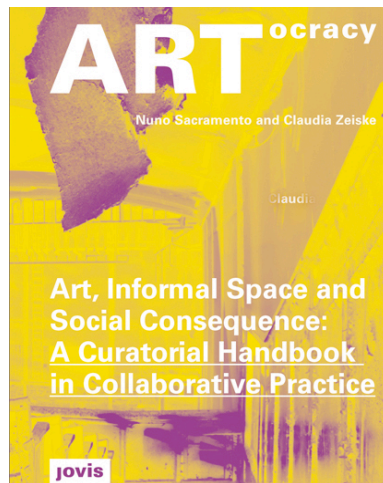


**Occupy Arts Administration**  
*Or*  
***How to “Shadow Curate” in Rural Scotland***



A book review by Gregory Sholette of *ARTocracy: Art, Informal Space, and Social Consequence: A Curatorial HandBook in Collaborative Practice*. Edited by Nuno Sacramento and Claudia Zeiske. Published by Jovis Verlag, GmBH, 2010.

Despite the remarkable half-decade long wave of creative resistance against all forms of business-as-usual from out of control capitalism to high culture starting in late 2010 with the suicide protest of Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi against abusive vending laws,\* rolling momentarily onwards into 2011 with widespread occupations of the Wisconsin State Capital, Zuccotti Park, Tahrir Square, and Madrid ‘s Puerto del Sol among other plazas and squares around the globe, then carried forwards by the atrium activism of Occupy Museums in 2012 and 2013 and more recently the one-two take-over and shut-down of Guggenheim Museum branches first in New York City and then in Venice to highlight migrant labor rights in Abu Dhabi where the Guggenheim is building a new museum, and not to forget the sensationally effective boycott of the last Sydney Biennial in Australia, there is nevertheless one disciplinary edifice not yet unoccupied, one citadel whose ramparts remain free from the partisans of the 99%.

Categorical assumptions and pedagogical orthodoxies dominate this growing field, and yet it is responsible for turning-out hundreds of largely self-effacing cultural operators who make possible the day-to-day operations of “serious” culture. Among other things they are also responsible for the public appreciation of art, regardless if it is framed as conventional, relational, experimental, or outright transgressive. Why then has something so profoundly elemental to the cultural life of society been spared an occupation, let alone a focused critique? Why is it that the very machinery reproducing the 1% art world has not been dismantled and re-imagined? Is this critical cultural space immune to serious theoretical attention? Perhaps the answers have to do with the world of the arts administrator –the force in question here- whose various roles appear so unassuming and so utterly ubiquitous that they are chronically overlooked, much like certain other service providers –street cleaners, curry deliverers, cargo handlers, even page-turners at a concert– who invisibly carry on unnoticed (and yet when these dead do awaken, what then?).

The real world of arts administrators is not especially pretty or endearing. Drearily tasked with reproducing the art world's professional mien the hidden army of cultural managers consists of "executive" directors working art spaces so miniscule that she or he must also answer the telephones and email, as well as carry out the rubbish. It is home to behind-the-scenes fundraisers and event planners putting their own art careers on hold in order to earn a living helping other artists exhibit their work. We should also list the armies of interns and volunteers drawn from surrounding communities and soulfully in search of deeper meaning, the installers and food handlers and guards, and of course the curators, no, not the stars of the global art scene seated first class to Venice or Miami, but rather those unheralded minions manacled to their cubicles in small towns and large, too busy to even glimpse an economy air seat because the next grant deadline, installation crisis, or technology meltdown looms around the corner. Yes, the subliminal troops of the art world keeping the local kunsthalle clean, the not-for-profit gallery groomed, the residency programs programmed, and the community art spaces bills paid more or less on-time, this precarious army is poised for an unprecedented rebellion.

*Or not.*

The type of critical resistance stirred by Occupy Wall Street and subsequent art activism is nowhere to be found in the world of contemporary arts management. If you don't believe me, start by searching for articles, essays, or teaching materials not conspicuously deferential to corporate modes of business management. End the crushing weight of student debt, indeed by all means, however, what if the debt amassed is also an ideological burden placed upon the shoulders of a future generation of museum staffers by those too timorous to challenge the power of Hugo Boss, Saatchi, BP, or Sotheby's? Becoming a professional skill for public relations-greedy oil companies or cigarette manufactures has got to have some opponents from within the world of arts administration pedagogy, and indeed I note here two small intellectual oases in this pedagogical wasteland: Derrick Chong's pithy primer *Arts Management* (Routledge 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2010), and Pierre Guillet De Monthoux's provocative treatise *The Art Firm: Aesthetic Management and Metaphysical Marketing* (Stanford Business Books, 2004). If the first book offers a singular example of how to simultaneously present critical analysis while still providing practically useful training to students, then the second, which admittedly is aimed at the MBA crowd and not the aspiring arts administrator, reveals through its sheer eccentricity just how uninspired the discipline of arts management has been and remains. To these two options let me add *Artocracy*.

