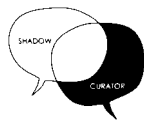


deveronarts
the town is the venue



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Foreword | Paul Shephard

Huntly, in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, is a small town built of dour grey stones surrounded by open country and huge skies. Like the other towns around, it is laid out in the military grid of the English occupation of two hundred years ago. There is a central square with a maze of little streets leading off towards the open landscape beyond, a big castle in the style of King George, and a plunging river full of fish and stones and clear water. It carries the usual strains of European modern life in its old frame—not enough money, a slipping demographic, and too much idle time—but in another way Huntly is special. It has become a living demonstration of the usefulness of art. Because here Deveron Arts, an arts organisation named for that river, has taken the idea of taking art out of the galleries and onto the streets and made that simple slogan mean something.

Freeing art from the galleries has been a long and messy affair. First there was the bourgeois revolution that sprung from the churches and the galleries, then the popular one that arose from the salons and academies. Then came the street protests, the graffiti, and the hippy happenings. The protest was about the invasion of capital into everyday life, and the depth of the individuation and the mediation that flows from it. The common milieu of public art—the brass bands, the statues, the people's festivals—had not survived that invasion. But then neither did the protest. It left us with an art whose objects were carriers for an ironic narrative—and what use is that?

Art is not just a critique. Not just a tool for shocking us awake. It is an enquiry into the nature of change. It is the open-ended and ungovernable part of that essential plaid woven of art, philosophy, and science through which we investigate and explain the changing world. It is indispensable, and that's why it's useful. In Huntly, Deveron Arts has curated an invisible gallery made of the whole town: as they put it, *the*

town is the venue. And they take being curators seriously. They point out that the definition of the word has the concept of care buried in it, and from this parlay an attitude that they are in the business of social health, in its widest sense. The artists they invite to take part work in themes that spring from the community as it confronts change. This book shows how it is done, and how it has been achieved—the research, the money, the projects, the effects are all here, in detail—as well as how it could be done in other places, too. In the end, the beauty of their story is in its evolution. It is not a tub-thumping manifesto, but the story of a matrix of collaborations that, like art itself, researches by doing. What could be further from the predations of capital than that?



Introduction | ARTocracy

This handbook is called *ARTocracy* and proposes a pragmatic curatorial approach, when dealing with contemporary art, context, informal spaces, communities, and social consequence. It was written with one thing in mind: to potentiate and stir a renewed practice-led dialogue between these spheres.

It has been tested through the work of Deveron Arts, a small arts organisation set up in the mid-nineteen-nineties in the small town of Huntly in North East Scotland. After abandoning the possibility of having a dedicated venue for the arts, it became clear that it would have to position itself in the open, where people could see it, and to operate on a town-wide scale.

The motto *the town is the venue* emerged from this approach.

Today, Deveron Arts is known as the place that invites artists to come to work in Huntly. It has found its place and its legitimacy. It operates with various organisations and stakeholders and introduces new elements for a discussion involving curators, artists, town planners, and other people working at the intersection between art and society.

This handbook will present all relevant information as to how *the town is the venue* was developed, and also look into how it could be transferred to other locations in different contexts.

ARTocracy is a word we conceived to help structure our thinking with regard to art and society. We clearly wanted to move away from the “white cube” and into the society at large—in physical as well as in conceptual terms. We are interested in publics that have never been confronted with visual arts, different from the usual art audiences and visitors of museums and galleries. We largely sidelined the discussion around curating in dedicated art spaces, and positioned our practice in places where people would come across art as if by accident; we have called them informal spaces.

Curator and *Shadow Curator*

After co-curating the *ArtCup, Le Salon des Refusés*—a project in Huntly during the World Cup 2006 that brought together art and football—Nuno Sacramento was invited to undertake a residency at Deveron Arts to test his *Shadow Curator* concept on the then emerging *the town is the venue* curatorial strategy. The aim was to enter a *Shadow Curator* dialogue with Claudia Zeiske, the director (and curator) of Deveron Arts, and investigate how this dialogue could feed back into the functioning and development of the organisation, as well as contribute to a wider discussion around curatorial practice.

Curator

Traditionally, a curator is someone who takes care of the collection of a museum or historic site. The word itself comes from the Latin word “curatus,” meaning “care.” A curator has a range of responsibilities, which are different from organisation to organisation, depending on the size of the institution, its mission, its financial resources, and the availability of other staff.

