

The Asking, Taking and Giving of Artist-Led-Activity

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Embassy Gallery asked me if I would write something about artist-led-activity to go in this year's Annuale brochure. I felt apprehensive about the task at first because I am aware that it is a subject on which there is plenty of interesting writing. However, I am hoping that drawing on my personal experiences will shed some light on the pragmatics and intricacies that sometimes get overlooked in more general discussions.

I've been involved with self-organised artistic activity in various ways since graduating from art school in 2007, but most recently I joined Rhubaba Gallery and Studios' voluntary committee last June. I will refer to Rhubaba quite often throughout this text, as it is my most active frame of reference and absorbs me for a good portion of each week.

While Rhubaba has been around since 2009, when it was started by a group of ECA graduates, it is only last year that it received annual programme funding from Creative Scotland, enabling twelve months of exhibitions, workshops, dinner events, screenings and residencies. Having joined part way through that period, I had the pleasure of being involved with the projects, without having had to apply for the money to fund them. The process of acquiring money remained relatively distant.

Some of the great things about being part of an artist-led organisation have included: the experience of working with a group of people to think about what we want individually and collectively and how to meet those needs using what we have; understanding that other people are involved in art for different reasons, and seeing their thinking and personalities emerge through their choices and preferences; feeling that our various abilities can come together to make something bigger than we are able to achieve individually; witnessing amazing acts of good will and enthusiasm.

Being part of Rhubaba, both as a committee member and a studio holder, has removed any desire to go back to university (an increasingly expensive option), because I feel like I can get an education here with a curriculum shaped by us. Some of the things I have learnt have included: how to re-floor a floor, when the original floor is about as level as a non-level-thing; when to use a rawlplug; that lobsters don't have brains; how to reconcile a bank statement (which at first sounded like some mediation process employed when the payments have been fighting one another); how to ask for help; how to give my time; that, at times, compromises need to be made.

Sometimes after a committee meeting, I have a kind of exposed, embarrassed feeling, a sensation of being slightly out of control, which has something to do with the negotiation of where I end and everyone else begins, and losing the clarity of that line a little.

As a backdrop to all of this, I presumed that the money for next year's programme would just roll on in, an assumption that was lazily lolling around in the back of my mind, like a golden retriever basking in the afternoon sun.

The sleeping dog was awoken with a bucket of cold water.

We found out that getting the money wouldn't be quite as straightforward as we originally thought, due to the reorganisation of funding streams. Not receiving the money made visible the act of applying, and brought with it a number of conflicting thoughts and feelings.

The most surprising was one of relief, which I think stemmed from a more general worry I have that, as a committee, and perhaps more importantly as a group of friends, we spend a huge amount of time working together producing events and exhibitions, without taking enough care for our own (often financially precarious) lives. Most of us live on unstable incomes, zero-hour contracts and bits of part time work. I often wonder what would happen if we spent the time that we currently invest in working together at Rhubaba, to instead set up a small business, a café, a furniture makers or a production company that might provide financial gain, as well as the other benefits of working together as a group. I don't know if these options would be any more or less rewarding, feel any more or less problematic or be any more or less work and I am not suggesting that a funding gap will necessarily stimulate any of these activities, but nevertheless there is a feeling of space in this period of uncertainty.

The term SELF-SUFFICIENCY suddenly feels very attractive, but I am aware that with it come certain assumptions. The word conjures up an image of an all-powerful figure, fending for himself, resourceful, taking it on the nose, hunting wild animals and skinning them with bare hands. It's a seductive picture, but falls apart on closer inspection. We are never entirely independent, whether it's nature's tasty delights we are after, or alternative forms of income or resources. (The floor that we built in Rhubaba's project space was made possible due to the donation of plywood from ECA, after the deinstall of their Krijn de Koning exhibition.) Even the idea that being able to actively choose one's own direction, rather than being forced by the agenda of a giving hand, leads us back to dodgy territory: an important part of starting a business is assessing the opportunities in the market. So what are the differences between earning money and being supported, in terms of feelings of empowerment?

A friend told me recently that he never gives money to people who ask for change in the street, that he would rather they just took it, just mugged him, because that way he would have more respect for them. I think his dislike of asking is about having to prove you are worthy, to be in competition with others, to deliver your elevator pitch. My dad says he gives whatever money he has in his pocket to whoever asks, trying to ignore his own inner reasoning of why he should give to one person over another, an attempt at making his giving unconditional, leaving it down to chance.