#### ARTOCRACY: RULE OF ART OR GOVERNANCE OF OR BY ART

Although published in 2010 a year prior to OWS independent curator Claudia Zeiske and artist and academic Nuno Sacramento have produced a compact 'handbook' for arts administrators with a big title: *ARTocracy: Art, Informal Space, and Social Consequence: A Curatorial HandBook in Collaborative Practice*. Diligently focusing on rural cultural initiatives in Europe, *Artocracy* offers some alternative views on managing art in the provinces that just might be applicable to the city centers as well. Sacramento and Zeiske's began their experiment at Deveron Arts space, a small cultural venue located in the rural town of Huntly in Aberdeenshire, Scotland. According to the handbook Huntly's population was not partial to contemporary visual art. As architect and critic Paul Shepeard puts it in his foreword to the book, "once there was people's culture in saloons and brass bands – then 'protest' culture – then an ironic art that was all critique and nothing more 'what use is that?'" Still, the handbook shows "Huntliens" are quite active in other ways including participating in sports, gardening, listening to fiddle music, dancing, and of course playing the bagpipes. And perhaps it is telling that among the first visualizations we encounter in the book is that of a compressed road-kill rabbit. What kind of sign is this? Is it meant as a warning? Or an indication that the terrain these curators converged upon remained first and foremost provincial.

In fact photographs of flattened fauna happens to be among Deveron Arts first research projects, carried out by artist David Blyth in 1995, except that appearing early in the pages of the *Artocracy* handbook I read the dead hare not as a reference to Joseph Beuys, but as a caution to sophisticated urbanites that cosmopolitan assumptions about art and culture should be kept in check. However, it is one of the shortcomings of *Artocracy* that such potentially bold assertions (if I am reading it correctly) are not followed-through as wholeheartedly as they might have been. The cultural tension between city and country inhabitants was succinctly addressed by Raymond Williams decades earlier when he stated, “identity and community became more problematic, as a matter of perception, as the scale and complexity of the characteristic social organization increased” (Williams 202). And perhaps with statistics showing more humans now living in urban rather than rural areas for the first time on earth we have reached a point where two kinds of geographically-defined communities, one that has typically played shadow to the others presence and both of which were always relatively transparent only unto themselves, are today being compressed into a single horizon, one whose resources are also drastically diminishing. Instead of investigating such socio-economic pressures as this impacts specifically situated arts management challenges, the authors turn to focus on how to best wed the needs of Huntly’s local “community” to the logic of the global art world. It’s a perfectly fair turn to take of course, but isn’t it in those odd local encounters where rural life and ‘worldly’ outlook collide that the untapped sites for critical intervention might actually reside?

That drawback aside, there still is much useful information for the novice arts administrator in this concise compendium. For example, clever visualizations of how the pair carried out their cultural mission abound. Pie charts and flow charts and graphic diagrams mapping funding sources, stakeholders, curatorial methodologies, learning mechanisms, and marketing models take up about half of the book. Notably this display of managerial functions is not aimed at the seasoned arts administrator, but is intended for those artists, academics, and independent curators who, not unlike Sacramento and Zeiske, find themselves taking charge of institutional venues despite little or no professional management training. I would go so far as to call this handbook an attempt at demystifying the field of cultural management, of making it transparent and accessible to the 99%. And perhaps it is this type of DIY approach to a professional discipline, which can only be mounted by those who stumble into the field from elsewhere. And with that in mind, Sacramento and Zeiske offer up a pair of engaging cultural concepts for others to work with. Eager to share their experience the first innovation goes by the name “the town is the venue,” while the second has the mysterious handle of ‘shadow curator’. The first is as it sounds, a recognition that the real exhibition space extends beyond Deveron Arts gallery proper into Huntly proper. The second requires some unpacking.

Borrowing the term from the Commonwealth model of a Shadow Cabinet or Shadow Minister, Nuno Sacramento coined Shadow Curator (also the topic of his PhD in Museum Studies) as a means of internalizing an institutional interrogator or artistic devil’s advocate. Ensclosed within a given administration the Shadow Curator is simultaneously part of the staff and officially charged with representing a contrary point of view to the sanctioned curator. The concept is further elaborated upon in *Artocracy* by way of Chantal Mouffe’s anti-dialectical model of political *agonism* in which a discourse of respectful disagreement replaces a Marxist concept of class antagonism. Thus the Shadow Curator is ‘not a competitive position – not wanting to take curator’s place – but to be like the loyal opposition in a political party or government.’ (18) Setting aside the author’s fashionable nod to Mouffe’s post-class utopianism (already wavering in the wake of the financial crisis that can not stop emitting x-ray illuminations of society’s economic polarities), *Artocracy*’s Shadow Curator remains an

engaging conception. And though it is prudent to question how someone embedded within an organization, including within its financial structure, can also generate genuine criticism of his or her employer, I would nevertheless argue that this rural experiment is justified as a good-faith attempt to reshape basic institutional hierarchies from within. One could go as far as to suggest this internal occupation is one logical outgrowth of 1970s institutional critique. With that said, it is disappointing the author's provide no transcript showing precisely what kind of critical exchanges actually took place between the curator and her shadow *other*. What we do find instead are a few superimposed purple-color coded memos injecting mild doubts about the book's official narrative such as "What does the town think of this?" or "How deeply are artists supposed to engage with communities in short residencies?" This worthwhile gambit to incorporate a bit of critical 'shadowing' in the handbook's very layout is never fully realized, disappearing from view all too soon after a few pages in. *Artocracy*, still it tells us about this shadow curatorial process even if it does not give us the chance to witness it for ourselves.

