However, they still leave room to explore the affective practices through which leadership is enacted and disrupted in everyday contexts, including the material forms through which it takes shape. It is here that feminist approaches contribute a vital extension, repositioning leadership not as the heroic acts of individuals, nor only as the discursive circulation of ideologies, but as the entanglements of affect, ethics, and politics (Ford et al. 2008; Liu 2017; Sinclair 2007). In this respect, leadership cannot but be relational, contextual, and political, emerging not from normative models of “good leadership” but from collective practices of care. Fisher and Tronto (1991, 40) define care as “everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it...” Care is not a personality trait or a gendered style of leading, but a collective practice. To call care a practice means it is composed of concrete actions and material arrangements (e.g., organizing time, labor, resources, and relationships) that enable collective work to be coordinated, sustained, and made meaningful. Tronto (2008) specifies this through four interrelated phases: *attentiveness*, the recognition of the needs of others and the acceptance that they should be met; *responsibility*, taking it upon oneself to respond to these needs; *competence*, ensuring the actual work of care is carried out effectively; and *responsiveness*, considering how care is received and whether it is experienced as caring. Taken together, these phases make explicit the links between ethics and politics: Care is ethical because it involves attentiveness and responsibility to others, and it is political because it depends on how institutions, norms, and power relations shape who is seen, who is heard, and whose needs are met.

This framing aligns with feminist organization scholarship. Calás and Smircich (1993) and Fletcher (2004) caution that collaborative or “postheroic” forms of work, frequently associated with women, are often rendered invisible or naturalized as supportive rather than acknowledged as leadership. Binns (2008) expands upon this into an argument for relational ethics, wherein leadership is assessed not by personal attributes but by the individual’s responsibility to others. Eveline (2005) and Rippin (2007) similarly demonstrate how feminized leadership in academia and leader identity formation are influenced by organizational cultures that both facilitate and restrict feminist practice. Empirical benchmarks, such as Dodd’s (2012) study of the creative industries, underscore the persistence of structural barriers even in instances where women assume leadership roles.

Concurrently, research cautions against equating women with caregiving roles. Prowse et al. (2022) document how the expectation that “women take care and men take charge” continues to undervalue women’s leadership labor. In contrast, Khan et al. (2022) demonstrate how ostensibly feminine traits are remasculinized when performed by men in media industries. Feminist theorists resist this essentialism. Porter (2025), updating Batliwala’s (2010) “feminist leadership diamond,” asserts that feminist leadership is defined by its values, practices, politics, and power arrangements, not by style. Care, in this context, represents one dimension of feminist leadership’s ethical and political orientation, a component of a redistributive project aimed at reorganizing power, designing nonoppressive structures, and holding organizations accountable to social justice. Additionally, Pullen and Vachhani (2021) argue that care should not be naturalized as inherently feminine but reconceived as intercorporeal and relational ethics, a mode of becoming with others that challenges entrenched leader–follower dualisms. This dialectical approach emphasizes the coproduction of leadership, rejecting binary logics that separate leaders from followers or structure from agency (Soga et al. 2014). It shifts attention from the limited individual to an emergent field of relations where leadership is inherently fluid (Josefsson 2020). Building on this, we can conceptualize leadership as an assemblage: a heterogeneous network of individuals, objects, and emotions that relationally generate leadership practice beyond any single individual (Soga et al. 2021).

Within this framing, artistic organizing offers a field of practice where leadership is enacted not through formal authority but as a feminist practice that mobilizes the ethics and politics of care. These are not merely alternative leadership styles, but also different ontologies of action, where the figure of the leader dissolves into the field of practice itself (Uhl-Bien 2006). From this theoretical framework, we do not seek to codify new leadership models, as “there are as many definitions of leadership as there are those who have attempted to define the concept” (Stogdill 1974, 259). Instead, we aim to highlight the generative messiness of feminist leadership and the multiple ways in which leadership is continually made and remade through interaction as exemplified in our empirical work.

