

FOR
CULTURE

CULTURE: WHAT NEXT?

SUMMARY REPORT

SUNDAY 10TH MAY 2015
SCOTTISH STORYTELLING CENTRE

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With Thanks to Roanne Dods for notes & contributions and Andy Summers for editing & review

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INTRODUCTION

Culture: What Next? was an opportunity to come together to reflect critically on past trajectories and to identify and discuss what might happen next ‘for culture’ in Scotland.

The event took place in the immediate aftermath of the UK General election (2015) and was in part a response to this historical moment. One participant noted that there was a strong sense of ‘picking up threads that had been left dangling post-referendum’ (2014) and many – encouragingly – shared a sense of optimism for the future.

Hosted by Mairi McFadyen and Roanne Dods, the event took place as part of TradFest Edinburgh, thanks to the generosity of the Scottish Storytelling Centre. The event was sponsored by TRACS (Traditional Arts & Culture Scotland) and co-curated with former organisers from the non-party campaign group National Collective, under the banner For Culture.

The day made use of an adapted World Café process. World café is about creating space for dialogue and conversations that matter that can lead to action. This design is slightly different from an ‘Open Space’ format in that the overarching questions are set from the start (with the full expectation that participants will question the questions). The aim of the day was not a conventional “where are we trying to get to, and how will we get there?” process, but rather – turning this on logic its head – about collaborating together to open up the conversation and find the right questions to ask, inspired by artists’ provocations, reflections, observations and inspirations.

This event was organised by a small group of dedicated and unpaid individuals responding to a felt need to open up a space for dialogue; it was not intended or conceived of as any definitive conversation. The organisers, facilitators, speakers and volunteers all contributed their time freely and in good spirit. The event was intended as a first of many; a humble contribution to a much wider national conversation.

With thanks to all contributors, hosts and volunteers and to Daniel Abercrombie and the staff at the Scottish Storytelling Centre, Edinburgh.

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CULTURE?

We are collectively aware of the inherent problems with using the term 'culture'. No-one was making any claims to a definition of what culture (or 'Scottish culture,' for that matter) is or is not, nor who it belongs to. The word 'culture' is found in countless academic disciplines, organisational pronouncements, policy, commercial venues, media and day-to-day conversations. We live in a technologically-enabled globally-connected world where many different sources – images, artefacts, expressions, experiences, relationships – shape us and are shaped by us in turn. Most of us mix and match these sources in fluid and dynamic ways, giving form and meaning to the way we think about the world. In this sense 'culture' is manifested at many different layers of depth and meaning.

By way of introduction to the day, we were invited to reclaim this word 'culture' for ourselves as individuals – to re-define it with our own values, our own practice and our own humanity. Roanne Dods set the scene with a quote from Peter Senge:

'The changes that we will be called upon to participate in the future will be both deeply personal and inherently systemic.'¹

In the arts world we often work with the deeply personal and increasingly with the inherently systemic. Embracing the paradox and ambiguity of this seeming polarity is hugely important at this cultural moment.

Roanne also encouraged us to approach the day in the spirit of 'getting lost,' with a quote from Rebecca Solnitt:

'The things we want are transformative, and we don't know or only think we know what is on the other side of that transformation. Love, wisdom, grace, inspiration — how do you go about finding these things that are in some ways about extending the boundaries of the self into unknown territory, about becoming someone else?'²

Roanne suggests that 'there are ways of doing things in the creative and cultural spheres with beauty, truth, humanity and love - defined for the 21st century - so that we are as much leading culture as we are mirroring it, which is often what we are expected to do.'

¹ *Awakening Faith in an Alternative Future - A Consideration of Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future* (2004) Peter M. Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers. *The SoL Journal on Knowledge, Learning and Change*, 5 (7)

² *A Field Guide To Getting Lost* (2005) Rebecca Solnitt. Penguin Publishing Group

PRIORITIES EMERGING FROM THE DAY

The big questions emerging from the day's conversations clustered around themes of participation, democracy, structure and process, economy, cooperation, collaboration, interconnectedness, engagement, localism/internationalism, inclusivity and diversity.

