**A Conversation with Harry Josephine Giles**

Jenny: Hello! Welcome to Lumsden Live. I'm so pleased to introduce a conversation between Sam Trotman, director of Scottish Sculpture Workshop, and Harry Josephine Giles. Harry Josephine is a writer and performer from Orkney in Scotland, living in Leith. Their first novel, 'Deep Wheel Orcadia', is coming out with Picador in October 2021; their poetry collections 'The Games' published by Outspoken Press in 2018; and 'Tonguit' published by Freight Books in 2015 were between them shortlisted for the Forward Prize for the Best First Collection, the Saltire Prize and the Edwin Morgan Poetry Award.

They have a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Stirling and their show, 'Drone', debuted in the Made in Scotland Showcase at the 2019 Edinburgh Fringe and toured internationally. Their performance 'What We Owe' was picked by The Guardian's Best of the Fringe 2013 roundup in the 'But is it Art?' category.

Connecting virtually, Sam and Harry Josephine discuss their work and writing that addresses structural inequalities in the arts, and how this has been informed by their political organising over the past 20 years.

Harry Josephine: I'm Harry Josephine Giles, am a writer and performer. Josie for short is grand. I am from Orkney the islands of the North of Scotland, for folk listening from further afield, and I currently live in Leith in Edinburgh. Ehm so I'm a writer and performer and I work across eh poetry and theatre and games and dabble in other areas as well. I tend to dabble quite a bit. And I'm also involved in local mutual aid organising in Edinburgh, with an organisation called Mutual Aid Trans Edinburgh and have a history in various other ehm political mutual aid and direct, direct action movements as well.

Sam: Amazing, thank you! Ehm and I guess I just wanted to start really to think about, I guess what I'm doing is sort of picking up from, ehm... I guess the start of the pandemic, really. I mean, we've we've sort of known each other a bit before that, but - and it was great to get you up to SSW earlier in the year - ehm but really since sort of March last year. I mean, gosh, it hasn't actually been so quiet for you. There's been a lot going on, hasn't there? It'd be great to hear a bit about what you've been up to over the last year and maybe then we could move on to one of the essays that you've written over that time.

Harry Josephine: Sure. Well there's what I've- what I've got up to in my own work and there's what I've got up to in my kind of political organising life, and they're not always so distinct. Although sometimes I try and I try and tease them apart sometimes. So ehm, in my own work I've had one sort of major project in the last year, which is a project called, 'Not Going Back to Normal', which was a collective disabled artists' manifesto, which was created in Scotland in 2020. And we we started work on it actually in 2019 and we had some plans for what to do before the coronavirus pandemic hit. And then when it hit we had to, like, rapidly reorganise what we were doing and actually it kind of gave us a context to write back to that was quite important. Because the position of disabled people in Scotland, and artists in Scotland, was was rendered so further precarious by the pandemic that that we- we kind of had this sort of urgent response of ideas that were coming out of the disabled artists' community for how to transform how art and disability are thought and practiced in this country and the response to this, this massive social crisis. So I curated that with my co-curator Sasha Saben Callaghan and that that launched in ehm October last year and it's still online at notgoingbacktonormal.com.

Ehm, and then in my own writing as well, I have a completely different thing coming out, which is that my my third book is coming out this October from Picador, and it's called 'Deep Wheel Orcadia'. And it's an Orkney science fiction verse novel which is about community and it's about social change and environmental change but on a space station - so it's a little bit different.

So those are two big things that I've been working on but I often have a lot of small projects happening at the same time. And then at the same time like many folk, I was swept up in both kind of joy and terror with the wave of mutual aid organising that happened at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic. In particular, ehm I helped set up an organisation called Mutual Aid Trans Edinburgh which was eh a mutual aid organisation by and for trans and queer people in the local community, which we created noticing that there was, there were... There were quite a bit of our community were not taking part in some of the more local and street based mutual aid networks because of experiences of violence and isolation in the community, and also because there were sometimes specific trans and queer health and social needs that weren't being met by those networks. So we created this, this mutual network- mutual aid network for the trans and queer community. And that's still going and still growing and still changing and still finding ways to meet ehm meet the needs that our communities have.

