

Coming of Age? A provocation for Deveron Arts at 21.

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Background:

As Deveron Arts reaches its twenty-first anniversary, I was invited by its founding director Claudia Zeiske to author a short provocation in text form. I accepted this invitation, which I perceive as an opportunity to ask a series of speculative questions. A provocation should be inquisitive but searching in ways that may lead to further thought, dialogue and may foster possible actions. The actual point is to provoke, which may solicit a response marked with discomfort but it should not be so intimidating that it fosters denial.

Sixteen questions with related tasks are posited by my provocation, followed by one final task. They are suggestive of a future, 21 years from now. This future will be informed by current tensions and problematics of the state of art and its social, economic and political relations.

In our initial discussion Zeiske also asked me to also consider how Deveron Arts sits within the field of social practice, a field that has developed its practices and literature, almost concurrent to the work of the organisation itself. In the questions and related tasks outlined, what I aim to do is not to reject that aspect of the brief but rather to enmesh it. In this way it allows for a revelation of the differing levels of ownership, knowledge, experience and perception of Deveron Arts by multiple respondents and stakeholders.

I would argue that a priority now is to reconceive of how our art institutions are constituted and managed but also importantly how they are administrated. A key function of art has been to as an engine for social imagination and to propose alternative ways of informing the world and our view of it. The field of social practice in art demands that organisations and how they work be purposed towards the production of the many relations that can foster and care for how public citizenship is critically imagined. Conversely, we now live in a moment that seeks to do the reverse, to limit imagination through multiple forms of cultural, social, political and economic control. Therefore, art's social practice is one route by which we can co-conceive of a world that we actually want ourselves, and others, to be able to live amidst.

To re-assert civic imagination we need types of arts organisations whose ways of working, their structures, programmes, protocols and administrative processes are actively designed to make that possible. By this, I don't necessarily only mean formal and legally constituted forms of organisation. The 2010 publication, *ARTocracy: Art, Informal Space, and Social Consequence: A Curatorial HandBook in Collaborative Practice*, edited by Nuno Sacramento and Claudia Zeiske is too rarely cited itself in the burgeoning literature of social practice and art. My understanding is – despite some key exceptions – that the field of social practice literature and that of artists' social initiatives remains dominated by work being conducted and supported in the USA, and that the UK sustains a paucity of determination in addressing the work conducted here and its historic roots, including within the field of community arts.

ARTocracy is significant in that its identification of the innovative method of shadow curating is driven specifically towards supporting a complex method of reflexivity within an organisation.

However, there may also be other forms of knowledge embedded within Deveron Art's history, methods with which the organisation is so constantly intimate that it may not even have recognised its implications to the development of further knowledge of social practices in art. For example, when artists are at work in specific places and with specific communities they are often actually involved in constantly re-working and re-purposing organisation through their projects. In developing their processes with constituents, stakeholders and the commissioner, it is as if artists are designing temporary mini-organisations that function inside the commissioning organisation and its own administrative logics. This mode of artists' initiative we could call 'intra-organisational'. The wealth of experience and knowledge generated by these processes remains under-considered as a resource that can inform how arts' institutions and organisations may themselves become more specific and conducive to social practices.

Organisational characteristics and operation are informed - or indeed resisted to - by the skills, knowledge and experience of those people collectively engaged by a mission or mandate. However, these are also affected, with regularity, by external factors such as policy and strategy cycles, which are themselves responsive to alteration in local and national governance. That is, of course, important but so are broader societal, cultural, political, environmental and economic shifts, such as devolution in Scotland and the recent chaos of uncertainty that the Brexit referendum hails, or the rise of the far-right and neo-Fascist movements globally that run in tandem to hyper-capital, or the impending collapse of the planet through violent acquisition and the enforced displacement of people through industrialised capital, war and neo-colonialism resulting in an age of migrancy that concurrently sustains the disavowal of indigenous knowledge of the impact of climate change.

A key factor - and I acknowledge my personal bias in identifying it here - facing us is the demands of neoliberal logic to instrumentalise via economisation as the *de facto* value system. The attack of neoliberalism on the notion of public goods (whether services and commodities provided without profit to all citizens, or as a term on which public well-being becomes affected) constructs a diminishment of collective and divergent access to education, health, employment, welfare and benefits. It orchestrates a deeply individualised dog-eat-dog logic. We are witness to a consistent engulfing of the arts in processes of privatisation or commercialisation including the commercialisation of our public institutions, their value now also measured in terms of metrics used in capital and forms of meritocracy.