In the contemporary visual arts context, the curator’s role is to develop an understanding and overview of both conceptual and organisational tasks. The “caring” element of curating is not related to the objects only, but also to the artists, the community, and the context—which may be a gallery, a residency centre, a site-specific project, an event, a book, etc. The curator generates the necessary conditions for the emergence of visual arts projects and at the same time is responsible for the frameworks of reception by the public. The curatorial scope relates to every stage of the project, from the conditions of making, to the presentation, and finally to the reception of the work.

While they may come from a visual arts training background or related discipline, such as art history or cultural studies, visual arts curators have become interdisciplinary practitioners, who have to balance the theoretical tasks (research and conceptualising of projects) with the

Deveron Arts

The Story of *the town is the venue*

Deveron Arts was set up in 1995 by three like-minded people who—at the time—felt there were not enough cultural activities in Huntly and surrounding area.

Over a glass of wine, a decision was made to try and take action instead of waiting for others to provide it.

In the beginning, a few summer schools and workshops were organised. Some theatre groups and a travelling gallery were invited to the town. All were projects that would be expected from a typical amateur community arts organisation. As Deveron Arts started to take the path of professionalisation, it was looking into the development of a building. However, the results of a feasibility study were not favourable given the weak financial base and the remote location. This is when the use of the informal spaces became the most attractive option.

At this time, a young artist who had finished art school in Aberdeen was invited for a residency. David Blyth researched road kill in the area—rabbits that had been killed through car traffic—which also led to questions relating to road casualties in particular among young people in the countryside. He investigated the relationship between people, pets, and other animals resulting in an exhibition in the dining room of a private Victorian mansion.

The following year, Deveron Arts invited Julia Douglas, an artist working mainly in the media of textiles, for a project with people who had become unemployed after the closure of the former textile mills. She

Deveron Arts did not emerge from the needs of the town but was brought in by outsiders.

How does the town take ownership?



Huntly

Geography and Climate

Latitude: 57.443734N Longitude: 2.772692W

Location

Huntly is situated in North East Scotland between the relatively flat Banffshire agricultural land and the mountainous moorland shooting estates of the Cabrach and Speyside whisky region. The town has transport links with the A96 trunk road, rail and bus links to Aberdeen (65 km) and Inverness (100 km).

What are the climate and seasons like?

The weather is considerably colder than the southern part of the UK; temperatures rarely rise over twenty-five degrees in the summer and can drop to minus ten degrees in winter, when snow conditions and blizzards can cause severe disruption. The summer evenings are very long, in winter however short.

What flora and fauna exist here?

The surrounding area is dominated by grassy fields and woodlands inhabited by some bird of prey and deer, as well as other wild animals like badgers, squirrels, foxes, etc.

Demography

How many people live in the town / in the catchment area?

4,500 in Huntly itself / 4,500 in the vicinity, which is defined by The Gordon Schools' catchment area.

Are there apparent class distinctions?

Huntly is a very mixed society, which makes it interesting to apply artistic processes. All children go to the same school, which provides a very inclusive atmosphere. Doctors, teachers, and oil workers live here, but the town also has relatively high unemployment, which manifests itself in dependency on the welfare system; some of this has been apparent for generations. The class divide is, however, somewhat visible in the distribution of houses, with housing for higher income families to the west of the town and social housing settlements in the east end.

What is the age distribution?

Families with young people; relatively many older/retired people; the age group between nineteen and thirty-five is fairly small. However, recent new housing estates have brought in new families.

What are the opportunities for young people after finishing school?

Few people stay who have finished school up to Highers Standard due to a lack of opportunities both in terms of academic training and lack of high income job market. Those who stay tend to get unskilled jobs, for example in the local supermarket, or they get local apprenticeships, for example in hairdressing, plumbing, or construction and go to Moray College in Elgin (circa 40 km) for training.

How many go and where to?

Most (about one hundred annually) go to the larger towns Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh, and Glasgow for further education; some commute to Elgin College; some go to England; some do a gap year abroad before going on to higher education.

Are there any particular social problems and what are they?

Huntly has a relatively high unemployment rate in comparison to the rest of Aberdeenshire. Opportunities for young people who are not going away to university or other training are limited. There is also a high number of unexplained accidents, which are thought to be caused by drink and drug abuse.

Politics

How do people vote?

Huntly is traditionally giving its majority votes to the Liberal Democrats, although the Conservative Party gets also a significant part. However, recently the Scottish National Party won, which brought the First Minister (Alex Salmond) as MSP to the area (and town).

What kind of local government is here?