Accordingly, we draw upon three core interrelated tenets as our analytical and theoretical framework in this paper. First,

leadership as relational and affective. Rather than emerging from the will or charisma of a singular actor, leadership is constituted in relation with others and with environments. We understand leadership as an ongoing negotiation of meanings and identities (Uhl-Bien 2006), where care underpins the cohesion of organizations (Binns 2008; Page 2011; Sinclair and Lips-Wiersma 2008; Sinclair 2007). Artistic practices often assemble infrastructures to create space for participation, complexity, and the cultivation of shared values (De Amicis 2025). Second, leadership as collective and emergent. We understand leadership as emergent from collective practice, shaped through copresence, and distributed responsibility (Ford et al. 2008; Liu 2017). In artistic organizing, leadership frequently unfolds through shared authorship, iterative design, and dialogic engagement, rendering it structurally invisible but functionally central. Leadership here is not declared but enacted, quietly, collectively, and often experimentally. Third, leadership as a site of resistance and ethical conduct. We understand leadership not only as a practice of organizing but also as a site of resistance. When enacted by those working outside dominant institutional frameworks, leadership becomes a terrain for challenging normative expectations and rehearsing alternative futures (Butler et al. 2018; Liu 2017; Chandler and Kirsch 2018).

3 | Methodology

This paper adopts a vignette-based conceptual approach grounded in empirical material generated during fieldwork on artistic organizing and feminist leadership practices. Rather than aiming for generalizability or causal explanation, vignettes are used as illustrative and analytical fragments, situated, evocative episodes that exemplify broader theoretical concerns (Kandemir and Budd 2018). In other words, the vignettes are not intended as illustrative “examples” of predefined concepts but as epistemological and affective devices that make space for layered, situated knowing. They can function as “moments of discomfort” that challenge the researcher’s desire for clarity and coherence and instead foreground the entangled and affective nature of fieldwork encounters (M. L. Carr 2021). This approach aligns with feminist epistemologies that value partial perspectives, embodied knowledge, and care for the affective conditions under which leadership takes place (Haraway 1988; Gherardi 2017; Sinclair 2007). Vignettes, in turn, provide a way of thinking *with* practice rather than about it (Kandemir and Budd 2018). They resist analytical closure and allow for the representation of leadership as emergent, partial, and deeply embedded in the micropolitics of everyday life. This resonates with feminist calls for more situated, relational, and affectively attuned approaches to studying organization (Liu 2017; Butler et al. 2018; Gherardi 2017). In feminist research, vignettes also function as a method of worlding: They conjure the relational scenes in which leadership is performed but not always recognized, allowing us to see and feel dynamics that conventional leadership literature often neglects (Sinclair 2011).

Ethics of care informed not only our theoretical framing but also our methodological orientation during fieldwork and analysis. Rather than treating care as a leadership style, we approached it as an analytic sensibility that shaped what we

attended to, documented, and analyzed as leadership in situ. Guided by Tronto's (1993, 2008) articulation of care, we focused on the everyday and often overlooked practices through which the organizations were upheld. This orientation informed both the selection and composition of the vignettes, which were compiled to foreground how leadership emerged relationally through practice. In this sense, ethics of care provided the connective tissue between empirical observation and our conceptualization of "leading otherwise," allowing us to identify leadership not in individuals or formal roles but in the ongoing efforts of sustaining organizational life. Read in this way, leadership becomes visible not through acts of authority, but through acts of assembling: holding together people, things, and affects so that collective work can continue. The vignettes used for the analysis are therefore presented to enable the reader to trace how "leading otherwise" is enacted across each setting.

3.1 | Case Selection: Company Drinks and Homebaked

The two cases—*Company Drinks* and *Homebaked*—were selected from a broader corpus of fieldwork on artistic organizing because they speak directly to our research question and because their vignettes become analytically important for developing our arguments on alternative ways of leading in the creative industries. Both sit at the intersection of artistic practice, community organizing, and economic experimentation, marking what Holm and Beyes (2022) describe as art's organizational turn: a reorientation from the production of artworks toward the creation of organizations, platforms, and systems for collective life. We consider them as *critical cases* (Flyvbjerg 2006), not only because they are representative of the creative sector, but also because they illuminate feminist leadership practices that are often sidelined, misnamed, or undervalued. Their work complicates normative assumptions about leadership, offering situated and materially grounded examples of *leading otherwise*.

