

## **The Town is the Venue – a methodology for our times**

Deveron Arts is an organisation based in Huntly, Aberdeenshire and has as its modus operandi the phrase 'the town is the venue'. It is the central tenet of a methodology of public arts engagement that has attracted artists from all over the world to this small, rural and ancient market town that is by no means at the geographical centre of the contemporary art world. This article tries to look at how this has come about, and why might it be significant, not just as a phenomenon in its own right but also in the wider context of public art practice.

DA was established just over ten years ago by a group of friends, including its current director Claudia Zeiske, as a means of broadening the local cultural horizon. It began in fairly conventional terms with the idea of a gallery, an arts centre and exhibitions by invited artists, but the process of invitation and the practice of residency quickly began to change that. Besides, after serious investigation it was felt that the cost of building, establishing and funding a traditional arts centre might not only be prohibitive but potentially divisive. Inevitably, any physical arts centre by its very nature establishes a threshold of separation between its contents and its public. If the content is imposed on the public they may not cross the threshold; if the public dictates the content the institution risks stagnation.

But DA has never been a curatorial body driven by theory. Rather it has found itself within its practice as it has gone along, understanding its essence by a critical analysis of its practice. As artists came to the area and began to work, it soon became apparent that the most successful projects were the ones that engaged directly with the place and its residents and opened up a relevant dialogue. Gradually there emerged a trend in the projects that recognised Huntly as the contextual paradigm but included all and any relations to that context within its borders. The town itself had become not just the arts centre but the content or the subject of investigation as well. Hence, *the town is the venue*.

It is an interesting phrase. At its simplest it establishes Huntly, a collection of private and public spaces barely one square kilometre in extent, as the geographical location of DA's activities, or rather the activities of the artists invited to participate. And one can assume that the work produced will directly reflect Huntly, or perhaps the character of north-eastern Scotland, but whilst this is the intention it is not included in the phrase.

In fact, *the town is the venue* is deceptively complex – Huntly itself is not actually specified either, only the term town; and a location cannot become a venue without there being an event. So the phrase raises the idea of the town as a generic social construct whose essence lies not in location but in an ongoing process – Life as a *happening* to resurrect Allan Kaprow's term from the late 1950s. In this sense DA's activities take on an anthropological aspect, (Zeiske studied Anthropology in Germany in the 1980s), in which contemporary society is the subject rather than the character of any one particular place.

Furthermore, the *town is the venue* does not specify the nature of the event, nor its orchestrator, but merely anticipates its occurrence. It announces an advent and implies arrival – in other words it suggests that the town is acted on by an outside agent or agents in order to create the event. As curator Nuno Sacramento says in his conclusion to his recent analysis of DA's methodologies

*This unique and one could say town-specific model of curating, places the artist in the heart of the community. This is the same as saying that the artist uses the town as the studio, the gallery and the laboratory.*

(‘The Town is the Venue’, Shadow Curator at Deveron Arts– Critical Recording of Curatorial Methodology, 2008)

It is in fact a declaration that the town is the crucible for an experiment conducted by the artist in which the engagement is reciprocal. *Participatory Observation* is a term used by Zeiske to describe this experiment in which neither party is outsider nor insider and the problem of threshold has been overcome. Again, in Nuno Sacramento’s words

*This way one is not only almost guaranteed an audience, but also a team of local people that take ownership of the project. The project is not the artist’s, or the institution’s, but it has, one could say, shared copyright between all people involved.*

But an experiment *about* what? If the *town* represents Society in a heuristic sense, then whatever the experiment is, it is nothing less than an enquiry into the nature of our relationships with each other and with our environment. One has to start somewhere – it might be Huntly or Clydeside, football or cake-baking – but one cannot grasp society all at once. In Claudia Zeiske’s own words

*“I was more interested in finding ways, as you do as an anthropologist, of reaching ordinary people’s lives... So we started off with this project with David Blyth and he was really interested in pet owners ... [but] the topic was more, people’s relationship to animals.”*

In another project, *Mono*, conducted by Berliner Jelka Plate, the starting point was the curious practice by some in Huntly of car ‘cruising’, sometimes travelling as much as 500 miles in a weekend without leaving the town. Another project (Dalziel + Scullion) responded to local debate about the arrival of wind turbines on a nearby hill; and another, *Homemade* (Böller und Brot) looked at the compulsive appeal of junk food.