Inevitably, these issues are so vast and wide ranging that it is difficult to refine the conversations immediately, but there is a hope that there will be a collective will to instigate a commitment to processes, further discussion and action around certain issues and priority areas, outlined below:

- OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH EUROPE
- SCOTLAND'S PLACE IN THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY OF NATIONS AND CULTURES (UNESCO)
- BROADCASTING
- TALKING OUTSIDE THE 'ECHO CHAMBER' – LINKS WITH HEALTH, EDUCATION, ECONOMICS, HERITAGE
- CREATING A MANIFESTO FOR CULTURAL ACTIVISM
- CREATING PLATFORMS TO ENHANCE INDIVIDUAL VOICES THROUGH COLLECTIVE ACTION
- RE-FRAMING THE VALUE OF ART IN PUBLIC POLICY AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE
- DEVELOPING NEW LANGUAGE/VOCABULARY FOR CULTURE AND POLITICS

SUMMARY OF CONVERSATIONS

Below is a summary of the day's conversations. It is grouped into the following themes:

- 1. REFLECTIONS*
- 2. CONVERSATIONS*
- 3. PERCEPTIONS*
- 4. NEW WAYS OF WORKING & ORGANISING*
- 5. NEW NARRATIVES*
- 6. DIRECTION OF TRAVEL*

A constellation of inspirations and negotiations is at play here: from the personal to the systemic, from the individual to the collective and from the grassroots to the institutions. There are also different time frames at play - a recognition of the need to act on the productive and creative opportunities open to us in the present, as well as a need for a longer-term strategic vision - on several levels - for the future.

1. REFLECTIONS

Three main areas for reflection emerged. Firstly, we need to ask: what is culture? What is it we are talking about? What is to 'make culture' and what is it to 'make art'? We need to think more about the importance of the act. Culture should perhaps be seen as a process rather than a product.

The second reflection, in a Scottish context, is the recognition that the political and constitutional process is not currently led by artists (even if, for many, the cultural side remains implicit). That is to say that it is possible to argue that politics has now 'caught up' with culture; the ideas of the earlier cultural vanguard in Scotland are now incorporated in state institutions and the establishment, which, for many, removes the comfortable distance between art and politics. The idea or possibility that culture is no longer leading politics was recognised as disorienting and uncomfortable for some, yet full of interesting potential. Perhaps artists have a different/new role to play in this context?

The third area for reflection is about opening up something new. There is a sense in which there is now a level of community engagement and democratic participation that wasn't there before the referendum. Is there a way, through cultural activism - with artists and through art - that we can keep up this momentum and, at the same time, engage with younger generations to normalise this level of political engagement? One way to do this is to continue to create and facilitate small-scale community events that blend art and politics, to bring people together in conviviality – perhaps in the spirit of National Collective's 'Yestival'.

2. CONVERSATIONS

Together we identified two specific contexts where those of us in the arts and cultural community could/should be 'involved in the conversation.' This process begins with a recognition of the fact that the public/societal aspects of cultural development will not be shaped by the arts community alone but by engaging with wider society (and not just political and policy constructs). There is a feeling that we need to raise aspirations in a way that those who are not part of the 'arts scene' can engage.

CONTEXT 1: SCOTLAND AND ITS PLACE IN THE WORLD

We can lead the way in exploring - with artists and through art - a definition of 'the Scotland we are now.' This is a continuing process that builds on the work done by the arts community during the UK referendum campaign in terms of articulating, reflecting, critiquing and questioning (as well as building confidence).

The immediate focus of the European referendum might be an opportunity to explore - with artists and through art - Scotland's relationship to Europe.

There is also conversation to be had about international recognition, statements of value and the expression of baseline principles for Scotland's place in the international community of nations and cultures. Despite the fact that Scotland is not an independent state, when it comes to UNESCO, we should act 'as if' we are. We might start a conversation surrounding the 'Cultural Affirmation' put forward by TRACS (Traditional Arts & Culture Scotland).

CONTEXT 2: BROADCASTING & MEDIA

Another very important conversation is one about broadcasting and media. It is clear that this is going to be a 'key battleground' in the coming years. Where do we need to be in the conversation, and what is our role?

Other identified areas where culture could contribute to a wider conversation include: Health, Education (Curriculum for Excellence & lifelong learning), Economics and Heritage.

3. PERCEPTIONS

In the widest sense, we need to be thinking about the language and vocabulary we use to describe and talk about what we do and the perceptions – both positive and negative – that this engenders.

'Culture' and 'the arts' are often perceived of as elite, exclusionary or centralised, 'not for the likes of us.' Many people take part in cultural activities on a daily basis – playing music, going to dances etc. – but wouldn't necessarily think of their actions as 'participating in culture.' How do we engage with different parts of society and reclaim the idea that taking part in culture is just a part of life?