Company Drinks is a community enterprise initiated by artist Kathrin Böhm in Barking and Dagenham, London. It began in 2014 as a socially engaged art project but evolved into a collectively governed business that makes and sells drinks using ingredients foraged with local residents. It emerged not only as a drink's producer but also as "art in the shape of a drink company," as Kathrin described it, a social enterprise embedded in cultural infrastructures and a living form of collaborative art practice. While the the organization produce cordials, sodas, and host community gatherings cordials, sodas, and community gatherings, the heart of the organization lay in its alternative organizing logics: shared decision-making, mutuality, and resistance to dominant economic norms. Practically, the organization's drinks are cocreated by participants through foraging trips, collaborative recipe development, and seasonal bottling efforts. Its leadership structure is fluid and iterative, emerging through ritualized making, boundary-crossing events, and the cultivation of alternative infrastructures. The project demonstrates how creative labor (e.g., bottling, designing, storytelling)

can double as a mode of leading, where value is generated not solely as a commodity but also as a shared memory and embodied ritual.

The second case, Homebaked, centers on a cooperative bakery in Anfield, Liverpool. It emerged from 2Up2Down, a socially engaged art commission initiated by Dutch artist Jeanne van Heeswijk as part of the Liverpool Biennial in 2010. The project was developed in response to the Housing Market Renewal demolitions that had devastated the local area, displacing residents and leaving buildings boarded up and spirits depleted. One of the few buildings spared from demolition was a former bakery on Oakfield Road, which became both the site and symbol of a different way forward: a shared space where bread could once again become a basis for gathering, making, and imagining otherwise (De Amicis and Wu 2024). The project exemplifies emancipatory organizing through collaborative ownership, architectural reuse, and collective visioning. Leadership here is dispersed across actors, artifacts, and events and is sustained through long-term infrastructuring, a form of artistic entrepreneurship that builds durable platforms for contesting dominant urban and economic logics. The site, much like Company Drinks, is not only a place of production but also a terrain of political experimentation (De Amicis 2025; Holm and Beyes 2022).

The vignettes are created by combining data from fieldwork, desk reviews of project materials, film documentation, public talks, and writings of the project's initiators. At Company Drinks, we conducted ethnographic fieldwork that combined participant observation, informal conversations, in-depth interviews, and direct participation in drink production. These encounters were documented through detailed field notes and complemented by project artifacts, such as drinks' labels, photographs, and public events. This afforded an embodied, situated perspective on how leadership practices unfolded in everyday organizational life. At Homebaked, the empirical data were obtained through long-form interviews with Jeanne van Heeswijk, the artist who instigated the project. We combined this with a corpus of secondary sources, including archival reports, project documents, media coverage, and public talks by Jeanne and community members. These sources provided a multilayered account of how Homebaked emerged and developed as an organizational experiment. This methodological approach enabled us to capture the multiplicity of voices and practices without reducing them to a singular narrative, reflecting our feminist commitment to situated, polyphonic accounts. Although Company Drinks is presented as a more explicitly multivoiced vignette and Homebaked as a more consolidated narrative, this variation reflects differences in how leadership practices became visible in each setting. This variation is analytically important, demonstrating how artistic organizing and feminist leadership surface differently across contexts. We trace how practices of care emerge across the data, which informed our construction of vignettes that foreground the ethical and political work of care in leading. Our analytic focus is not only on what participants said or did, but also on how care is enacted through everyday practices and material arrangements, demonstrating feminist leadership in the creative industries.

4 | The Vignettes

4.1 | Vignette 1—Company Drinks

In the former bowling pavilion of Barking Park, a group of people gathered around boxes of picked herbs and crates of bottles. It was drink-making day, and the rhythm was informal but purposeful. The atmosphere was electric, as if this day could not come soon enough. On one side, Shaun carefully checked the ratios for this season's elderflower cordial. On the other, I—the first author—gathered the tools needed to pour the drink into bottles. From the beginning, the team spoke to me as though I had always been part of the project. What mattered was not my role as a researcher, but the sense of belonging they extended through small gestures of attentiveness and welcome (e.g., going together to buy lunch at a local Turkish deli, helping me properly wear the food cap, etc.).