These methods are often deeply conflictual to the critical and imaginary potential of art. Despite the work of numerous sociologists to conceive of alternative methodologies by which to capture forms of impact that are non-economically driven, the potential of imagination and critically are actually being disavowed as key principles of art.

Transparency:

In the interests of transparency, let me finally clarify here that I have visited Deveron Arts but once, in June 2014, whilst I was in the area to give a talk in at Robert Gordon

University. I had breakfast then with Zeiske, was given a tour of the Town Collection and gave a short informal talk to resident artists, shadow curators and staff on a recent book I had edited. I then went back home to London where for many years I have received the printed and posted version of the organisation's newsletter. I gave a book when I left, received one in reciprocation and sent some prosecco to the employee who had kindly hosted me overnight and cooked dinner. So, I have not worked previously for Deveron Arts as artist, curator, researcher or writer. I am not a trustee, advisor, board member nor have I assessed its work on behalf of an external organisation or partner or made any financial contribution to it as a patron or donor. I have accepted a fee for this writing but have not agreed to any editorial control by the organisation.

I agreed to write the provocation at relatively short notice and with limited resources. A provocation is not formally a study. Therefore, I have not conducted any interviews with staff at Deveron Arts, artists with whom it has worked, citizens of Huntly, funders or other stakeholders. What I have done is to read from its website, look at the annual reports that are available and conducted a literature search that has revealed Deveron Arts is mostly cited in relation to sociology and art, including in relation to thought around place-making, well-being, ethnography and regeneration and policy impact or through the writings of artists with whom it has worked.

I have also relied on my own knowledge of the field of social practice, built up over almost thirty years, along with my current research on the potential of artists to inform organisation. My current thinking is dedicated specifically to formations of organisation conceived of, interfaced with, or directly managed by artists. This includes their interventions in or re-purposing of public institutions and their resources in order to make us think big about the public sphere.

Intention:

The intention is that Deveron Arts uses this provocation as it sees fit, with whichever constituents they consider it applicable to. The questions and tasks demand a process of casting between now (2016) and 21 years into the future (2027). It is written in a way that hopefully allows for individual or collective analysis and response whether internally within the organisation or publicly with multiple constituents or previous, present or forthcoming stakeholders.

These may also be initially encountered as provocative in that they suggest a significant workload that would be conditioned by variables that are as yet not fully known and potentially re-direct resources from the current urgencies of Deveron Arts and its work. However, provocations are a means to prod that are not always conducive to a culture of immediacy or expediency. In this instance the provocation is actually multi-directional. It points Deveron Arts towards a future based on an analysis of current conditions, tendencies, dogma and rhetoric.

Pessimistically, as provocation, it suggests an inevitability of the continuation of the problematics we seem to face: displacement, injustice, inequality, disenfranchisement, environmental calamity, the violence of pervasive capital in the public sphere and its impact on civic lives and liveability. However, it is pointed specifically to an organisation with 21 years of experience of durational development of methods and

processes that seek conversely to imagine alternative futures and implement processes by which to engage artists and citizens in world-making.

Usage:

There are sixteen questions accompanied by tasks. The questions and tasks demand that they are conducted as if the respondent has no agency to intervene, re-determine, re-imagine or re-purpose. This is, of course, highly problematic and antithetical to the methods and organisational characteristics established by Deveron Arts in its first 21 years of work. Therefore, it is purposeful that the provocation demands a detailed scoping of a future that hopes to reveal the processes and forces of current conditions, which if sustained without intervention, may concur with forms of administration, organisation and management that are oppositional to social practice and its imaginary possibilities.

As a means of generating dialogues the questions and tasks may also require the reader to become at cross-purpose to their customary perspective, role or perception. In a sense, every reader becomes instrumental via participation in designing the organisation's future. The questions and tasks are posited to also challenge whether consensus or compliance are desirable consequences of the current context. However, the shadow thrown by the provocation actually resists addressing Deveron Arts as if it has a robust autonomy that disentangles it from other societal, environmental, cultural, social or political concerns. Rather, it is orchestrated to acknowledge and uphold that a definition of social practice is to be propagative of imaginaries amidst an enmeshment of multiple tensions – of constraint and potentialities - in the making of publicness.

