



IETM REPORT

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# CULTURAL DEMOCRACY IN PRACTICE

Report from the IETM Hull Plenary Meeting, 28 – 31 March 2019

by Vassilka Shishkova



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# Cultural democracy in practice

## Opening notes

Matt Fenton, the Artistic Director at [Contact Theatre](#), introduced the session as the practical continuation of the [Nothing about us without us](#) session at IETM Hull 2019, which brought up some tensions around the lack of representation, choice of narratives, capitalism and power structures. The session [Cultural democracy in practice](#), which happened the same day in the afternoon, focused on some practical responses to inequalities and exclusion.

Matt proposed some possible takes on what cultural democracy might be and how we could implement it across our organisations. Since the 1960s, cultural democracy has been contraposed to what was understood as 'official culture' – a concept, which could be perceived as elitist and exclusive. The cultural democracy notion stemmed from the belief that many cultural traditions coexist and none should dominate over the others as the "official" or "high" culture. Another premise of cultural democracy is that everyone should be free to participate in cultural life, not just by consuming someone else's art, but by creating it and seeing their culture celebrated. This means there should be space and resources for creation, open and available to everyone.

Finally, how can our cultural spaces better embody democratic processes? How do they welcome diversity? How inclusive are our staff and boards of trustees? How democratic are our processes of decision-making, governing, programming – or is it an impossible dream to dismantle power structures across our organisations?

## Empower young voices

Miray Sidhom presented the work of [Contact Theatre](#), a Manchester-based company, which for the last twenty years has been making performances "with young

### Moderator:

Matt Fenton, Artistic Director at Contact Theatre, Manchester (UK)

### Speakers:

Amy Letman, Creative Director at Transform Festival, Leeds (UK)

Nassy Konan, Producing Coordinator at Battersea Arts Centre, London (UK)

Matteo Lanfranchi, Artistic Director at Effetto Larsen, Milan (Italy)

Kate O'Donnell, Artistic Director at Trans Creative, Manchester (UK)

Elmi Ali, Writer, Director, Facilitator, collaborating with Contact Theatre, Manchester (UK)

Miray Sidhom, Artist at Contact Theatre, Manchester (UK)

people and for young people". Contact Theatre went one step further than most of the art organisations and opened its management structures to young people. There are young people on the board of trustees of the theatre. A panel of young people (15-25 years old) interviews and approves all staff members; young people work on the core programming of the theatre. The theatre programme is not aimed at "attracting younger audiences". It gives space for young voices to speak for themselves: to write the shows, to produce them, and to curate public programmes. This creative empowerment of young people – along with the administrative power they exercise in the institution – is far more inclusive, and definitely, more democratic than simply inviting them as an audience. That is how young Miray got herself working on challenging projects like "There is a Light", based on the stories of teenagers and young people with cancer; or on the "[She bangs the drum](#)" production, celebrating 100 years since establishing full voting rights for men and partial voting rights for women in the UK.

## Distribute ownership

Amy Letman, Creative Director at Transform Festival, Leeds (UK) spoke about how could one distribute the ownership and the power within an organisation that stemmed from a single individual's idea. [Transform Festival](#) is a small independent company which commissions work to professional artists from around the world and brings them to show their projects in various sites and locations in Leeds. For the past three years, they have been working with non-professional artists on various co-creative projects.

There have been conversations within the organisation how to make the works presented last longer than the festival's duration, how to pass the working ethos from one festival team to the next one and how to make Transform more democratic, by distributing the ownership of the organisation to a wider range of people.

[Future Radicals](#), the company's new project, has become a platform to test new ideas around empowering others to step into

power. Having done creative projects with young people before, Amy has noticed that typically mentor artists, even being brilliant professionals, tend to guide young people in their work, predefining what and how they should create. Knowing that young people didn't feel represented in such a way of work, Amy and the Transform team wanted to challenge this model. Future Radicals gathered 25 young people aged 16-25 years old with professional artists, but this time, with a lot more ownership on the process for the young. Of course, there have been challenges. A lot of responsibility was given to the young people: budgeting, designing, marketing, logistics, and so on, but Transform has given them a safe space for their endeavours.