Some of these lines of enquiry reflect the chosen artist’s existing practice; some, like the wind turbine debate, are manifestly obvious and as such almost proposed by the town; and some come from DA’s own observations in the local media

*“The most important tool is the Huntly Express, our small local newspaper... they just identify any problems in the town or sometimes they are not problems sometimes they are love affairs and sometimes they are letters to the editor.”* (Zeiske)

How these avenues are explored depends on the nature of the issue and the artist in question but the thing that is common to all is the town. It can be said then that there are two levels of methodology at work here simultaneously: one is the practice of engagement between artist and community; and the other is the meta-practice deployed by DA in the totality of its engagement.

There are of course some commonalities even at a project level: all involve dialogue with the community at a one-to-one and a group level; all take place over a period of time involving a number of separate events; all involve third parties be they individual professionals or institutional bodies; all require recording usually in multiple media; all result in a public debate, presentation or event; and many produce a printed document. All recognise the terminology of research - documentation - outcome and consequently all can be archived.

Of course. there is nothing new in these processes, they are the common tools of many socially engaged practices. And in themselves they do not prescribe the content or predetermine the outcomes of any individual project, which are as diverse as the artists who conduct them. Of the 44 listed on the [deveron-arts.com](http://deveron-arts.com) it is worth noting a selection to illustrate that diversity:

A See of Green	Catriona Mackay	Biodiversity and commercialism in the forestry industry prior to the felling of a local wood. Uses ambient sound recording and live performance
Music for Streetfights	Garry Williams	A choreographic response to binge-drinking cultures using a loudspeaker equipped van
Homemade	Böller + Brot	TV documentary series in collaboration with a local Primary school on the theme of junkfood
Hommage to George MacDonald	Duncan Maclaren	A literary festival and the publication of a book by Maclaren celebrating the work of this local writer
Knockturne	David Blyth	An exploration of birth, death, magic and ritual using film, taxidermy and sculpture in collaboration with local farmers
Cinemagic Tour	Elsebeth Jørgensen	An exploration of community dreams unearthed in the remains of Huntly's abandoned cinema
ArtCup	Roderick Buchanan	Artistic motivation and international social interaction enacted in the stadium of Huntly FC during the 2006 World Cup
Space/Retail/Magic	Eva Merz	A large-scale photographic installation in response to the construction of two superstores on the edge of town

While each project may be different from the next, illuminating a different facet of the town's identity, each has the same relationship to the whole and should be viewed in that context. DA's methodology is the cumulative sum of its individual project methodologies and they in their turn owe their identity to the whole.

There is in this something of the hermeneutic methodology employed by Walter Benjamin in his Arcades Project. This archive, compiling third-party texts by poets and philosophers, anecdotes, half-completed research and his own musings, tries to convey the zeitgeist of late-19thC Paris through a form of literary montage that persuades by weight of evidence more than didactic argument.

*Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.*

The Arcades Project, Walter Benjamin. [On the theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress, Convolute N1a,8]

In a work of this kind one might expect to find chapter titles such as Iron Construction, or Fashion, but not perhaps The Doll, The Automaton, or Boredom, Eternal Return, or The Flâneur. This last has come to be seen as the central motif of Benjamin's project, defined by Baudelaire as 'a gentleman stroller of city streets', this window shopper on life reveals the tenor of his times as much by display as by consumption.

*"To leave without being forced in any way, and to follow your inspiration as if the mere fact of turning right or turning left already constituted an essentially poetic act"*

Edmond Jaloux. *Le Dernier Flâneur, Le Temps (May 22 1936)*.