Using The Questions and Related Tasks

Instructions:

The respondents should define where, how, when and by whom these questions and tasks are to be addressed and within what timescale. The questions and tasks can be re-ordered or added to. Nevertheless, Questions and Tasks 1-3 must come first as they are foundational. As a minimum all sixteen should be eventually answered and conducted. If numbers 4-16 are re-ordered, or any further ones added, then the orders of accrual listed in each should be re-worked accordingly.

This part of the provocation is intricate in its accumulative nature. As what you are dealing with is organisation, and the making of an organisation, the tasks are inter-related. So, you may find yourself having completed one question and task but then desiring to re-do each relatively to the others. That is entirely acceptable and indeed preferable.

Now, let's do it:

1.

What do you believe are the key social, cultural, political, economic, environmental factors (including but not solely in terms of policy indicators) that mark the direction we are set on from now until 21 years into the future for arts organisations and art's social practice?

Assume you have no agency to intervene, re-determine, re-imagine or re-purpose and that current social, cultural, political, economic and environmental structures will progress uninterrupted and thus the path is determined accordingly.

- Write a comprehensive list that takes into consideration these factors at local, regional, national and transnational levels.

2.

What impact will these factors have on how Huntly is in 21 years?

Assume you have no agency to intervene, re-determine, re-imagine or re-purpose and that current social, cultural, political, economic and environmental structures will progress uninterrupted and thus the path is determined accordingly.

- Scope how Huntly would consequently look in terms of business and employment; infrastructure and environment; key services and institutions such as education, culture, arts, law, health and social services; its built environment, landscape and natural resources; its citizens and their socio-economic status and cultural heritages.

In tandem with the list made as response to Question 1 now use this scoping as the response to Question 2 to respond to all the following questions.

3.

What would be the mission statement of a future arts organisation in Huntly in 2027?

Assume you have no agency to intervene, re-determine, re-imagine or re-purpose and that current social, cultural, political, economic and environmental structures will progress uninterrupted and thus the path is determined accordingly.

Use your responses to Questions 1 and 2 to respond.

- Write the mission statement.

4.

What income generation model would then support the mission statement of this new art organisation in Huntly?

Assume you have no agency to intervene, re-determine, re-imagine or re-purpose and that current social, cultural, political, economic and environmental structures will progress uninterrupted and thus the path is determined accordingly.

- Scope the income generation model.

5.

What management processes does the written mission statement and scoped income generation model demand for this new art organisation based in Huntly?

Assume you have no agency to intervene, re-determine, re-imagine or re-purpose and that current social, cultural, political, economic and environmental structures will progress uninterrupted and thus the path is determined accordingly.

- Diagram the management process structure.

6.

What roles and responsibilities and therefore job descriptions are required by the written mission statement, scoped income generation model and management structure diagram for this new art organisation based in Huntly?

Assume you have no agency to intervene, re-determine, re-imagine or re-purpose and that current social, cultural, political, economic and environmental structures will progress uninterrupted and thus the path is determined accordingly.

- Write the employment policy.
- Write the job descriptions including the person specification, essential and preferred experience, skill set and educational qualifications required.

7.

What constituents can be supported by the written mission statement, scoped income generation model and management processes diagram, written job descriptions, recruitment policy this new art organisation based in Huntly?

Assume you have no agency to intervene, re-determine, re-imagine or re-purpose and that current social, cultural, political, economic and environmental structures will progress uninterrupted and thus the path is determined accordingly.

- Write your audience development strategy.

8.

What stakeholder partnerships does the written mission statement, scoped income generation model, management processes diagram, written job descriptions, recruitment policy and written participation vision statement for this new art organisation based in Huntly in 21 years make possible?

Assume you have no agency to intervene, re-determine, re-imagine or re-purpose and that current social, cultural, political, economic and environmental structures will progress uninterrupted and thus the path is determined accordingly.

- Write your stakeholder partnership policy.

9.

What equality and diversity opportunities does the written mission statement, scoped income generation model, management processes diagram, written job descriptions, recruitment policy, audience development strategy and stakeholder partnership policy for this new art organisation based in Huntly in 21 years make possible?

Assume you have no agency to intervene, re-determine, re-imagine or re-purpose and that current social, cultural, political, economic and environmental structures will progress uninterrupted and thus the path is determined accordingly.

- Write your equalities and diversity policy.

10.

What types of social arts practice does the written mission statement, scoped income generation model, management processes diagram, written job descriptions, recruitment policy, audience development strategy, stakeholder partnership policy, and equalities and diversity policy for this new art organisation based in Huntly in 21 years make possible?