In gathering bottles, I noticed the company's "C" logo on the labels, but also something different. These were not just products' labels. These were not merely product labels. Alongside ingredients and expiration dates, they documented how many people joined the picking trip, what was harvested, and how much was spent on hiring the coach. Shaun had joined after attending picking trips and plant workshops. He later became Head of Grow Club, Herbalism, and Drinks Production, roles chosen according to his interests rather than a formal job description and accepted by everyone. "We are now all heads of something that we are

really interested in," he explained. His involvement, without an art background, was based on shared responsibility and responsiveness to the group's needs. He spoke of "doing something meaningful," of "actively contributing to forge [the company's] values and management."

As for the drinks' labels, I came to understand that the company's "C" logo was multivocal. For Shaun, it stood for cycle, as in caring for seasonal rhythms and production flows. For Cam, another team member, it meant community and catering to locals' needs, particularly those of the youth. For Kathrin Böhm, the project's founder, it signaled commoning: an invitation to build economic life through shared values and mutual care. I realized how each member held on to their own understanding, but this did not seem to negatively affect their collective action. Every September, the team arranged the bottles into a family photo. Böhm said, "Our first drinks launch was quite emotional, suddenly all those different bottles and flavors and names! This new amazing group photo represented the possibilities and actuality of the project."

This vignette shows how leadership emerges not through direction or individual authority, but through narrative tools and participatory practices. The drinks and their labels (see Figure 1) functioned not only as products, but also as organizing artifacts, objects that held scripts of participation and distributed authorship. The family portrait born out of this material practice reflected attentiveness, affirming the value of every contribution



FIGURE 1 | Self-made collage of the Company Drinks 'family' portraits produced from 2014 onward. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/grow.70116)]

with others to deliver the desired collective outcomes. Here, artistic organizing is less about managing performance than about composing continuity under conditions of flux, made possible through ethics of care: attentiveness to each contribution, responsibility for sustaining relationships, competence in the craft of drink-making and organizing, and responsiveness to the values and needs of others. By cultivating infrastructures in this way, the people of Company Drinks (including men like Shaun) make visible how feminist leadership operates not by commanding action, but by assembling with care. The everyday acts (e.g., labeling, bottling, and co-organizing picking trips) accumulated into a shared practice of leadership, not of a transformational leader inspiring action or of a charismatic leader (often a male character) nor of a transactional reward system, but of “doing something meaningful” together, as described in the vignette. This rehearses a mode of organizing in which leadership is affective, material, and always in the making, requiring several people and things to be assembled so that shared practice can be enacted.

4.2 | Vignette 2—Homebaked

Jeanne van Heeswijk, the artist who instigated Homebaked, began by recalling how she first engaged with her neighborhood in Liverpool. Rather than arriving with a pre-determined plan, she immersed herself in everyday life in Anfield—shopping, getting her nails done, doing laundry, and attending local meetings and performances. “It’s not one visit,” she explained, “but like a month or two... just to be part of the texture of the everyday.”

By going through the project’s material, I—the first author—understood that at the start, the community was facing the aftermath of urban renewal plans that had devastated the area. Jeanne remembered how people felt that they no longer had a say. A., one of the founding members of what would become Homebaked, mentioned how she was “sick of waiting for something to come.” Meetings about housing, intended to build support for a community land trust, often reinforced the collective sense of loss. In Jeanne’s words, “Talking about building houses collectively was almost like reinforcing constantly that pain... we were constantly poking in an open wound.”

This shift began with an improvised act. “Then one day, we set up a camp... this was an informal bakery that we set up as a camp. And then people started knocking at the door because that bakery had just closed maybe a month before; they just asked if we would still sell bread and stuff.” When a collaborator brought in a cake and suggested offering it with tea, the atmosphere changed. The cake itself helped shift the tone. “We lured them in with cakes,” Jeanne said, laughing. “And then, of course, like the day after, there were people who were bringing more to share, and so on. That sparked a desire to open the bakery again, and that started a process of happening: The bakery opened, and the bakery became the driving force for Homebaked, for the housing struggles.”