Sam: Wow. That I mean- that's totally amazing that you've been able to do this much work and I totally hear when you sort of talk about the "swept up in the joy and terror" that really resonates. You know, that sort of moment where there felt like there was maybe this gap where a lot of things that we had been speaking about change or listening or writing or hearing about, actually felt that maybe there was a moment at just at this time to kind of be able to make something happen? And I'm still really hopeful that we're still in that place. How are you feeling about that now we're in a just-about-coming-out-of-it kind of first- well, is it second, third locked down?

Harry Josephine: Ehm, I have a bit of hope and I have a bit of despair [laughs] as well. So a mix of both. And ehm... yeah, last year kind of came at an interesting moment for me in that the mutual aid group I was part of was really important for me. I was was very involved in ehm environmental direct action movements in my early twenties and then ehm, essentially kind of burned out of that both both in the sense of having a complete collapse of energy and also having some quite traumatic experiences of police violence that ehm, just sort of knocked me out of protest organising and movement organising for quite a long time [long inhale].

And then last year, I think the energy and urgency of that moment and also finding some good folk to organise with because it was always a collective effort - the organisation - and continues as a collective effort. Ehm, I've managed to find myself in a political organisation like organising in a new way that gave me a lot more hope. And it was actually the first time I found myself kind of able to sustain movement work, political work, in a healthier way. I'd kind of done little bits here and there; and attended protests here and there; and been to meetings here and there; but this is the first time I've kind of been part of a sustained engagement with one organisation since my early twenties. And it's partly that I've done a lot of... growing and learning aboot mesel, and it's partly that ehm, [sucks teeth] I find the context and people to organise with that sustain me in in a healthier way I think than when I was younger. And that's given me hope and continued to give me hope and there's other things that are giving me hope. I think the, [long inhale] the wave, the international wave of protests against police violence led by black people in the US, but but spreading internationally across many communities affected by police violence and as part of a broader abolitionist movement [long inhale] that continues to build in these islands and continues to build in a very important and [long inhale] ehm inspiring way and in a way that encourages and galvanises action.

And we happen to be speaking now efter an extraordinary victory was won in Glasgow. So this is the day of what I think will become known as 'The Battle of Kenmure Street'. Just a street that I have many friends and comrades on. It's in the heart of the Muslim community in Glasgow and in Scotland, and a mass response of neighbours and people in Glasgow have successfully resisted an immigration raid on Kenmure Street. And that resistance has come from years and decades of community organising and anti-raids organising and migrant solidarity organising in Glasgow. And it's won an extraordinary victory that people around the country - and actually around the world - are now seeing, are being inspired by, with extraordinary images of hundreds of people working together, through both mutual aid and direct action, to free people from a deportation event. It's an extraordinary success and I think- I think the ripples of that are going to go out for a long time. And that's connected to the protests last summer, it's connected to the insurrections that happened there and it's connected also to the- to the work around Kill the Bill protests that have been happening this spring in these islands. It makes me feel a little bit encouraged that a radical movement is building and growing, and growing from the work that's been done in the past into the future. And that kind of resistance gives me a lot of hope.

At the same time, I'm a bit distraught about how much of the energy from this time last year has fallen away and how, you know, we created this project, 'Not Going Back to Normal', and now I'm seeing a push from some sectors of society to go back to normal, to try and bring normal back, as if the pandemic hadn't happened and as if the world could continue in the same way as it continued before. A way that created pandemics; that created environmental disaster; that created social deprivation; that created the extreme marginalisation of disabled people that we talked about in that manifesto. And if we don't hold on to that energy; and if we don't hold on to that hope of transformation; and if we continue to attempt to go back to the normal that some of us never had, I think that spells an even greater disaster round the corner.

Sam: Absolutely, I mean I think you pick up on so many interconnected things there that feel so important at the moment. Ehm I think, you know, I totally... hear you talking about the the ways in which community organising is is happening now, and I really would love to pick up a little bit - as one point - on on the kind of ways in which organising differently now able- enabling you to sustain that engagement in political organising. I'd love to talk a little bit more about the kind of structures of that.