The Arcades Project, Walter Benjamin, [The Flâneur, Convolute M9a,4]

In short, the flâneur is a medium through which one may experience the zeitgeist. His unceasing but idle exploration unearths truths that a more direct approach may not. Society is not visible as a series of facts that may be arranged in rows to form a thesis, but only as a flow whose trend is as apparent as the infinity of its variables.

DA's methodology is this: under the heading *The Town is The Venue*, artists are invited to interact with the society that they perceive, turning to left or right as the needs of poetry and the public dictate. What results is another entry in an archive whose entries turn amongst each other like dancers in a ballroom. And as the dance-floor fills up so the relationships between them become both more evident and more complex. The analogy is a useful one and it is tempting to try and find other parallels within it but that would be to miss the point – that the system is complex and its parts so densely inter-related that any absolute definition necessarily falls short of the truth.

*The Town is the Venue*, is both a natural successor to Benjamin's arcade and an inevitable reflection of its time – the age of reality TV, the public vote and the celebrated amateur. The ordinary is our oeuvre, the epic a thing of the past. We gaze at ourselves mirrored in the fishbowl of our TV screens, convinced that Truth, not the devil, lies in the detail. But as we channel-hop from war to gardening and comedy to golden-oldies we are only continuing the tradition of Benjamin's flâneurs. If we risk reducing the horror of a terrorist outrage to the same level as a rerun episode of Friends, it is also possible that we might just uncover the relationship between them.

Glancing down the list of DA projects one can form a constellation (to use Benjamin's term for a relational system) that includes Merlyn Riggs' *Feed the Five*, Böller + Brot's *Homemade* and Eva Merz's *Space/Retail/Magic* for example, but also includes TV Masterchef, the River Cottage, George Soros and the price of rice in Bangladesh. Or you could place Jørgensen's *Cinemagic Tour* alongside Buchanan's *ArtCup* and the opening to the Beijing Olympics and get back to *Space/Retail/Magic* via David Blyth.

These juxtapositions need not be seen to diminish the poetry or integrity of any of the artists' work involved, they do something else. They connect the individual, local experience with the collective and the global, but in ways which are too complex to pin down. They become allegorical, like those still lives of the 17thC in which household goods, food, books and the occasional skull for good measure, are turned as if by magic into Art simply by their collation falling under our gaze. They transcend their singularities and become phenomenal events as surely as location is superceded by experience.

So why Huntly? Why not. It could equally well have begun in Clydeside. And in fact, if the argument put forward thus far holds any water, then Huntly's truth is both as valid as, and only

valid in relation to Clydeside. And Clydeside's to Pitlochry, and all three to each other, and Kirkwall, Manchester, Oslo etc. Paradoxically, by focussing on the *town* that is Huntly its location becomes less important than that which it reveals about others. By constant examination of a singular reality we are allowed access to a universal. There is a manifest internationalism at work in DA's practice in terms of both artist selection and context but it is its application at a singular local level which is transformative. It would be interesting to see what would result if a single project were to be conducted in a single time-frame across multiple locations – Time then being the venue.

By being both non-specific in its details yet collective in its use, the phrase *The Town is the Venue* allows each project to transcend itself and touch constellations that it might not otherwise easily reach. By repeatedly conducting its practice in a single location the universality of its subjects becomes more obvious. It is in fact a meta-practice whose outcomes are as exploratory and unfinished as those of the artists it works with.

But its greatest strength perhaps, is that it takes the Space out of the term 'site-specific' and converts it into Time. Whilst acknowledging our material expressions it recognises that our truth lies more in our deeds and beliefs than the clothes that we wear or the architecture we inhabit. If there is a value in the obsessive self-reflection of our times then it perhaps lies in a Proustian hope that we might realise its significance before it is lost. The value of DA's methodology is that in wedding itself to our lives as they are lived, it is both 'of the moment' and enduring.

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