Reflecting on this moment, Jeanne observed, “The cake itself was a vehicle that was understood, like a vehicle of care and sustenance. The bakery became a center of resistance,

through its practice of nourishment through the cake. The cake became the biggest non-human participant, the cake was the participant.” It was as though, for Jeanne, assembling Homebaked was as much about creating emotional conditions as physical ones. She said, “It’s about how the different individual desires meet within the collective of a place... I try to think of a place as an emotional sphere that has all of that.” Attending to this emotional sphere was essential. A project could only move forward, she explained, when the emotional condition was recognized and responded to. “That to me was an important moment to understand... it made for me very important to find a common point of inspiration to move forward,” Jeanne stated.

Unlike Company Drinks, Homebaked was not primarily set up as an independent organization, although it evolved into one, having emerged from an artist-led commission (detailed information can be found at https://www.jeanetworks.net/projects/2up2down_homebaked).

It developed as a response to a crisis in public life in the neighborhood. The project offered residents a means to stay, resist displacement, and build alternative futures from within. It became a bakery, a cooperative, a land trust, and a commons and yet always remained an art project with infrastructural ambitions (see Figure 4).

Here, artistic organizing is deeply intertwined with working with local people, materials, and dreams to hold space for collective life. Jeanne’s ordinary acts (shopping, doing laundry, etc.) are not incidental but practices of attentiveness, a way of becoming part of the texture of the everyday and attuning to the locale’s emotional terrain. Leadership in this space is not about strategy or authority but about responsiveness, creating conditions in which residents could act, relate, and imagine together. Jeanne’s account highlights a pivotal shift: from engaging the community through abstract discussions of housing policy to creating a space where people could relate, act, and imagine together. Bringing cake, serving tea, and baking bread



FIGURE 4 | Anfield’s Housing Market Renewal Area, 2010. Photo: Tim Brundsen. Source: Homebaked—Harvard Design Magazine at <https://www.harvarddesignmagazine.org/articles/it-is-a-fundamental-right-to-have-a-place-to-live-in-well-2up2down-homebaked/>. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]



FIGURE 5 | Screenshot from the short movie “Chapters of Homebaked”. Source: <https://vimeo.com/475436036>. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

exemplified this responsibility, the act of taking on the work of care to build spaces of belonging and possibility. These gestures inspired the reopening of a bakery, which then became the commons where ethical and political work could coalesce. In this sense, Jeanne did not initiate the project through a directive plan but created what she called “a place in which one can produce together, work together, make something, meet.” The “doing” of the bakery (e.g., its renovation, its routines, and its rituals) became a political act: a feminist practice of infrastructuring in the ruins of failed urban renewal. The bread produced and sold there became the artifact that carries the ethos of the project (see Figure 5).

Leadership here is inseparable from caring for others, building and maintaining relationships, being made visible, and being supported. It takes the form of assembling people and things, sometimes literally, as with the renovation of the bakery, and sometimes figuratively, as with the reinvestment in commons-based economies. In this context, it is pivotal to create conditions in which Anfield residents can step in, step up, or step back. This form of leadership is iterative, distributed, and grounded in the mundane (Uhl-Bien 2006). It is shared, emergent, and deeply affective, not imposed or positional, but sustained through participation, care, and mutual attunement. In the context of failed redevelopment, Homebaked shows how the work of care can reweave the political imagination, creating not just economic alternatives but also new infrastructures for collective life.

Overall, leadership in artistic organizing performed at Company Drinks and Homebaked does not follow a strategic plan or a top-down flow of decision-making. Instead, it is assembled through affect and materialities that enable diverse actors to participate without requiring complete alignment or consensus (Josefsen 2020). In other words, leadership emerges from holding things together, through seemingly mundane acts of coordination that accumulate meaning over time.

5 | Discussion: Reframing Leadership in the Creative Industries

The practices seen through the cases of Company Drinks and Homebaked foreground what PHL and CLT studies posit as the relational and negotiated nature of leadership (Liu 2017; D. Collinson et al. 2018) while extending it into the realm of everyday organizing and feminist ethics (Pullen and

Vachhani 2021; Binns 2008). In our study, we observe leadership emerging through practices of care, which are materially mediated and collectively enacted. These findings have significant implications for leadership studies, feminist organization theory, and creative industries scholarship, where the focus is often on the individuality of the artist, their unique talent, and the art forms they deliver. Several contributions emerge.

