

Interview with Claudia Zeiske, Deveron Arts, Huntly

By Wanja Kimani

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Wanja Kimani:

Deveron Arts works on a 50/50 policy: 50% local/community and 50% international/artistic. How do you strike the delicate balance between local and global interests?

Claudia Zeiske:

This policy gets the best out of what is available locally as well as bringing in ideas, aesthetics and energy from the international scene, which feed each other. This conundrum between cutting edge and almost parochial is what makes Deveron Arts tick.

WK: The Town Collection is unlike other collections in that it provides visitors with a unique way to see the town, void of the confines of individual taste. Do you think such an approach to 'collection' is transferable beyond the rural context?

CZ: The Town Collection is made up of works that artists left behind after their residencies. Some are very valuable, whereas others are more of a souvenir or memorabilia left by the artist. The work is then contextualised in the choice of location it is displayed in. This could be where the artist spent a lot of time, where the main event took place, or in more unusual settings such as Hamish Fulton's work, which hangs in a carpet shop.

It would be problematic to transfer this to an urban setting because you would need a vast collection to make it coherent and this may dilute the overall experience.

Furthermore, people here know each other. If a work requires attention, someone would tell us next time they see us in the supermarket. But in the city, it is often more anonymous and it would be difficult to maintain the works.

WK: Perhaps that is another distinction between urban and rural based community engaged art. It seems in the urban setting artists work with specific community groups, whereas in the rural context, it is not precisely categorised. Is this the case?

CZ: It depends on the artists' approach. You could also work with specific groups here, but you would work with few people. I believe that in working with marginalised groups, there is a danger in marginalising them even more. In a small place like Huntly everybody uses the same school, the same pool, the same supermarket, whether you are unemployed, or the local doctor. In a city you are by nature already in a poorer or wealthier neighbourhood. So here instead of working with let's say older people, or poorer people, we work alongside themes, which might touch everybody. Our next theme is around the role of fathers in our community. Everybody has a father, whether present or absent.

WK: How do you think your background in anthropological research contributes to your ability to identify such trends? And perhaps as a curator when working with culturally diverse artists?

CZ: Deveron Arts combines the application of my anthropological background and curiosity and creating a cultural environment around myself, which I longed for when I

was first moved here. I am now much more conscious about this balance between art and anthropology/ethnographic working. I have a desk in the local library building from where I can look out onto the town square, which allows me to always observe what is going on. There are also other mechanisms that contribute to this kind of 'participant observation'. For instance, I am on quite a few community boards, including the school board, the tourism group the local development trust and the local paper, the Huntly Express. It is vital to find out what is going on in the town and provides me with subconscious research of the topics we are introducing to the artists.

WK: A key partnership is the Shadow Curator. The Shadow Curator mirrors the Shadow Minister in Westminster politics, making their relationship one of 'friendly opposition', rather than a complaint partner. What challenges, is any, face this relationship and how are they resolved?

CZ: We are taking the metaphor Shadow Minister here. But the Shadow Minister is of course not always a friendly opposition; he/she is in fact interested in the downfall of the appointed Minister. The idea of Shadow Curator is to have somebody working alongside you, whose role it is to critically challenge your decision, similar to the 'check and balance' approach taken by ministers in parliament. This can be applied on all levels of operation: choice of theme or artist, development of the project or simply managerial things like making a poster or filling in a funding form. Shadow Curator is more than a mentor, a mentor's job is to make you feel good. Shadow Curator is there to sharpen your decisions. I like this concept of working very much. But it may not be everybody's cup of tea.

WK: It's a great concept, which allows critical perspectives throughout the project. Is this common among curators? How long have you been working in that way?

CZ: I started doing this about 3 years ago, when Nuno Sacramento (who I also wrote the book, *ARTocracy* with) proposed the idea to me. I really liked the idea and invited him for a residency here. Since then I have attached a different Shadow Curator to each project. It truly is a great concept but I am unaware if any other curators do so.

WK: It's been an insightful conversation. Thank you for your time and comments.

CZ: My pleasure Wanja.

Wanja Kimani is an artist based in London and Nairobi who undertook a brief research residency at Deveron Arts in spring 2011-04-07

Claudia Zeiske is Director of Deveron Arts: *the town is the venue*