I think there was maybe quite a few people of maybe of our generation who were involved with COP 15 in Copenhagen, or involved with the kind of 2019 kind of G8 protests - things like that - that after that were just absolutely burnt out. And I think lots of people at that moment felt the environmental movement was sort of never going to happen again, you know, that was the burst of it. But actually what you see is a lot of people have found other ways of organising, and that environmental concerns are so intrinsically linked across all of these other struggles that are happening as well and I think that's something that your work really picks up on as well when you- when you speak and when you write. Ehm, so it would be great to talk a little bit about some of those structures that you think are in place that might help to sustain engagement in in these struggles.

Ehm and the other thing that would also be really great to pick up on... is about that sort of feeling of ehm... how how can we not let that kind of tide of of normal- normality kind of come back? Like what are the things that we can do to stop that, because I think I'm exactly seeing this narrative of 'the arts is reopening, great! Da da dah. Let's get out there. Let's go to exhibitions.' and actually maybe that's not what we need to be doing right now. Maybe it is that we're meant to be on the streets and maybe it is- you know, there are other ways that we're meant to be working now. So it'd be great to pick up maybe a little bit more on those two things and your thoughts on those.

Harry Josephine: Yeah, I think those are lovely, lovely questions, and, you know, I can't I can't speak to, like, a general political strategy that's going to save the world or work for everyone-

Sam: Uch damn! [laughs]

Harry Josephine: But I can speak for myself- I know sorry, I can't fix everything! But I can speak for myself and actually, I think maybe in attempting only to speak for myself there is a bit of a broader answer there, which is that like in my teens and early twenties, I was involved in in protest movements where people gathered from across the country, sometimes across the world, in mass protests and mass resistance and that was that was a model of social change, you know. Get as many people as possible into one place to eh- to a protest and if we have enough people and if we do it loudly enough then something will change. And- and I don't want to be too critical of that like, I I was- I was very active in Climate Camp ehm in the early 2000s and... when I look at our targets: the next runway at Heathrow; the the power station in Kent; ehm the Royal Bank of Scotland's involvement in fossil fuels, carbon trading; these were all targets that we had as a- in in a- in the direct action movement. And at the time, we often felt defeat, and I remember when we protested outside the Carbon Exchange, that was a really difficult time for me because we were [long inhale] we were rioted by the police in a very violent way. And it felt like defeat and yet, 15 years on, we actually won most of those causes. We haven't eh, we haven't stopped climate change, but we have actually won most of the targets that we targeted at that time and I think that our direct action movements were part of that. And I also think that the environmental movements that we were a part of then helped build the consciousness into a much broader social consensus on climate change, which wasn't there 15 years ago, it wasn't there even 10 years ago. And that, I think, has some hope in it and I do think that we are part of that.

At the same time, I burnt out, a lot of people that I knew burnt out and stopped being able to be involved in that kind of work and what is sustaining me now I- is less ehm, that model of work and more thinking: if we're going to have a political resistance, that can create change in the long term, it has to grow from strong local roots. And I think I think so what's happened on Kenmure Street today is a really good example of that. That ehm [sucks teeth] the immigration enforcement agents [sucks teeth] detained two people as they left their mosque and attempted to- attempted to drive them out of the street, but enough people had seen the van and had then texted their friends, phoned their friends and said, "Get doon here, we have to stop this van." That enough people were able to get there and physically block the van in those early moments. And then those people messaged all of their friends and those friends messaged all of their friends until a couple of hundred people were doon there, surrounding the van. And that happened because the people on that one street knew each other; knew how to look out for an immigration raid; and knew what to do when an immigration raid happened. And that happened through neighborliness; and it happened through local political organisation; and it happened through local communication networks that could then tap into national networks. And noo we have a victory, the story of which is spreading roond the world and inspiring many more actions like that. But it grows from that local root. And it grows from years, decades actually, of migrant solidarity work and anti-border work that has happened in that streets and in that part of Glasgow and in that city of Glasgow and in that country.