We discussed the need to be aware of the potential problematic tension between intrinsic and extrinsic or instrumental values. As part of neo-liberalist ideology, 'value' is measured in terms of how it contributes to economic growth. Through Creative Scotland, the Scottish Government has sought to implement a growth paradigm of development centred on the creative industries, introducing an entrepreneurial language and ideology. The phrase 'cultural ecology' is appropriated in this context to describe the interconnected and interdependent 'creative economy': a mix of diverse grassroots, high-art, experimental, individual artists and subsidised arts venues and companies. This is not to say that instrumental values are not important, nor about setting intrinsic and extrinsic value systems in opposition to one another, but rather about reframing the value assigned to arts and culture in public policy and in the lives of the public.

Culture should not be seen as trivial, a luxury or decorative frill that is nice but not necessary – first to get cut in times of austerity – but rather seen and understood as absolutely central to a sustainable civil society.

Perceptions about recognition and legitimacy come into play here too. There is sometimes a vexed relationship between the categories of 'amateur' and 'professional,' and, as a consequence, a perceived anxiety – sometimes resentment – that comes both from the grassroots and prestige organisations.

There is a general feeling among community artists that funded projects are generally perceived of as having more value than grassroots shoestring projects. The 'informal' community or voluntary arts are a vitally important part of our cultural ecology, such as community choirs or knitting groups etc. (these two groups spring to mind having made wonderful contributions to the referendum campaign).

Community arts and professional arts should work together as an ecology. As an example, in the context of sports, no-one would think that taking part in 'amateur' sports was taking away from the value of 'professional' players; rather that the former cultivates participation and interest in the latter.

4. NEW WAYS OF WORKING & ORGANISING

There was a shared sense that old ways of working and organising are no longer necessarily fit-for-purpose in today's interconnected, increasingly complex and uncertain global environment. This new context demands of us to finding new ways of working and communicating through networks and making use of new technologies. Again, this is not about setting up an opposition, but rather that acknowledging that we need to make space and be open to new groups, organisations, collectives and ways of working together.

There was a feeling that we should focus on collective action where possible to enhance both individual and collective voices. In order to do this, we need to create platforms and collectives (and not just artists' collectives) for people to come together. How do we balance individual creative vision with the desire and duty to speak on behalf of a community?

For those of us involved in such collectives or engaged in co-ordinating and facilitating arts activism in a wider sense, we need to ask, 'what is it that we agree on?' If this is not a political goal, then what is it? What are our shared values? What is most important?

Finding new ways of organising to work collectively and collaboratively is vital. There is often a collective proclivity for self-defeat in progressive movements (it is seldom possible to perfectly embody all of our values collectively and simultaneously).

Much is made in today's progressive movements of 'leaderless organising,' such as the type of mass demonstration that arises through social media networking. However, to express something more complex or more propositional than voting one way or another requires the concerted, effective work of an organisation, and this needs particular types of leadership; it needs people who can articulate resonant aims, inspire and galvanise action.

We discussed the feminisation of political and cultural structures: shared leadership, matrices rather than hierarchies and an emphasis on democratic process and consensus decision-making. Whatever mode of organising a group chooses, there must be structures in place to protect the interests of the group – whether this be a board, steering committee, council or advisory group – to provide a filter that can catch those who seek leadership for self-serving or destructive reasons. Without such a filter, it is very difficult to sustain democratic organisation and action.

We should encourage cultural activism at the grassroots level, but also within institutions. There is perhaps a need to assist with creating a 'Manual of Effective Activism' for organisations and

institutions. Following on from the desire for collective action where possible to enhance both individual and collective voices, we need to help people who run organisations – who are individuals themselves – to be activists as far as possible (within the constraints of these organisations).

It is incumbent upon us as a community not to let points of disputes mutate into defensiveness or shut down debate. We must strive to remain in dialogue, and not to become paralysed by the fact that there is no single vision. How do we create spaces for this dialogue to bring people back into the conversations who might have felt excluded during the referendum campaign? Thinking about how things are framed, we need courage to being more forthright and to not be afraid of approaching difficult topics.

Collectively, we can consciously make use of art to create dialogue, invite social participation, build bridges across difference, to communicate across social barriers and help foster a culture where it is possible to hold opposing views even in a time of highly polarised opinion. On an individual level, we should strive to be as open as possible for people to come towards us as well as having the confidence to put forward our views for debate.