Since a reorganisation of local government, Huntly is part of the county of Aberdeenshire; which has its administration in Aberdeen and Inverurie.

Architecture and Assets

What are the main architectural features in the town?

Huntly is a conservation area, which features an ancient castle, Archibald Simpson school building, Stewart's Hall, and an ancient bridge over the river Deveron.

Economics

What kind of jobs do people have here?

65 per cent of the people here work in Huntly, 13 per cent travel to Aberdeen (65 km) and another 15 per cent work in the rest of Aberdeenshire. Only 7 per cent work outside Aberdeen City and -shire, some of them work offshore, with their base and family in Huntly. The largest employers in the town are the schools and the health service. The second largest are the small factories Dean's Shortbread and Rizza's Ice Cream, as well as some smaller construction and industrial companies. Other key employers are the two supermarkets ASDA and TESCO, the Forestry Commission, and the two nursing homes. Finally there is employment in small businesses and shops, both skilled (plumbers, electricians, hairdressers) and unskilled.

Are there any special skills?

There is now a skills shortage for traditional trades, like plumbing, building, and electric works.

Curatorial Methodology

the town is the venue

This is a curatorial methodology for organisations that function within small towns, have no dedicated arts venue, and can be run from a small office while using found and informal spaces for the implementation of projects.

the town is the venue requires close interaction with a given context. It starts with a general enquiry concerning the place's geography, demography, and social history—questions that have been articulated in this handbook through the cultural audit.

Furthering this research, a closer investigation is devoted to what topics/issues are of relevance to the place, and can be tackled through the thinking and action of contemporary visual arts.

Once the topic is chosen, an artist is invited to go and spend time in residence.

Residency time, or time away from home is particularly relevant because it means the artist has full commitment to the project and at the same time arrives with a fresh outlook on the context.

On arrival, the artist is paired with communities and individuals concerned with the topic and, together with the curator and *Shadow Curator* starts developing a collaborative practice that will give way to one or more events.

At this point, education and marketing plans are devised. Education is seen as a built-in part of the concept and school and community groups are invited to contribute to parts of the project. In terms of marketing, the mechanisms for reaching different groups, in the immediate surroundings and further afield, are now put in place.

Could it work in a city neighbourhood that has the same size of a small town?

Is there an ideal duration for a residency?

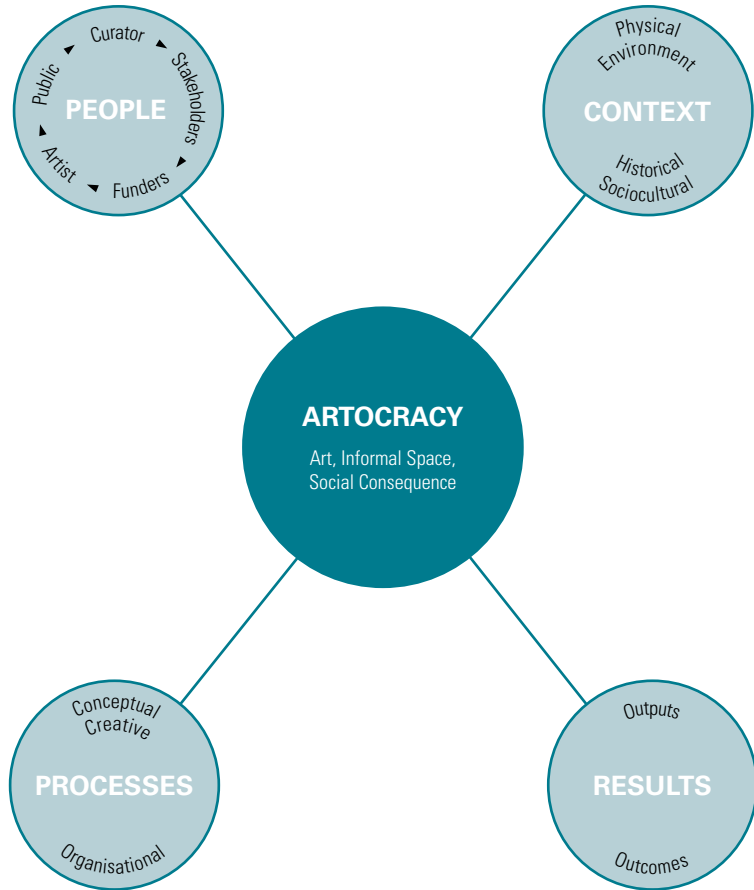
Project Layers

This part of the handbook is devoted to analysing practice. This is done by looking closely at the underpinning elements of every contemporary art project.