First, we extend leadership studies by proposing the *assembler*. Unlike “traditional” leadership arguments that privilege strategic direction, heroic decision-making, or entrepreneurial charisma, the assembler denotes feminist subject positions emerging through the careful composition of relationships, materials, and conditions. PHL and CLT have been central in critiquing the romance of leadership. In particular, although CLT has shown how leadership is constituted through power relations that render some practices visible and legitimate while obscuring others (M. Collinson 2018; Alvesson and Spicer 2012), it has been less explicit about how alternative forms of leadership are enacted in everyday organizing. The cases examined here extend this critique by showing how acts of assembling redistribute influence without relying on command or individual authority. Power, in this sense, is exercised through ethics of care (Tronto 1993, 2008) and the ensuing practices of holding together people, things, and affects so that collective work can endure. As Uhl-Bien (2006) argues, relational leadership dissolves the figure of the leader into the ongoing processes of organizing. Rather than remaining a theoretical provocation, the ethics (and politics) of care traced in the vignettes materialize, *leading otherwise* in practice. Company Drinks and Homebaked demonstrate that it entails mobilizing Tronto’s (1993, 2008) four elements of care. In doing so, it grounds the conceptual promise of feminist leadership in the empirical work of *assembling*, which involves building infrastructures that sustain belonging and continuity over time. At Company Drinks, “Head” roles were formally assigned but collectively defined, illustrating shared responsibility and responsiveness to individual needs rather than command. At Homebaked, attentiveness to the community’s emotional terrain enabled collective assemblage to emerge through the establishment of a bakery. These examples show how leadership studies can move beyond deconstructing heroic and postheroic imaginaries toward recognizing care as constitutive of leadership.

Second, the study contributes to feminist organization theory by foregrounding esthetic and infrastructural labor as legitimate forms of leadership. Feminist scholars have long insisted on the relational and embodied dimensions of leadership (Fletcher 2001; Binns 2008; Sinclair 2007) and have highlighted how care and affect are often marginalized in accounts of organizing (Pullen and Vachhani 2021). In our analysis, affect is understood not as individual emotion but as a relational and material force that circulates between people and things, shaping how leadership is enacted and sustained. Our cases extend these insights by showing how feminist leadership is enacted through materialities that carry and modulate affect. At *Company Drinks*, labels of drinks documented collective journeys, and bottles were arranged into a “family photo,” making visible the shared and affective work that sustained the project. At *Homebaked*, cake and bread became “participants,” enacting competence and responsiveness by transforming nourishment into a vehicle of resistance. These artifacts and gestures illustrate

leadership as not only relational but also esthetic, material, and affective. Feminist organizing therefore requires attention to how infrastructures of care are assembled and maintained even through the mundane. This expands feminist scholarship to include a material sensitivity, attentive to how artifacts contribute to the affect and performativity of leadership (Gherardi 2017; Orlikowski and Scott 2008).

Third, this paper offers a critical intervention in creative industries scholarship by challenging the metrics through which leadership is recognized and valued. Within dominant narratives, leadership is often equated with innovation, visibility, or individual distinction, measured through entrepreneurial success, cultural capital, or institutional impact (Dean and Ford 2017). Against this backdrop, the feminist leadership shown in this study is structurally minoritarian: slow, relational, place-based, and largely invisible to mainstream discourses of value. These practices also inhabit ambiguity and contradiction. Critical engagement is not without risk, especially when the goal is to sustain practice within precarious material and institutional conditions. Leadership in these contexts is never stabilized: a continuous negotiation between care and exhaustion, openness and boundary, and sustainability and precarity. Yet it is no less transformative. Rather than offering a prescriptive model, *assembling* practices invite us to remain with complexity, to understand leadership not as clarity or command, but as holding open a space for possibility. Through feminist leadership and the ensuing infrastructures, Company Drinks and Homebaked *assemble* in a way that prioritizes care over scale, continuity over disruption, and livability over spectacle. They offer alternative templates for what leadership can look like, particularly in contexts marked by precarity, austerity, and cultural erasure. In doing so, they demonstrate that artistic practice is inseparable from organizing (Holm and Beyes 2022; De Amicis 2025) and can serve as a mode of rehearsing alternative futures (Gümüşay and Reinecke 2024). Here, what is at stake in this form of leadership is not only what leadership does, but also what it makes possible.