The project has risen many questions for Transform: do they need a more stable structure to run projects like Future Radicals? Do they need a stronger connection with a physical space, when they are a city festival? Do people actually want to have agency within Transform? How could a founder-led festival like this be more democratic in its decision-making?

Amy believes that being flexible, adaptive to each specific project is the key to instil cultural democracy in practice.

### Give agency

The [Agency programme](#) at [Battersea Arts Centre](#) (BAC), London, and Contact Theatre in Manchester is designed to support young people (14-25 years old) from social housing or life changing circumstances to embody their entrepreneurial projects in life by giving them resources, training, mentoring, shared facilities over a considerable period of time. The programme was initially developed by [Marcus Faustini](#) from Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. It is adopted at BAC and Contact and has been implemented across the UK, including Belfast, Manchester, and Cardiff.

Nassy Konan, producing coordinator at BAC, shared some inspiring examples of young people from under-served communities developing their ideas into sustainable businesses and emphasised that, albeit there is no demand for the projects to result in an artwork (they are not

expected to be theatrical performances, for instance), the outcomes are usually artistic in a way. With the support of The Agency programme, [Daisy](#), a young performer and mother aged 19, developed a fashion campaign that holds a clothing line for babies and toddlers, as well as skill sharing [events](#) for young mothers to promote togetherness and prevent isolation in the local community.

Osmond Gordon Vernon (19 years old), who had started the agency programme when he was 14 years old, created a new project called [Life Is What U Make It](#) - a new educational board game where young people play out real-life decisions around gangs, peer pressure and other important issues. Osmond's project will work with young people to make their entrepreneurial ideas a reality.

Nassy explained that The Agency offers a continuous support to those who took part in the programme. Young people are welcome to come to the centre whenever they need to, for advice and mentoring or for using the premises and the office resources. They are also offered paid opportunities to become mentors and facilitators to the new young people who join the agency, so the cycle of support continues to grow and they become leaders in their communities.

Matt, representing Contact Theatre, a [founding partner](#) in The Agency programme, pointed out that it is not easy to explain to funding bodies that an art organisation sometimes has to step away

from making art in order to achieve greater inclusion and empowerment of people, especially young people from deprived communities.

### Trigger conversations

Since 2012-13, everybody at Effetto Larsen, a Milan-based theatre company, realised that the traditional way of making art, i.e. artists being on stage in front of an audience sitting in the dark, is not working anymore, at least for them. They needed something different, a new way of communication with their audiences. They opened up their rehearsing spaces, so that the audiences are involved from the very beginning of the process.

Matteo Lanfranchi, Artistic Director at Effetto Larsen, shared the stories of two of their projects that have reached unexpected effects from involving communities.

The first project was [Mnemosyne](#) at the [Palace of Venaria](#) in Turin, North Italy. The palace is one of the most important museums in Italy, now a UNESCO World Heritage site - a museum with plenty of visitors. The people from the nearby town do not feel connected with the place. The museum institution did not seem much involved in the local community's life either, as it thought its target audience were tourists from around the world.

In 2016, Effetto Larsen were invited to bring Mnemosyne, their "site-sensitive project about emotional memories connected to



19-year-old Osmond Gordon Vernon created Life Is What U Make It - a new educational board game where young people play out real-life decisions. © 64millionartists

places” to the Palace of Venaria. They held a workshop, conducted interviews and in result, devised an [installation](#) at the palace, an emotional map of the place: the palace and the town. Effetto Larsen invited the audience to the palace and asked them to walk on the map, to [enter the territory](#), so to say, and describe what they see. This triggered a conversation between the town (the citizens) and the institution (the palace). Therefore, the project investigated social conflicts and enhanced the sense of belonging to a community or a territory.

