

Praktika in Huntly – March 2008

Maintaining the tension in hospitable criticality

Nuno Sacramento

Praktika took place in Huntly, a small, rural market town in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, with a population of some 4000. Located on the River Deveron in sheltered fertile farmlands between the North East coastline and the Cairngorm National Park, it sits astride the main transport routes between Aberdeen and Inverness. I was invited by Deveron Arts, as Shadow Curator ^[1], to be present at Praktika to contribute reflections on how this event related to the context of the town.

The gathering had a balanced measure of two characteristics which I consider to be the two most important aspects of socially engaged art practice: hospitality and criticality. I propose a reflection on the dialectics between the two and will look at Praktika as an attempt to converge them. Hence my reflections will go beyond a straightforward chronicle of the event and into more discursive territory.

Deveron Arts is a small arts organisation in Huntly which treats the town as the context for socially relevant art projects. Deveron Arts' strategy is the 'Town is the Venue', which in itself is self-explanatory. There is no specific building or gallery space and practice is projected into "found" spaces and places that are inhabited by people in the locality. To achieve this, Deveron Arts invites artists from all over the world to live and work here for longer periods of time.

The idea of bringing Praktika to Huntly had two distinct objectives for its host organisation. One was the relationship between Deveron Arts' practice and a wider discursive framework. Like many in other small and remote institutions, staff at Deveron Arts often travel long distances to urban centres to participate in events and discussions. Praktika presented an opportunity to de-centralise the discourse. The other motive was to test the Deveron Arts' model in a national workshop. I will elaborate further. When artists arrive in Huntly to undertake a residency with Deveron Arts, they are introduced to a range of inhabitants, often staying with local families, and encouraged to engage with them throughout. The institution attempts to create an intense encounter between the artist and the social context of Huntly. Another important element is that the venue where the project takes place is always within Huntly's catchment area, and used for other purposes. In the past, venues have ranged from churches to supermarkets and garages to sheep auction markets.

In the case of Praktika, the artists, instead of staying in local hotels or B&Bs, were invited to stay with local people. The coupling of local people with these outside visitors prompted connections and inclusion in a way welcomed by Deveron Arts and the town. A wide section of the community was mobilised and the artists got a clear idea of the breadth of cultures, experience and jobs of Huntly's inhabitants. Volunteers to host participants in their homes included a local GP, the Town Co-ordinator, a single mother back in full-time education, the Deveron Arts' resident artist, teachers, a Health & Safety officer, an accountant and his wife, the local councillor and a retired shoe-shop owner. In the end it was clear to all that this was an extremely enriching, if unusual, situation.

The socially-oriented strategies of engagement put forward by Deveron Arts with regards to its local context (and referred to by Jacques Coetzer in Praktika when he stated that

the artist's role in Huntly is as clear as the baker's or the butcher's) were further enhanced by the direct engagement between the invited artists and some of the Huntly locals. The status of the artist in Huntly is somewhat demystified and unique in regards to gaining access to the inside of people's homes, this also being a sign of the trust that Deveron Arts has acquired within the community.

In Huntly from 17th to 18th March 2008, all the ingredients were gathered for the development of what could become a precedent for discussions amongst artists engaged in social practices in Scotland, namely trust, camaraderie and a simultaneously comfortable and critical environment. According to the workshop organisers the discourse and understanding of these practices in Scotland was fragmented. Praktika thus proposed to create a new positioning by undertaking the discourse from a practice-based perspective, hence the name. The event brought together thirteen artists to discuss past projects and look for connections in practice, identify similarity, problems, struggles and put down on paper the derived discussions and critique.

The organisation of Praktika embraced both the aspects of criticality and hospitality in detail. These aspects were represented by the workshop itself, which took place in the Ex-Servicemen's Club, and by the relations between Praktika, embodied by the group of artists and Huntly town. The short stay had a full programme including a historical tour of the town, hill walking up the Clashmach in ubiquitous rain, the two-day workshop, a small banquet with low food-mileage and socialising with the local hosts, culminating in a Scottish Ceilidh. Venues ranged from an old lodge, the Ex-Servicemen's Club, an empty shop, private homes and Huntly's golf club. The artists also visited The Square, charity and book shops and spent mandatory time in various pubs.

One of the most important aspects of the event was that artists, with multiple viewpoints and approaches, came together to discuss the 'nooks and crannies' of an art of relationships, an art which has existed for decades yet only now seems to be viewed as a legitimate process central to the theoretical discourse. The artists in Praktika did not come together to defend their practice or to hide inside their conceptual bunkers, but to open up with all their ideas, worries and concerns. To me this was indeed unique.

Participants were organised physically in a semi-circle where every artist could see each other and the large projection screen. The group's physical formation, reminiscent of reading groups and art school critical discussions, was familiar to most present. The twist was to bring some of the trust and camaraderie involved in the learning process, and adopt it for a professional situation.

Rather than a series of presentations from a podium, defining a clear-cut boundary between speaker and audience, Praktika revived a circular format conducive to a non-hierarchical approach. Every presentation consisted of a participant giving a 20-minute description of a single project, followed by a 40-minute group discussion mediated by David Harding. Presentation times were taken seriously and on the dot, totalling twelve hours over two days. Tiring, yet extremely productive and rewarding.