Above all, these cases show that a feminist take is not peripheral to leadership studies. It is central to rethinking what leadership can be. The *assembler* as an analytical device offers a language for organizing and leading otherwise, rooted in practices of care. By attending to these practices, we aim not only to broaden the empirical scope of leadership within the creative industries, but also to refine its conceptual boundaries, highlighting that organizations at the margins are not outliers but sites where leadership is actively being reassembled. At this point, it is important to clarify why feminist leadership matters, particularly for readers less familiar with feminist approaches to organization. Feminist leadership does not simply offer an alternative style to dominant models; it reorients the process of leading toward different ends. Although conventional leadership frameworks often privilege visibility, authority, growth, and success, the feminist leadership argued in this paper foregrounds the conditions that make collective life possible, that is, acting with care. This reorientation is especially significant in contexts marked by precarity, inequality, and exclusion, such as those in the creative industries.

As the sector increasingly grapples with questions of leadership legitimacy, equity, and sustainability, leadership theorizing and new evaluative frameworks for what leadership does and whom

it serves might need to pay closer attention to the world of arts and culture. The feminist leadership and instances examined in this study matter because they offer ways of organizing that value continuity over disruption and collective efforts over individual achievements, thereby expanding what leadership *can* do and whom it *can* serve.

5.1 | Theoretical and Practical Implications

The feminist leadership shown in this paper offers more than a critique of dominant norms; it also points toward actionable shifts in how leadership might be resourced, recognized, and sustained in the creative and cultural sectors. This reinforces the urgency for leadership research to move beyond abstract models and pay closer attention to practices that are affective and material. This has theoretical implications and calls for a fundamental reorientation in how leadership is understood, from an individual asset to be developed to a collective practice that must be ethically sustained and materially supported. Equally, our analysis extends the reach of ethics of care, showing how it operates as an *organizing logic*—understood as acts of assembling *with care* as people, materials, and affects make collective life possible under conditions of precarity while simultaneously challenging dominant, heroic understandings of leadership. By sustaining participation, redistributing responsibility, maintaining infrastructures, and holding open spaces for collaboration and belonging, the assembler sets the conditions under which alternative forms of organizing can endure. As such, these acts are inherently political.

Another implication concerns leadership development. If leadership is not a trait to be possessed but a practice to be sustained, then the emphasis should shift from individual skills to collective capacity. This means recognizing that leadership often emerges not through vision, but through *holding space*: coordinating people, managing tensions, curating atmospheres, and enabling others. In this sense, attention shifts from individuals to the art of assembling people and things in a way that delivers the desired outcomes of the collective. Theoretically, what constitutes an effective assemblage within which leadership flourishes would need further exploration. As shown in this study, leadership circulates through collaborative infrastructures, ethical routines, and shared practices (Magkou 2023). In tracing the leadership practices of feminist artistic organizers, this paper has sought not to define a new model but to surface the value of practices that resist recognition: practices grounded in affective labor, infrastructural improvisation, and embodied care. These organizing efforts offer more than alternative forms of cultural production; they constitute rehearsals for collective life (Gümüşay and Reinecke 2024), modes of working that challenge the assumptions embedded in traditional leadership discourse.

In practice, these insights are especially urgent in a sector still shaped by precarious funding, extractive models of entrepreneurship, and instrumental logics of innovation. Existing leadership development schemes too often focus on the cultivation of individual capacity, strategic foresight, or institutional advancement, privileging visibility, scale, and output. This

reinforces the same tropes that marginalize the infrastructural, collective, and care-based leadership practices enacted in feminist artistic organizing (Patrick 2019). The feminist leadership explored here does not easily translate into such metrics. To support such work, evaluation frameworks must be retooled to recognize process over product, maintenance over novelty, and sustainability over growth. This may involve creating alternative indicators attuned to care, commons, and community embeddedness and valuing the ongoing labor of keeping things going (UNESCO 2005).