Assume you have no agency to intervene, re-determine, re-imagine or re-purpose and that current social, cultural, political, economic and environmental structures will progress uninterrupted and thus the path is determined accordingly.

- Write your social arts practice vision statement.

11.

What forms of dissemination or circulation does the written mission statement, scoped income generation model, management processes diagram, written job descriptions, recruitment policy, audience development strategy, stakeholder partnership policy, equalities and diversity policy and social arts practice vision statement for this new art organisation based in Huntly in 21 years make possible?

Assume you have no agency to intervene, re-determine, re-imagine or re-purpose and that current social, cultural, political, economic and environmental structures will progress uninterrupted and thus the path is determined accordingly.

- Write your dissemination strategy.

12.

What types of artists commissions does the written mission statement, scoped income generation model, management processes diagram, written job descriptions, recruitment policy, audience development strategy, stakeholder partnership policy, equalities and diversity policy and social arts practice vision statement and dissemination strategy for this new art organisation based in Huntly in 21 years make possible?

Assume you have no agency to intervene, re-determine, re-imagine or re-purpose and that current social, cultural, political, economic and environmental structures will progress uninterrupted and thus the path is determined accordingly.

- Write your artists' commission brief.

13.

What environmental affairs does the written mission statement, scoped income generation model, management processes diagram, written job descriptions, recruitment policy, audience development strategy, stakeholder partnership policy, equalities and diversity policy and social arts practice vision statement, dissemination strategy and artists' commission brief for this new art organisation based in Huntly in 21 years make possible?

Assume you have no agency to intervene, re-determine, re-imagine or re-purpose and that current social, cultural, political, economic and environmental structures will progress uninterrupted and thus the path is determined accordingly.

- Write your environmental policy.

14.

What legally constituted business model does the written mission statement, scoped income generation model, management processes diagram, written job descriptions, recruitment policy, audience development strategy, stakeholder partnership policy, equalities and diversity policy and social arts practice vision statement, dissemination strategy, artists' commission brief and environmental policy for this new art organisation based in Huntly in 21 years make possible?

Assume you have no agency to intervene, re-determine, re-imagine or re-purpose and that current social, cultural, political, economic and environmental structures will progress uninterrupted and thus the path is determined accordingly.

- Write your memorandum and articles of association

15.

What forms of marketing does the written mission statement, scoped income generation model, management processes diagram, written job descriptions, recruitment policy, audience development strategy, partnership and stakeholder policy, equality policy, dissemination strategy, artists' commission brief, environmental policy and memorandum and articles of association for this new art organisation based in Huntly in 21 years make possible?

Assume you have no agency to intervene, re-determine, re-imagine or re-purpose and that current social, cultural, political, economic and environmental structures will progress uninterrupted and thus the path is determined accordingly.

- Write your marketing plan.

16.

What forms business model does the written mission statement, scoped income generation model, management processes diagram, written job descriptions, recruitment policy, audience development strategy, partnership and stakeholder policy, equality policy, dissemination strategy, artists' commission brief, environmental policy, memorandum and articles of association and marketing plan for this new art organisation based in Huntly in 21 years make possible?

Assume you have no agency to intervene, re-determine, re-imagine or re-purpose and that current social, cultural, political, economic and environmental structures will progress uninterrupted and thus the path is determined accordingly.

- Write your business plan.

Next Steps:

The result will be the coming of age for a social arts practice organisation based in the Huntly in 21 years time predicated on and conditioned by an uninterrupted progression of current social, cultural, political, economic and environmental structures in which intervention, re-determination, re-imagining and re-purposing has been rendered impossible.

Now based on your 21 years of knowledge and experience work with your previous, current and predicted future constituents. Warrant everyone to interrupt the progression of current social, cultural, political, economic and environmental structures. Through re-determination, imagination and re-purpose now repeat all the questions and tasks and design the future for a social arts practice organisation based in Huntly.

Happy Birthday!

Biography:

Jason E. Bowman is an artist with a curatorial practice and MFA: Fine Art programme leader at the Valand Academy at the University of Gothenburg. He is a member of the working group for PARSE (Platform for Artistic Research Sweden), a fellow of the Royal Society of the Arts and a board member of Paradox: the European Forum for Fine Art Higher Education. His writing has been published in numerous anthologies and journals and his current curatorial focuses on the potentialities of artist-organisation.