Praktika was a very enriching situation because it created a space or zone where trust and camaraderie were conducive to constructive judgement. It is difficult to quantify this statement but I believe everyone present must agree that what happened was comfortable if rigorous, enjoyable if at times harsh, a combination of holiday and work.

I said at the beginning that my reflections would move beyond a chronicle of the event. In hindsight the main questions prompted by the Praktika workshop and its relation to the town concern the dichotomy between criticality and hospitality in socially engaged art. Is hospitality a relatively new concept in the visual arts' context? Can hospitality lead to a different type of criticality? And finally are the notions of criticality and of hospitality opposed?

I have spent approximately half my life talking and thinking about art. For the last ten years I have lived literally between countries and travelled extensively. If there is one word I have heard (and used) consistently while working in all these contexts and languages it is the word 'criticality', with the secret belief that criticality is the *sine qua non* condition for every art project. I have never felt the need to question this premise but when an earlier version of this text was scrutinised by others I was forced to challenge this motivation. I still believe criticality is a crucial element for an art project but a component not an entirety. I firmly believe that for the time art dealt mostly with inanimate objects one could deploy criticality alone, but now that it consistently involves people this has to be counter-balanced with hospitality. In a basic sense people must have a reason for wanting to be involved.

Hospitality, on the other hand, is a fairly recent term in my artistic lexicon. I have used it widely in other contexts such as family and social work but seldom in the arts. I don't remember having heard it theorized in the context of art by the heavyweight theoreticians like Lacan, Zizek, Foster or De Duve, who were some of the main voices during my schooling.

Over the last few years the word hospitality has started to assume a higher importance in the arts field through, among other things, the *Relational Aesthetics* of Bourriaud and the performances of Tiravanija. I have also recently discovered the essay *Pas d'Hospitalité* by Jacques Derrida and the art symposium and publication *Conversations at the Castle* curated by Mary Jane Jacob and Michael Brenson. All of these provide different and thought provoking views on hospitality.

According to the Oxford English Reference Dictionary criticality comes under critical and next to criticism, the latter being the word that relates most to our activity. Criticism is defined as an article, essay etc., expressing or containing an analytical evaluation of something. Hence, being critical can be taken as being inquisitive and offering an analytical view of a situation through art (visual thought). It is perhaps important that the same dictionary notes that definitions of critical are often negative describing it for example as making or involving adverse or censorious comments or judgements. The significance of this becomes explicit later.

Concerning hospitality the same dictionary defines it as the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of strangers, referring its etymology to the word hospital, being a space of comfort and welcome.

By now I have no doubts that criticality and hospitality, the main elements of a socially engaged project, are pulling in opposite directions. While remaining analytical, criticality strives for objectivity and distance, providing a judgement that is eminently rational. It doesn't go with the flow. Hospitality on the other hand is welcoming and warm, inviting people to lower their guards and open up. Intuition tells me that hospitality is conducive to a different type of criticality.

Referring back to Praktika I believe that artists (as everyone) in a comfortable position open up for scrutiny. Each artist was placed in the similar position of simultaneously scrutinising another's practice and themselves being open to scrutiny, leading to mutual relaxation and an atmosphere of trust. In analysing each other they were able to accept criticism as constructive rather than personal and accept the positive benefit of external opinion, which made the event successful. Clear bonds emerged and artists previously working in isolation now find they have a peer group with whom they can discuss and share experiences. Praktika as a workshop created a social network and a positioning in relation to socially engaged practices, one that will serve as background for future projects and speculative discussions. I can comfortably say that criticality and hospitality, despite pulling in different directions, worked together during Praktika in producing an open dialogue around artistic practices. Praktika created a bond between artists, which allowed them to criticise each other openly.

This critical proposition was initially successful but a crucial question remains open. How can this approach be transposed from a dialogue between a group of artists to a relationship between artists and public? We often use hospitality and criticality independently. Will a convergence of hospitality and criticality add another dimension to our socially engaged art projects?

In my view artists should remain aware that they must not pull solely in the direction of hospitality or of criticality but instead work towards maintaining tension and balance between these two. The approach demands that processes shouldn't be unbalanced, becoming too easy or too incomprehensible.

I would suggest that the ways in which artists use criticality and hospitality in relation to their publics will probably now become the most important methodological question of socially engaged practices. The good news is that although there is not one straightforward answer to this, this publication is dedicated to twelve possible answers by artists who briefly suspended their activity to come up to Huntly to present (while being part of a wider critique) their challenging, artistic, socially engaged approaches.

[1] In the artistic context, Shadow Curator is to the appointed Curator, what in politics the Shadow Minister is to the appointed Minister. This conversational project lives off the tension between Shadow Curator and Curator and is based on a positive and critical exchange of ideas. In this capacity I was engaged with Deveron Arts/the town is the venue over the past two years. My participation in Praktika's workshop chronicleur does not emerge from an interest in theory but rather in reflective practice as shown in this text.

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