5. NEW NARRATIVES

We need new narratives and new stories that help give form and shape our worldviews. One way to do this is to develop metaphors, images and vocabularies that open up new ways of seeing and the world.

One group suggested thinking in terms of Old Structure, Current Structure and New Structure.

Based on a conviction that many people seem to be trapped in a model of reality which is inadequate, the International Futures Forum³ have come up with a complex metaphor based on recent thinking about complex systems, both in nature and society. For example, societies, organisations and people are not predictable machines; we are qualitative rather than quantitative entities. This entails a shift from a 'science of quantities' to a 'science of qualities.' A science of quantities is data-driven, control-driven and prediction-driven; a science of qualities means participation, exploration, imagination. In terms of psychology and emotions, particularly as they operate in organisations, these two sciences are matched by two value-driven loops: the 'Fear Loop' (science of quantities): alienation, abstraction, homogenisation and control, leading to disappointment and withdrawal; the 'Love Loop' (science of qualities): diversity, belonging, intrinsic value, leading to hope and play. It is important to realise that a science of qualities doesn't deny the need for a science of quantities; it is more to say that the science of quantities is insufficient on its own. Where a generation of new data has reached a limit in terms of its offering access to new action or new ways of being effective, some other mode of understanding is needed.

"Hiding in plain sight is a much larger story" - Arlene Goldbard⁴

Diminished expectations can inhabit a much larger life. One group talked about overcoming this habit of powerlessness and despair that many share. How do we overcome this? How do we solve it? Whose responsibility is it? The first step is perhaps to acknowledge and become aware of it. We have all glimpsed first-hand the power of art to move and inspire. Facing loss and finding resilience, we need to create space for a larger narrative that offers room to move – a narrative that encompasses beauty, meaning, reflection, creativity full of inspiration and possibility.

Even ordinary actions and experiences can take on completely different meanings, depending on how we name them, how we frame them, how we shape the story. There is a shared sense that the present political moment offers us a collective opportunity. Necessity and creativity can collaborate. The

³ The International Futures Forum (IFF) <http://www.internationalfuturesforum.com>

⁴ The Culture of Possibility: Art, Artists & The Future (2013) Waterlight Press

current UK political climate, with public cuts as part of an austerity-driven agenda, necessitates a redefinition of work and understanding the value of investing in creative and social capacity.

Transcending party-political or constitutional persuasions, is the fundamental overarching and connecting aim here about reframing the value assigned to arts and culture in public policy and in the lives of the public, reasserting their place as absolutely central to a sustainable civil society?

Reflecting on this political and cultural moment, there are perhaps two future narratives: one is that of despair and powerlessness that forecloses; and one that sees this moment as a productive opportunity, opening to new ways of thinking and doing across and through art forms and our practice.

6. *DIRECTION OF TRAVEL*

This new direction of travel was summarised with the following keywords:

UNTAPPED

This is a moment of **opportunity** for everyone: individuals, organisations and collective society

OUTWARD

The direction of travel is **outward-looking**; internationalism is central - embracing our own cultural diversity

LIFE-LONG

Creativity and the quest for critical discovery is a life-long process and we want everyone to be on that journey, when and how they wish

CONVERSATION & ACTION

The **action** needed cannot come from the arts community alone; it must involve wider society, including politicians and policy makers. The question is not 'what can we do to influence others,' but rather, 'what can we do to invite others into a wider process?'

QUESTIONS EMERGING

AT THIS HISTORICAL MOMENT, WHAT ARE THE BIG QUESTIONS 'FOR CULTURE'?

WHAT CHALLENGES DO WE FACE?

- How do we build on the work/legacy of the indyref and past trajectory leading up to that moment?
- How do we build on the head of steam built by the arts community to rebalance power through culture?
- What processes can we use to develop our thinking and action?
- What are our shared narratives?
- The difficulty of creating consensus - how do we move forward with no single shared vision, but many?
- How do we co-habit with ideas other than our own?
- Internationalism: how do we engage with Europe and beyond, through art and art practice?
- What role will artists play in upcoming referendum of Europe?
- How do we as a community challenge Westminster policy?
- How do we address/shift/change/influence the economic system/context that affects culture and politics?
- Broadcasting is going to be a key battleground in future years. What role could/should the arts community need to be part of that play in this?
- What do we define as the 'State'? What do we expect from the State?
- Do we need new structures? How can artists assert and create new structures?
- How do we overcome the issue of self-marginalisation because of relationship to structures?
- How do we reframe the value assigned to the arts and culture - in public policy and in the lives of the public?