The concluding section of the book functions like a literature review. It contains an annotated bibliography, a glossary of terms, and two reprinted essays on the theory of community art practice, one by American critic and activist Lucy R. Lippard, and the other by European writer and curator Nina Möntman. The bibliography and other resources are limited by the lack of thoroughgoing research into they key topics addressed in the book, such as the history of social practice in art and cultural activism, as well as alternative forms of arts organizing and so forth, but as a starting point for additional research and discussion it is hardly a waste. Meanwhile Lippard and Möntman's contributions primarily address the question of who and what makes up a community including the town of Huntly. "What does the artist do with that knowledge, if anything?" Lippard asks. Her writings are long associated with breaking down barriers between art and life, artists and non-artists, and she does not hesitate to complicate presumptions underlying recent patterns of cultural organizing. Möntman's text on the other hand focuses on the status of institutional critique and tends to eschew notions of community as an uncritical category always external to rigorous research in advanced art practices. She cites Miwon Kwon's well-known call for artists to establish "experimental communities," as opposed to intervening in seemingly organic ones. (167) Both of these reprinted essays are now several years old and curiously the positions of Lippard and Möntman (or Kwon for that matter), which previously occupied opposite ends of a political art analytical spectrum, now seem almost compatible. With the advent of social media, Occupy Wall Street, and the Arab Spring the concept of participation and even occasionally the notion of community have entered directly into the discourse of high culture, including among its most reserved academic holdouts. Major museums now clamor to include "communities" and participatory art in their programming, theorists such as Claire Bishop, Grant Kester, Miwon Kwon, Shanon Jackson, John Roberts and Nato Thompson have also turned their attention to this question as the groundswell of socially engaged art rises. Add to this the irony that it is the art world's corporate sponsors who no longer feel comfortable funding elite culture, at least not without making some attempt at pleasing a broader popular constituency. In other words, the era in which a piece like Richard Serra's Tilted Arc could be bolted to a public plaza without the input of locals is long over.

Still, few would suggest that institutional critique and the community arts movement have merged with one other. Instead they seem to operate in the same overlapping space and time like superimposed quantum fields. Community arts, that frequently disparaged cultural activity where professional artists and prisoners, unwed mothers, and senior citizens engage in mutually designed, education flavored art projects, has always been treated as a nonmember of the urbane art world. By contrast, the practice of institutional critique, whereby artistic power is interrogated by artists permitted to interrogate such power, remains for many the *Sine qua*

*non* of cultural sophistication. And yet with the rise of social practice art in the past decade or so, the act of challenging institutions has increasingly begun to unfold within non-art oriented communities located fully or partially outside the designated zones of high culture. Gene Ray and Gerald Raunig proposed something along these lines as far back as 2009, suggesting that a new wave of institutional critique was already underway outside of art's privileged institutional spaces. What is stupefying today is that as this "third wave" of institutional critique has evolved its *modus operandi* deploys an artistic grammar virtually identical to that of its poorer, critically rebuffed community arts cousins. Meanwhile, most critics and curators refuse to acknowledge this all-too obvious morphological homology. Rather than searching for some underlying structural determinant within the gravitational field of neoliberal enterprise culture that might be responsible for bringing about this parallelism, they think it better to sort and separate the "serious," "vanguard" practices that remain in dialogue with the global art scene from the participatory neighborhood projects and bottom-up public artworks. Notably, this brand of Artocracy mirrors the stereotypical disdain of the cosmopolitan for the rural rustic.

How does one educate a new generation of arts administrators to fundamentally reimagine their practice when so much of their professional orientation tilts deeply towards the global art world global luxury axis and its elite state and corporate sponsors? In other words, how does one not so much start thinking outside the box like good little creative class cognitariat, but actually begin to operate counter-institutionally beyond categories of high/low, inside/outside, country/city? Such fundamental changes require not only developing new methodologies of working and teaching arts administration, but they demand a basic transformation in the language of cultural management itself. To that end I recommend *Artocracy*, because those who are just beginning to tackle these issues will learn from, as well as disagree with, much of what is in its pages. Let's begin the overdue task of occupying arts management from the bottom up.

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References and further reading :

Welcome to *Deveron Arts*: <http://www.deveron-arts.com/home/>

Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, (Paladin: Frogmore, 1975).

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<http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00011734/00001>

*Extreme Arts Administration*:  
<http://www.sholetteseminars.com/xxa-extreme-arts-administration/>

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\* Serendipitously there is a 2011 website entitled *Artocracy in Tunisia*:  
<http://www.jr-art.net/projects/artocracy-in-tunisia>