Who would have thought that people are eager to enter an artistic project to discuss issues of death? Yet, this is the case with [After/Dopo](#). It is a participatory and site-specific project, relying on the audience to take part in different [activities](#). The Effetto Larsen team keep receiving messages from participants, saying that after taking part in the project, they spent more time thinking about their life and making important decisions – surely, an important conversation we all need in our lives. The next place to take part in After/Dopo is Gratz, Austria, in the end of July 2019.

Matteo explained these “side effects” of the company’s artistic projects: “Participatory art can be a powerful tool to create spaces and times for important topics and conversations. Art can be useful, art can give answers to the very old and unsettling doubt about what happens after we die.”

Matteo underlined that it is not only independent artists who are interested in engaging with the civic society. There are some theatre directors who are changing public institutions as to engage more with the communities. Milo Rau, the artistic director of the Municipality theatre of Ghent, NTGent, is determined to [redefine](#) the rules public theatres rely upon. The [NTGent Manifesto](#) summarises this vision of a theatre that is more democratic and socially open.

### *Sow the seeds and let go*

Kate O’Donnell, artistic director at Manchester-based [Trans Creative](#), has been a performer all her life, but it was just

two years ago when she began performing as a transgender artist. Her reasons to do so? “There are not enough places for trans people to perform. We are seen, but not heard. Now, we tell our own stories.”, Kate declared.

Sometimes, being a trans person running a trans company leads to expectations that you would present any work that is considered ‘trans’. It should not work this way, Kate argued. She would programme a show because it is exciting, not (just) because it is trans. So, when Trans Creative received some public funding through Arts Council England to promote diversity across North England, Kate had a challenging matter to address. On one hand, she wanted to present fabulous, exciting trans projects. On the other, she wanted to include as many people as possible, both as creators and audiences as it was a publicly funded project on inclusion. The solution? – A festival.

Starting from 2017, her purpose has been to bring trans art and trans people to the major art venues, in the centre of social attention. [Trans Vegas](#), the transgender festival of Trans Creative, brought trans people to tell their stories in prestigious venues across Manchester to wider audiences. [Young Trans Tour](#) was a major breakthrough, putting on stage young people with their own topics of concern. “Some of these young trans people have never been to the Manchester Art Gallery, yet they won over a large audience with their smart honesty.”

Trans Creative also initiated a transing up campaign which aimed at taking trans work into art venues and public institutions, like the [NHS](#) (National Health Service) or City Hall in London, to name a few. “It can sometimes be the first time that trans people have visibly connected with that building or space. Our work ranges from a complete takeover of a space, for example, our trans tour of the City Art Gallery, to encouraging and promoting trans awareness with staff in the workplace. For this, we consider things such as internal announcements and how the binary of ‘ladies and gentleman’ can

be, for non-binary people, affecting.”, Kate explained.

The figures, as stated in [Trans Creative’s report](#), say that the company has hosted 15 transgender panel events, visited 17 towns and cities, ‘transed up’ 11 venues in Manchester, and collaborated with 69 transgender artists. From that experience, Kate learned that the role of the creative director is to start the creative process and then, to let go, to let the people tell their stories with their own voices.

Kate has witnessed the positive outcomes of their work: improved approaches to the trans and non-binary communities within public environment, promotion of safety and wellbeing, ownership and claim to the spaces and encouragement to revisit the site with more confidence.

### *Invite subversiveness*

Elmi Ali, a writer who works with Contact Theatre, presented an experimental project commissioned by [Manchester International Festival](#) (MIF) and Contact as an example of cultural democracy in practice. For their collaboration with MIF, Contact Theatre have brought together a collective of five emerging local artists, the Contact Young Curators, which Elmi is part of.