- Is this a crisis time for the arts in general? Should we collectively demand that arts budgets are ring-fenced?
- What is the role of arts and artists in education? Is our education system working? Do we have teachers who understand the centrality and importance of arts and culture?
- What is the role of the artist in communities?
- How do you balance individual creative vision with the desire and duty to speak on behalf of a community?
- The 'arts' are still seen as 'elitist.' How do we overcome this real/perceived elitism?
- Political change is not driven by the elite. How can we ensure participation from everyone?
- How can we democratise access and participation in the arts?
- How do we ensure that the bottom up grassroots and top down policy makers talk to each other?
- How do we, as artists and cultural workers, engage with everyone who is not ourselves/us?
- How do we reach out to/connect with/build solidarity with other communities or organisations, e.g. STUC, Church and other larger institutions?
- Is there a way, through cultural activism – with artists and through art – that we can engage with younger generations and make this level of political participation and engagement a normality?
- What is the best way to create spaces/platforms for the sharing of knowledge and experience?
- What can we do as individuals and as a wider collective movement?
- How do we overcome this habit of powerlessness and despair?
- How do we balance inspiration and sustenance with a strategy for what happens next?

COLLECTIVE FEEDBACK

The following thoughts were captured via post-it notes from participants:

WHAT VALUES DO YOU THINK ARE IMPORTANT?

- Creativity
- Resilience
- Self-determination
- Connectedness
- Autonomy
- Authenticity
- Listening
- Dialogue
- Humility
- Honesty
- Empathy
- Mutual support
- Importance of ambiguity
- Embracing diversity
- Embracing difference
- Avoiding defensive behaviour
- Being as open as possible for people to come towards you

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO COMMIT TO PERSONALLY?

- Write and share
- Engaging with others with honesty and empathy
- Direct action
- There is always plenty to be optimistic about even when things seem the worst
- To engage with everyone and not write anyone off as a 'lost cause'
- Telling the truth when I can
- Shake things up a bit
- Revolution!
- Keep telling stories
- Creating spaces for discussion about our future
- Keep involved, taking risks and not becoming disheartened
- Reading the Reddit thread about why people voted Tory
- Link people together more and more

- To be inclusive re culture with people I fundamentally disagree with
- More walking and talking
- Participating/writing/comms/organising
- Being open to artforms I normally ignore
- Abandoning the notion of the *avant garde* cultural elite
- Making more meaningful stuff
- Learning Scots poems by heart
- Being more open minded, make more, share more stories and ideas
- Helping organise a community lunch with my neighbours

WHAT WILL YOU TAKE AWAY FROM TODAY?

- What I take forward is a hopeful thought that culture is an area very much alive and active, taking ownership of its future – happy to dedicate my time to future events
- Possibility
- Inspiration
- A sense of solidarity and support
- Energy, ideas and good memories plus a whole load of questions
- Doubt, questions and uncertainty are all okay
- Interesting inspiring session but need for collective vision/goal/destination post indyref
- Reinforced sense of purpose and community
- 1000 scribbled notes and great ideas
- Janice Galloway's contribution
- We need some form of collective working arrangement
- Myriad possibilities
- Keep us informed
- Engage more in grassroots cultural projects
- Political cultural links are one way forward
- A very full brain
- A need for connection
- Humility
- Draw pictures/make music
- How important it is to hear viewpoints that connect you to things you didn't know you thought
- Own up to your own self: inconvenient historical truths and all
- That we are only just beginning and maybe always will be

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO DO COLLECTIVELY?

- Find ways for inclusive dialogue including differing opinions, languages, etc
- More visible mixing of arts re broad political discussion in my local community

- Platforms for sharing art
- Platforms for building inclusive creative communities
- Help make the arts visible and values
- Unity and solidarity between individuals
- Research and collaborate to decide how we should proceed
- Get action plan going
- Encourage
- Not just talking among ourselves (while remaining authentic)
- Turn the discussion into action
- Make more (together!)
- Meet with politicians, policy makers, purse-string holders
- Communicating via our art forms rather than discussion
- Engage across Scotland
- Each carry on with our own individual journeys – creative and personal – but keep sense of connectedness
- Explore cultural value and community
- Join committees and working groups
- LISTEN
- There is a need to articulate values, strategy and vision
- Bring voices/messages together in one strong form