Here we go back to basics and list every detail relating to people, context, processes and results in project making. Each of these layers is subdivided into a number of components described on the following pages.

Project Layers		Examples
People	Artists	Local, incoming, international, or emerging collaborative practice, object-based practice
	Curators	Employed by the institution, independent, curatorial team, <i>Shadow Curator</i>
	Public	Community: project participants, local stakeholders, community groups, individuals, schools tourists, day trippers, and other visitors Art public: academia, art funders, art media, other art institutions
	Funders	Public funders, local funds, customers, corporate supporters, private donors, art and non-art funders
	Other Stakeholders	Directors of community organisations, directors/chairs of umbrella organisations, local authority
Context	Physical Environment	Landscape, architecture, buildings, urban spaces
	Historical and Sociocultural	Cultural Audit content: economics, language, art, food, customs, etc.
Processes	Conceptual and Creative	Selection of artists and topics, dissemination of topics, concept development
	Organisational	Networking, staffing and volunteer management, budgeting + fund-raising, marketing/PR, learning, documentation + archives, evaluation + monitoring
Results	Outputs	Installation, performance, events, festival, book, articles, drive-in, video, billboard, website, interviews, logo, song, conference, lecture, etc.
	Outcomes	Community: change, dialogue, polarity, opposition, provocation, understanding of an issue, understanding of opposed positions within the community Art outcomes: contribution to dialogue, methodological contribution to artist's practice, strengthening of local arts community, transferability of the model and ideas, critical practice occurring in rural place.

Project Layers



People

There are many different people involved in art project making, all of them contributing in a number of different ways: artists, curators, the public, funders, and other stakeholders.

Artists

The artists bring a methodology to every project that, when coupled with the questions prompted by the dialogue with the curator regarding public/context/topic, will introduce new perspectives and possibilities

that were not visible before. As a result, a project emerges—be it an object, a performance, an action, or an event. We often talk about the artists as if they were a unified class, or profession, or with a standard set of skills. Artists can belong to many different categories, such as a local artist or an artist that works internationally. Or they can make work according to different processes such as object-based, collaborative, socially engaged, or process-based practices. We could talk about formalists

What types of practices are relevant to the project?

Do artists work collaboratively with other artists or professionals?

Why would the artist want to be involved in the project?

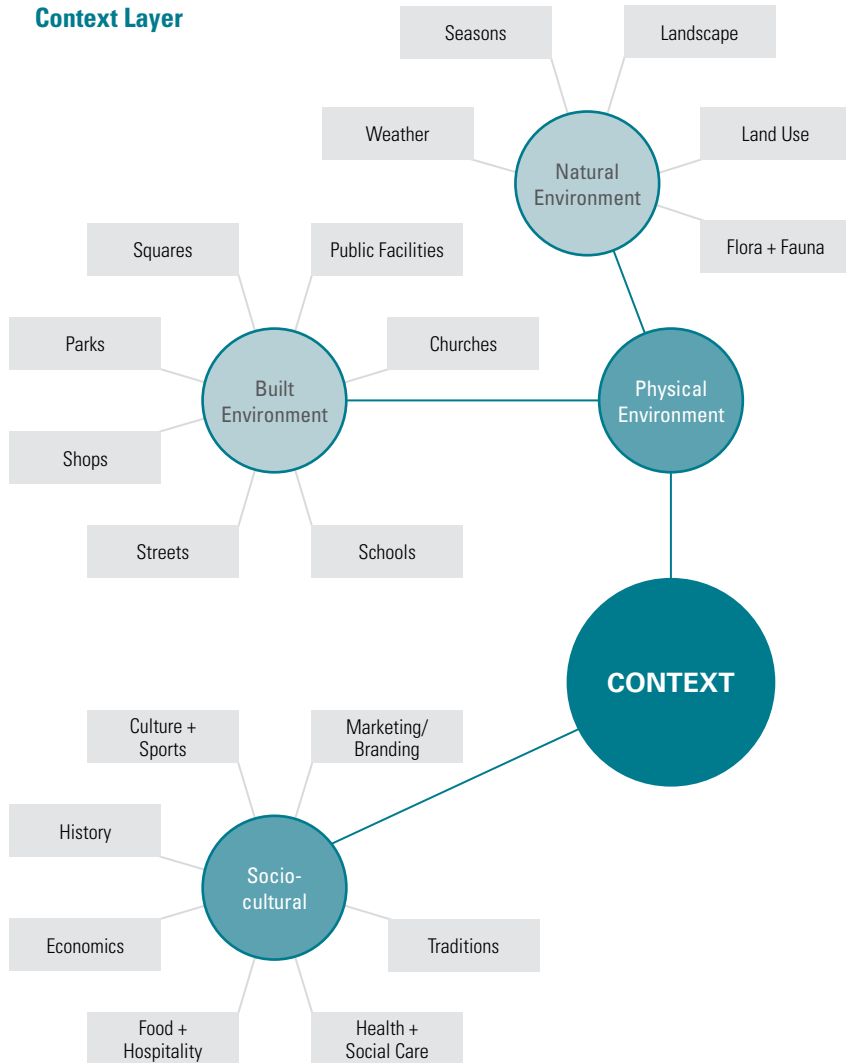
or conceptualists, or about professional or amateur artists. Again, it is not the intention of this book to create any sort of hierarchy.