MIF is a big bi-annual festival that gathers artists from different art forms and backgrounds to create dynamic, innovative and forward-thinking new work, which is presented at multiple venues across Manchester. MIF works closely with local communities, sharing ownership over the festival through its [My Festival](#) network. Within their collaboration with MIF, starting two years ago, the Contact Young Curators had the opportunity to watch most of the shows at the festival, had access to the festival staff, learned a lot about the ways MIF commissions works and organises events.

So, after a research process, Contact Young Curators team decided to focus on the Asian and East Asian community across Manchester - Indians, Koreans, Japanese, Chinese – and open space for their voices

to be heard. The exploration of the roots of East Asian migration to Manchester has brought the team to the beginning of the 19th century, and the grim and rough times of the Second cholera pandemic (a.k.a. the Asiatic cholera pandemic), that has reached Manchester in 1830s. Cholera spread rapidly from the docks to the overpopulated, poorly sanitised areas where the immigrants and the poor lived. Although it was believed that “bad air” caused the disease, it is the contaminated water that is the source of the bacteria that cause cholera. Thousands of people contracted the disease, more than half of them died. Those who avoided the disease, were the ones who drank beer instead of water. So, Contact Young Curators, together with the artists they chose to commission, decided to devise their own secret brewery to produce their own craft beer and to create a show, called A Drunk Pandemic, around sanitation issues, social structures and inequalities which dominated that period.

After a thorough selection, ChimPom, Tokio based artist collective was chosen to work on this experimental project. Why them? Firstly, they are a collective, which implies they embody plurality of voices; then, they come from East Asia, hence, would resonate with the East-Asian communities of Manchester; and most importantly, “they make great art”, Elmi explained.

One of the projects of ChimPom is called Don't Follow the Wind (2015 - ongoing), a long-term exhibition inside the inaccessible radioactive Fukushima exclusion zone which involves displaced local residents working along with twelve artists who create new work inside the zone. “We chose them, because we liked how subversive their art is, how they develop socially engaged projects with a sudden twist – they have blown up designer handbags with explosives, or installed a giant trash bag in front of a mall calling it The Gold Experience. We thought we would benefit of whatever intervention they would bring to the city”, said Elmi.

## Concluding notes on cultural democracy

Some participants in the session noted that giving more agency to the younger generation brings surprising and exciting results. Getting out of the way may prove to be the best way to empower young people, to give them space to create what is meaningful to them.

Judging from her experience, Kate confirmed that having more voices in the trans conversation meant having “less of her” curating the discourse. She works with transgender people of colour, with transgender people with disabilities, so many different cases and topics to talk about – it is impossible encompass creatively all that. “I need to let go and share, and let others to speak for themselves.” Kate addressed the participants with a call to take the chance and deliberately had over some of their projects to people who were excluded from the creative and production process before: “Give the most power to the ones that are least heard and you will be surprised by the exiting new outcomes.”

Speaking of democracy as a way to manage processes, a participant noted that unlike our political governments who are more or less prepared to change in every four years, many cultural managers do not have

any exit strategy and they tend to stay in power at their institutions for quite a long time. In response, Matt from Contact Theatre shared his understanding that every cultural manager and organisation have to develop a legacy programme and to include the whole team in the decision-making process. That would counteract the potentially undemocratic concentration of power.

The word “power”, the language around power, rose some concerns among the participants in the session. As a person whose organisation is looking to abolish power and hierarchy altogether, shared: “I am not afraid of the word ‘power’, but how it is abused.”

“Giving power” implies someone holding and giving the power according to their own concern – which is not quite democratic in the end. Let’s not speak about ‘inclusion’ or ‘power’; or about ‘giving power to those whose voices were not heard’ – because this language implies hierarchy and is condescending. Instead, let’s speak of equality, empowerment/empowering, and engagement, some participants suggested.

The term ‘cultural democracy’ was also put into question. Why would we need to separate democratic principles in culture from democracy in general?



Don't Follow the Wind is a long-term exhibition inside the inaccessible radioactive Fukushima exclusion zone.  
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