Finally, there is a need to redistribute recognition and risk. In both cases, leadership was carried out by feminist artists operating in liminal spaces, without formal authority or adequate support. As M. Carr and Van Raalte (2025) argue, the creative industries are structured by exclusions. The costs of this labor (e.g., emotional, logistical, and political) are borne disproportionately. Cultural institutions and funders must therefore address not only who leads, but also *under what conditions*. Recognizing the act of *assembling* as infrastructural and processual challenges conventional criteria of leadership “impact.” The practices described in this study are often invisible in institutional metrics, yet they are central to the durability and coherence of creative organizing. Importantly, these practices constitute more than empirical observations because they form a *repertoire* of feminist leadership: modes of doing and being that can be learned, shared, and adapted across contexts. Sharing these repertoires with broader audiences, within and beyond academia, can nurture solidarity, inspire reflection, and support alternative imaginaries of leadership in action. This includes creating more equitable governance structures, embedding feminist ethics into funding criteria, and enabling long-term infrastructural commitment rather than short-term project cycles (Batliwala 2010).

This study has some limitations. More precisely, it has absences and constraints shaped by the context and scope of the research. First, the vignettes focus on two case studies in the UK context, which are culturally specific. Although they offer rich insight into feminist artistic organizing, they cannot speak to all geographies or modes of leadership. Further research could explore how the act of *assembling* manifests in other contexts marked by different political economies or cultural infrastructures. Second, our focus on artistic organizing means that the assemblage of practices surfaced here is grounded in esthetics and infrastructure; future research might explore how such repertoires translate across sectors where visibility, funding, and legitimacy take different forms. Third, the temporality of leadership as iterative, durational, and affective is central to our argument, but this study is limited in its ability to trace long-term transformations. More longitudinal, embedded approaches are needed to understand how the *assembler* sustains or reconfigures leadership over time, especially under conditions of exhaustion, austerity, and systemic neglect. Future research might also investigate the emotional sustainability of feminist leadership under such conditions. Further insights might also be generated by investigating the use of “leadership proxies,” such as artifacts, spatial arrangements, or ambient cues, to illuminate how care, attention, and “response-ability” travel

beyond the human subject in feminist creative work. Attending more deeply to intersectional dynamics and situated materialities in these future studies could extend the repertoire of feminist leadership practices and address important questions around power, access, and legibility across diverse organizational fields.

6 | Conclusion

This paper has argued that artistic organizing offers vital insights for reimagining leadership in the creative industries. Through the cases of *Company Drinks* and *Homebaked*, it has shown how leadership is enacted through affective practices grounded in care and sustained by materialities in what we conceptually refer to as the *assembler*. By so doing, this paper has sought to expand the vocabulary of leadership studies. Assemblers are not individual leaders in the conventional sense; they are feminist subject positions “stitching” together people, materials, and ideas into infrastructures that make participation possible. Our cases exemplify this dissolution: Leadership does not reside in Böhm or van Heeswijk as individuals, but in the infrastructures of which they became a part. Leadership thus appears not as a personal possession but as a distributed effect of practices of care. By tracing how attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness organize collective life in the creative industries, we demonstrate what it means to lead otherwise.

Ultimately, this study adds to creative industries research by repositioning artistic organizing as a site of both theoretical innovation and practical transformation. We contend that the challenge in the creative industries is not only, or even primarily, the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles. More crucial is the absence of feminist orientations to leadership. What is lacking is not simply more women, but more feminist practices of organizing. This does not imply that such practices are absent. Indeed, as shown throughout this paper, feminist practices of organizing are already enacted, but they remain insufficiently recognized as leadership, limiting their capacity to reshape dominant norms and conditions of organizing. *Company Drinks* and *Homebaked* show how such practices can be made tangible via ethics of care and how they offer ways of rehearsing alternative futures. To advance this work, leadership studies must actively participate in the construction of new narratives. If we do not intervene in the making of these narratives, others will. If we continue to rely on vernaculars and theories that privilege authority, scale, and visibility, we will keep reproducing the very exclusions we seek to critique. Our task, then, is not simply to analyze leadership but to reimagine it, to build new conceptual *repertoires* that can illuminate practices currently rendered invisible or illegible. To take these practices seriously is to shift how we support, teach, and value leadership. It is to ask not only who leads, but also how, where, with whom, and at what cost. It is to recognize that the future of leadership may not lie in the figure at the front, but in the careful *assembling* of things together.

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Ethics Statement

The study was reviewed and approved by the University of Reading Ethics Committee.

Consent

Participants provided informed consent before participation in the study.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available upon request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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