



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### **PRAKTIKA II**

21 Years of The Town is the Venue

**Citation for published version:**

Mulholland, N 2017, *PRAKTIKA II: 21 Years of The Town is the Venue*. Deveron Arts , Huntly, Aberdeenshire.

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



## PRAKTIKA 2

PRAKTIKA 2's facilitator, the artist Anthony Schrag, asked participants to speculate on possible, probable and preferable futures for Deveron Projects. As it celebrates its 21st birthday, what might the next 21 years look like for the organisation? The charrette were hustled into small groups, plied with mint tea and home-made sausage rolls, and tasked with generating five action points within the space of just 30 minutes. Many of the participants' discussions began with a morbid and apocalyptic tone overshadowed by recent political events: notably the rise of fascism in the U.K. and USA. With the clock ticking inexorably toward the half-hour deadline, an arts congregation will, expectedly, proffer the arts as a potential bulwark against despotism and so, to some extent, expectations focused on resisting our mercantilist, racist, corporatocracy.

Numerous remarkably positive action points erupted from the reconvened charrette, to this effect:



### Do:

- Nurture leadership
- Be open to change
- Build relationships
- Strengthen local and self-governance
- Mediate with policy makers
- Foster creativity in all areas of life
- Build resilient systems
- Work effectively across systems
- Acquire assets to gain autonomy
- More micro than macro

### Don't:

- Try to do too much with too little
- Work too fast
- Work the jobs of other institutions

Certainly, since they are so frequently self-organised and cell-like, arts organisations operating on a comparable scale to Deveron Projects have played a key role in grass-roots community resilience. However, the question remains: how might they continue to organise their body politic when their established life-support systems are being switched off?

Contemporary art, as generally understood today, has only been around since the 1950s, and it would be folly to assume it will be around forever. There's plenty of evidence to suggest that it's transitioning into something else, not because it has exhausted its mission, (world domination), but because the paradigms that supported it, notably social constructivism, are now persistently

challenged. PRAKTIKA 2's dalliance with the anthropocene, mandatory mise en scene for every debate today, is a case in point. The anthropocene is, in part, an attempt to pull the rug under the anthropocentric tendencies that gave birth to contemporary art. Moreover, PRAKTIKA 2's consensus that creativity (rather than 'art') is empowering is an anthropological conception of art that, equally, runs counter to the increasingly professional world of contemporary art.

A related issue, then, revolved around what actually constitutes an arts organisation. David Harding, as convener of our feedback session, pointed out that arts organisations that have sustained themselves over many decades were frequently led by charismatic founding-directors. There is a great deal of truth in this. Many of the arts organisations we take for granted in Scotland were hard-won by individuals who devoted their lives to securing resources and support for their artistic vision. Equally, there are just as many arts organisations that are the legacy of carefully articulated, and equally Herculean structures and covenants. Is it only codified systems that prevail? Harding's legitimate concern was that the institutions led by charismatic directors would die off with their founders, leaving no estate, no legacy. This was a concern, however, that PRAKTIKA 2 did not appear to share in the case of Deveron Projects.

To understand why, we need only ask: what sort of institution is Deveron Projects? The 21st birthday celebrations that followed PRAKTIKA 2 were a persistent reminder that Deveron Projects is clearly Claudia Zieske's brainchild and exists primarily because she wanted to see and participate in the kind of activities it brings to Huntly. As Harding rightly said, Zieske's vision, perseverance and tenacity is largely what we must thank for the persistence of Deveron Projects. However, we need to remember that Deveron Projects is a user-generated institution rather than, say, an ARI (artist-run institution). This makes it unusual in relation to the dominant discourses and mythologies that truss Scotland's visual arts bodies. From the start, Deveron Projects has committed to an anthropological approach to culture and, in doing so, has demonstrated autonomist and commoning tendencies. The artist isn't any more, or less, at the centre of Deveron Projects' conception of the arts than are the communities and the fields within which they are enmeshed.

It is perhaps for this reason that Zieske has spent more time than most arts directors communicating and distributing the aspects of Deveron Projects can be modelled. With Dr Nuno Sacramento (Director of Peacock Arts, Aberdeen), Zieske co-authored ARTocracy (2010, [www.deveron-projects.com/about/artocracy](http://www.deveron-projects.com/about/artocracy)) a user-manual that "systematically explains how the creative process is applied through its layers of people, context, processes and results." ARTocracy has enabled a number of readers to establish their own town-venue arts projects. Deveron Projects, thus, is an artistic method, one that Zieske and Sacramento have done an unparalleled job of making explicit and transparent. In a union state wherein constitutionalism is uncoded, and thus highly opaque, ARTocracy's openness is a vital tonic.

Deveron Projects is akin to an Open Educational Resource (OER), one that imbues and facilitates the cyclical models developed in Participatory Action Research (PAR). Of course, OER and PAR sync neatly with the open aspirations of many artists with which Deveron Projects has worked; with the desire to do things with, not to, the community. This aspiration was clear at the 21st birthday celebrations when Councillor Hamish Vernalby, the Provost of Aberdeenshire, singled out Deveron Projects as an exemplar of how situated and socially engaged arts programmes could, and should, connect the local and the global.

As an artistic method, Deveron Projects here deploys a partial inversion. The gallery is an instrument upon which artists perform their different scores. Huntly - in its totality - is the instrument, Deveron Projects, the score. Where galleries are highly controlled environments, play-spaces with deliberately constrained parameters, Huntly is a flood of possibilities, a living, breathing life-form. This is why Deveron Projects cannot help but inculcate practices of agency and community that run counter to the personalised ontologies that still underwrite a great deal of contemporary art. This dynamic field explains why Deveron Projects can be both a score that can be collectively played, and remain generative and adaptive to its ever changing environment.

Deveron Projects' legacy, then, will be witnessed in the extent to which it is adopted and adapted as a model. Does this mean that Deveron Projects is a 'script'? As Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold have argued, there is 'no script for social and cultural life.' If this is true, it means that arts organisations cannot proceed from the position that they know what artistic practice is; they should be, rather, be motivated by aiding speculation on what it might be. Deveron Projects is an explicitly autopoietic structure, a network of processes that learns and regenerates itself. It adapts and recalibrates in ways that ensure its reproduction. As Deveron Projects and the ARTocracy model mature, its communities of practice will grow and spawn an increasingly complex conglomeration of customs and practices. If its manifest codifications become internalised and implicit, in the ways that studio-practice has, it may become our common culture.

In this sense, Deveron Projects' future would seem to be secure yet, necessarily, unpredictable. The fact that Deveron Arts has now changed its name to Deveron Projects is testimony to how, as an institution, it inherently embraces its need to shape-shift. If being an 'arts' organisation becomes a barrier to supporting the arts, then there is always an alternative.

*Neil Mulholland,  
Professor of Contemporary Art Practice and Theory,  
Edinburgh College of Art*