As soon as I realised I was going to have to ask for money to work with artists over the coming year, really put some effort into the asking by seeking out sources, read funding guidelines, demonstrating audience outreach, I felt a bit sick with myself. By applying for arts funding, I have to explain why an artist is better than everyone else, which is what I don't believe.

I do not believe artists should be granted the resources to enable time for creative activities, I believe that everyone should, whatever form that creativity might take. A system such as Basic Income, where everyone's basic needs are met unconditionally, is an example of how this could work, and would massively shift people's relationship to any voluntary activity, due to the time it would afford. Taking this line of thinking to the extreme, I wonder whether the fight for arts funding is the right fight, as it ensures we are still in competition with one another, still needing to justify what is produced according to certain agendas and still promoting the image of the Important Artist.

Speaking more pragmatically within the system we have, I guess it's a case of weighing up whether the work and promises required to get the money, align with one's own aims and are proportional to what it allows for. Certainly, what the programme funding enabled for Rhubaba last year was hugely rewarding. So what are the concerns?

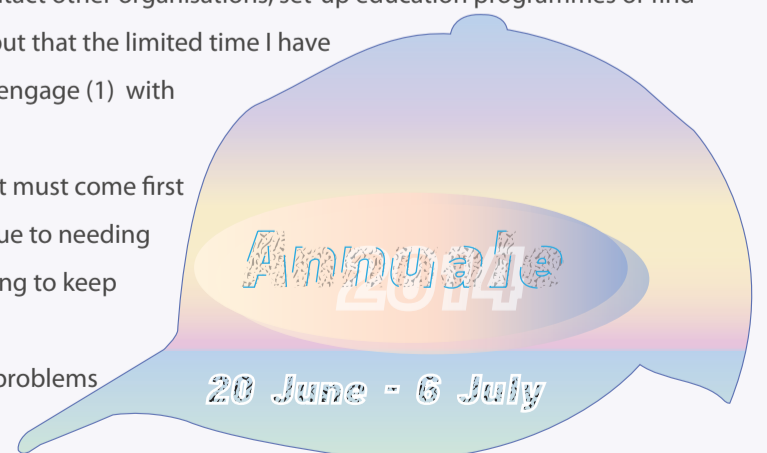
One worry I have is to do with the effect of using certain buzz words surrounding a project; the more I frame an activity as able to 'foster new relationships', 'facilitate links' and have 'critical engagement' in an abstract way, the more those phrases have the potential to become emptied out and for my involvement to be replaced by the remaining shells. A knock on effect being that the optimistic phrases end up masking the reality, because of not wanting to mention the difficulties, failures and frustrations due to a concern about the organisation's reputation (again an effect of competition).

But perhaps more important than the effect of language, there is also the question of having a limited amount of time. Because of the pressures of the voluntary work, in addition to making money to pay for food and rent, remembering to get some exercise sometimes and "when the hell am I going to do my washing so I have enough pairs of pants to get me to the end of the week?" mean that my engagement (1) with projects is sometimes fairly brief. Sometimes there is a less than ideal amount of dialogue that happens with artists and that reaching broader audiences becomes equivalent to having more likes on Facebook, because there just hasn't been the time or energy to contact other organisations, set-up education programmes or find ways of connecting with local communities. So the fear is not that it won't always be perfect, meaningful and productive, but that the limited time I have to give to Rhubaba is at risk of being taken over by these bureaucratic procedures, leaving me with little time or energy to engage (1) with the projects themselves.

I want to hold back the bureaucracy, at least long enough to allow space for curiosity and interest. These are the things that must come first and I write that as a reminder to myself, because for the last few weeks I haven't been going to Rhubaba Choir rehearsals due to needing more time for other things, a clear example of the way I am not always able to engage(1) in the community that I am working to keep going, because of the upkeep involved.

I realise my diary and its intricacies might not be top of your interest list, and obviously some reorganising might fix these problems (please write in with suggestions), but my point is that the organisational side of artist-led-activity must not replace our

engagement (1) with the content of the activities themselves, because then where would we be? We would be working our voluntary butts off to create something that we have no real investment in and therefore would probably end up being a bit shit, no matter how much money goes into it.



¹ For me engagement is to be invested in a process, allowing it to challenge my ideas and therefore change my thinking about the world in some way, following which I am able to question it, to find out where its assumptions are, and back and forth and so on. This requires spending time with the process.