In the following table, we present some of the pros and cons in the various methods of selecting the artists.

Sometimes artists take on curatorial tasks.

How do artists and curators negotiate this overlapping practice?

Context Layer



Context

We consider context to be physical and sociocultural. Both must be mapped and researched in advance for they constitute a crucially relevant part of the work.

Physical Context

This is the built environment, such as the town layout, buildings, built heritage, and architectural features. This also includes the natural landscape, its geologic formations, and its weather conditions.

Sociocultural Context

These are all aspects of life inhabited by people such as history, law, education, leisure, sport, religion, gastronomy. This should be revealed through the cultural audit.

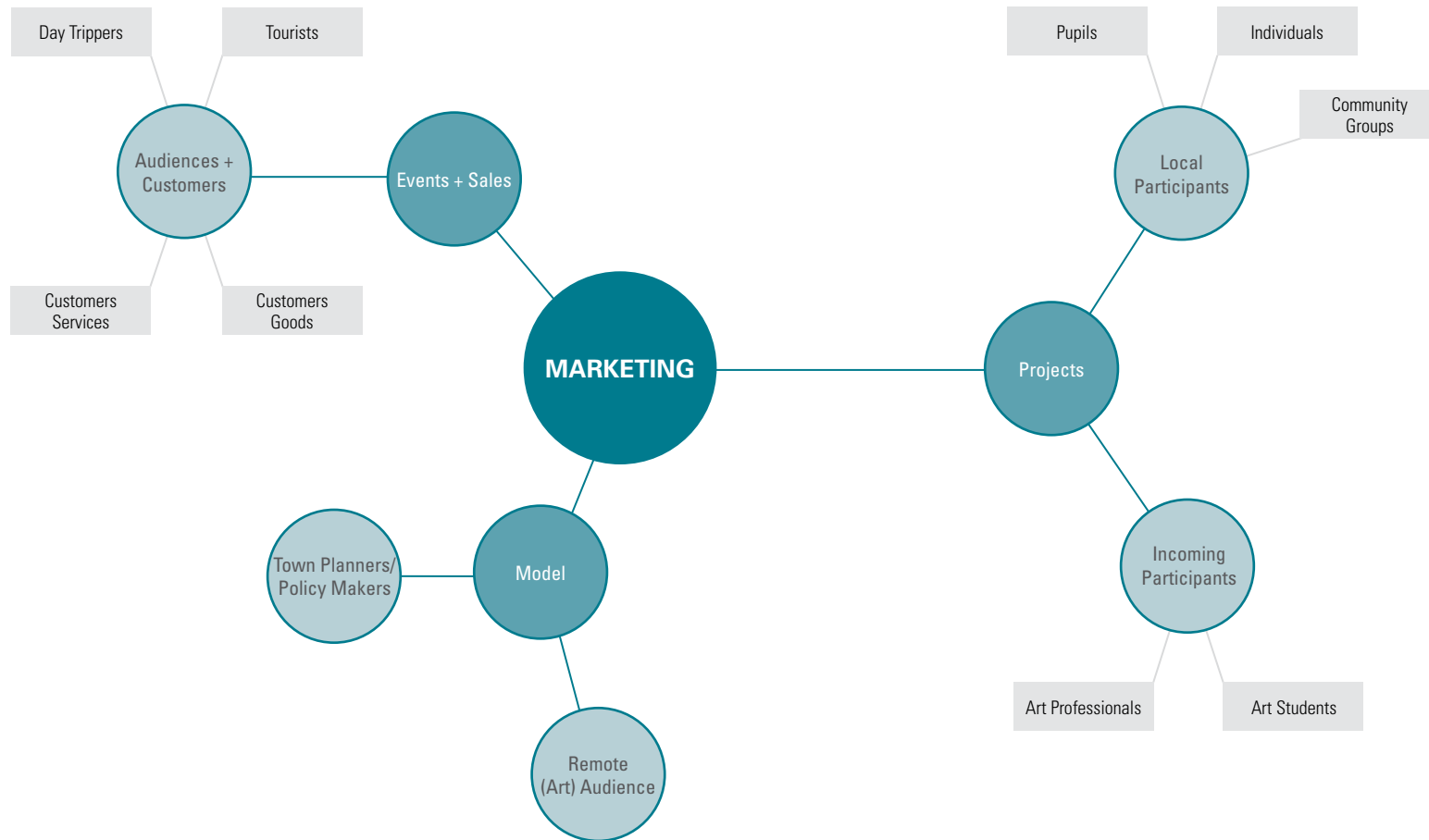
There is another context that does not refer directly to the town but to the professional contemporary visual art context. This consists of the discourse of many artists, curators, critics, and theoreticians that takes place in museums, galleries, art academies, art schools, and other forms of art media all over the world.