And it's built on that long term political understanding and that long term community building. And through those networks, protests like that can happen; and change like that can happen; and mutual aid and self defence like that can happen. And that's- that's a different model of political organising, it's a model that says 'get to know your neighbours'; 'get to know the people that you share a life with, an interest with whether that's through class or race or sexuality or gender'; 'know those people in your local area so that when you need each other, you can find each other and you can communicate with each other'. And that builds, I hope, a more sustainable form of resistance. And that's why mutual aid work has been what I've been putting myself into. And I felt myself much more nourished by that and much more looked after by that, to a point where when I get tired now in in the organisation that I work with I can say, "I'm having a dip in energy. I can't really manage this for a few weeks. I'm going to take a break for a few weeks." And all the friends and comrades that I work with say, "It's ok. Take a break, have a rest. Other folk are doing this work, you don't need to be there all the time. Come back in a few weeks, and in the meantime, is there anything that we can do for you?" And that is a very different experience to say what might have happened to me 10 years ago when I collapsed and felt too ashamed to go to a meeting and maybe there weren't enough people to check-in with me and find out that I was doing OK sometimes. It's a very different experience and that really matters and I think it creates a much more sustainable approach to social change in the long term.

Sam: Absolutely that I think. You know the work of someone like No Evictions Network or or people who are working on the ground, like you say, during this time with mutual aid groups, that really kind of getting to know people and being in a place, feels so different to the kind of meeting. I mean, it was exciting, you know, 15 years ago meeting a bunch of other young, very white, very middle class people to eh do do this work, but it feels very different to the work that's happening now. And I think that's what's so exciting: to see this evolution of of how organising is happening.

And what it makes me want to segway into [chuckles] is thinking about what you said, about how what happens when you don't have that energy and how your networks now around political organising are able to support you. Are able to say, "OK, we hear you. We see what's needed. We're able to adapt. We're able to respond." That sounds like amazing political organising. It also doesn't sound like any arts organisation I've ever heard of. But I think what I'd really like to talk a bit about is an essay you wrote - now, I want to say it's at the beginning of the pandemic - yeah, it was called 'I Woke up and the Art was Gone'. And I think within this essay that you've written, you know, at the start, you know, you talk about so many things that feel so... important. Ehm which at the time in March no one was thinking. Everyone was thinking, 'oh, gosh, what is this?', you know, 'what's going to happen?'. But I think ehm, you pick up on some really amazing points that would be great to talk about and how maybe there's... some reorganising that might be able to happen here.

Harry Josephine: Yeah, so I wrote the essay ehm in the first week of lockdown really ehm and then it was in that week, you know- for about a week before lockdown, maybe two, you started to see arts events cancelling and you started to see venues saying, "Hmm, we don't know if we can do this." And then ehm... efter lockdown happened everyone- every organisation had to cancel its events ehm and had to say, "We can't operate, we're closing and we don't know what's going to happen." And it was- it was this sudden experience of a sector, a workplace, suddenly- that is based on people meeting live largely, suddenly saying, "We can't operate." And it did feel like an entire sector was closing up all at once. [long inhale] And I did feel horror at that, I particularly felt horror for everybody whose job was at risk. And at the same time, I felt- I didn't necessarily feel grief for the arts as a sector because the arts is a part of society- is is something that I've kind of been involved in a ehh a very strong critique of, for a very long time. That there is a lot about how the arts operate that I do not want to see keep happening and I think there's a lot about how the arts operate that actually created the crisis for that that part of the- that part of the economy; that part of the workplace; that part of people's lives. But the pandemic crisis was much worse for the arts than it needed to be because it's a sector that revolves around quite hierarchical institutions. That revolves around large wage disparities. That revolves around keeping buildings open that don't actually serve the communities that they live in a lot of the time. That revolves around massive, massive salaries for the winners in the organisation and for the people at the top of the pyramid, in a way that I think drives the whole sector away from the interests and artistic excitements of the majority of people. So what closed was everything that couldn't function in a social crisis and what closed was everything that couldn't repurpose itself to meet the new community needs of pandemic times. Ehm [sucks teeth] and I'm not saying but I want to see every arts organisation go, I want to see people have decent jobs, but I am saying that the way the arts is organised has brought it to the brink of crisis over and over again. Look, try now as the world is opening up to bring back the kind of arts sector that we had before the pandemic crisis, there's only going to be another version of that further down the road. And what I fear, and one of the reasons that I'm I suppose struggling a little bit to organise in that sector at the moment, is that we are just going to try and bring back what there was before or a large part of the arts is going to do that except there's going to be a lot of small arts organisations that are gone. There's going to be a lot of grassroots venues that have closed forever. There's gonna be huge sections of the industry that are missing and what we will focus on is reopening and sustaining those big venues with their big audiences and with their work that is mostly put on for the wealthier parts of society and because those are the most spectacular, because those are what command a lot of media attention, it'll look like the arts is reopened but actually all we have is some big trees that the mass of people don't actually look up at all the time and most of the grassroots and most of the undergrowth has just been kind of swept away and won't be grown. So that's kind of what I'm worried about at the moment.