What gives a particular town a sense of place?

Are demographic, cultural, and artistic contexts mapped in the same way?

How can one relate to two contexts (art and community) simultaneously and with the same rigour?

Marketing



Transferability and Topic Selection

	Huntly	Huntlosen	Sesimbra	Ribeek Kasteel
Environment	Wind-farm development in vicinity; supermarket development on the outskirts of town	Monoculture for biogas	Tension between fishing community and environmental activists due to recent restrictions on fishing zones.	Very hot in the summer, crop apraying
Heritage	George MacDonald (writer), Ronald Center (composer), James Legge (Sinologist), Gordon Clan/Highlanders	August Hinrichs (writer)	Sebastião Rodrigues Soromenho (cartographer)	Jan Smuts (president during WWII, co-founder of the UN), D.F. Malan (former president, instigator of apartheid)
Identity	Challenge is <i>The Family Town</i> branding	Challenge is the absorption into Grossekneten; lack of a town centre	Identity as fishing village under threat	Town in danger of becoming a quaint and pseudo-authentic village for tourists
Intergenerational Topics	Youth isolation, car cruisers, drinking + drugs, supermarket development	Supermarket developments, lack of opportunities for young people	Property prices beyond the reach of young families forcing them to move to the outskirts of town	Integration post-apartheid, alcohol abuse (also in pregnancy), small number of street children

Shadow Curator Discussion

Nuno Sacramento and Claudia Zeiske Skype Conversation: 7 July 2010

Instead of a conclusion, we decided to have a final *Shadow Curator* discussion about a wide range of topics that either emerged from our practices or were prompted by the writing of this book. Some of them remain inconclusive.

[14:28:08] **Shadow Curator:** Hi Claudia, are you ready to have another one of our conversations about the book? What are we going to do after the book is published? Will we run out of issues to discuss?

[14:33:12] **Claudia Zeiske:** No, each section could do with another book. We could almost make a series of books out of it. There is still a lot to talk about.

[14:45:49] **Shadow Curator:** We should start right at the beginning with the project that brought us together, and with the type of working relationship we established over the last few years. I feel that we managed to contribute to each other's practice in a quite meaningful, albeit not always easy way, and that is the natural outcome of the curator/*Shadow Curator* relationship.

The *Shadow Curator* is given sometimes access to quite personal issues. Can you talk a bit about how you felt, being shadow curated by someone else you hardly knew?

[14:51:21] **Claudia Zeiske:** I think we have to go back to the roots of the definition of *Shadow Curator*. It is not the shadow of the curator, as one would expect it, like for example an intern shadowing a curator which means more like being at the curator's side like someone's shadow cast by the sun. *Shadow Curator* comes more from the Shadow Minister in Westminster politics, who, yes, is constantly at their counterpart's side, but also has another dimension of friendly opposition, which you call agonism.

Theoretical Reflections

Theoretical Reflections: Place and Communities

Since the early discussions around *the town is the venue* we have tried to keep updated with the various arguments in artistic discourse. Amongst the many texts we read, two in particular have resonated with our practices. These texts by Lucy Lippard and Nina Möntmann are published here as a theoretical positioning for our pragmatic approach. They are looking respectively at place and communities, which are two of the cornerstones of *the town is the venue* and this book.