Sam: Yeah, absolutely and I feel like we're just at that sort of peak now which, you know, it is great that places can actually be open and there is a way, but it is interesting to see that it's kind of all the postponed programme, just presented again. You know it's like 'now we can present our work', almost as if that this last year, you know, wha- what's the-. I would love to start hearing, seeing the programmes where the thinking of that last year is really coming out and how that change is happening. And I think what also ehm... is very interesting to see is, is how Scottish government, but also Creative Scotland has responded in this moment as well. How it's responded to freelancers; how it's responded to institutions; and the reporting that's now going on and what's happening there; and and the accountabilities that are going to happen over this next year. So I'm sort of seeing- I'm interested to see what happens there. I mean you've been very sort of vocal in, you know, in this essay - but you know like you say before in many different ways - about talking about how you felt that the arts has kind of failed in its mission of kind of lifting, bringing together the kind of culture of people. And ehm and I think that's where we've seen a kind of progression in political organising and where the arts has kind of remained as kind of lifting a particular kind of culture, but not actually kind of understanding the cultures of the place it is. I don't know how you're feeling about that or whether you're seeing that in some places or not?

Harry Josephine: I think in some places I'm seeing seeds of a change. I'm seeing some organisations think things like, 'well, we can't base what we do around international travel all the time' and actually finding ways to make work available remotely; make work available online; has broadened our audiences that has made the arts accessible to more people. And those are- those are exciting moves. When I see a theatre venue say, "Actually, we're gonna livestream all of our performances from now on." I think that's a very positive thing. [sucks teeth] When I see a festival say, "We're going to cut our budget for international travel and increase our budget for accessibility." And I have seen that. I think that's a very exciting thing.

I've seen a lot more ehm, small scale organisations as well start to take seriously their their position in a community and trying to work out how they can serve specific local community needs. And that- that has happened actually throughout the pandemic as well as... as well as now that that, you know, you did see venues repurposing themselves as centres of mutual aid organising quite often. That was really important. And I think moves like that that carry a lot of hope.

At the same time, I look at some things like, for example, the announcement of the partial reopening of the Edinburgh Fringe, with a little bit of despair. Ehm... because... [sighs] So many of us that live in Edinburgh have said this so often, the way that the French is organised is not sustainable for the city; it's not sustainable for the environment; and it's not sustainable for the arts. It does not create work for artists. It requires artists to work unpaid. It requires intense exploitation of venue staff and the profits really only go to landlords, whether it's residential landlords or venue landlords or pub landlords. Those are the only people that are actually making money from the Fringe. And those are- that's that's that's where profits go and those profits go through quite intense social, economic and environmental exploitation that happens every year. And it's a- the economy of the city as a whole has now become so reliant on on the Fringe that ehm it's kind of unthinkable to be without it. That- that- that actually just to rip it away does risk a lot of people's jobs and does risk the livelihoods and well-being of a lot of people and that's quite frightening as well. But now we've got a situation where there's gonna be some kind of partial reopening of the Fringe ehm but it can't, it can't guarantee exactly what and it can't guarantee exactly how it's all gonna happen. And it's going to have a gated live streaming platform. But we don't quite know what's going to happen if you're not on that particular platform and and what this situation creates actually is a very risky situation for artists and venues. And the riskier the Fringe is, the greater the profits concentrate to the top. But ehm [sucks teeth] the only people that can really afford to take a punt on the Edinburgh Fringe now are those with a guaranteed audience and those with a large promotion budget and those who can afford to absorb the risk if something goes wrong. And that actually means an even more winner-takes-all scenario and an even greater exclusion of the majority of artists and now even the majority of audiences. So I'm really very worried about that particular direction which seems to me an attempt to recreate as much of the Fringe as possible, without reconsidering fully the new economic and social circumstances that we find ourselves in. And I think rej- rejecting or not noticing the possibility for social transformation that happened in putting a pause on it for a year, but rather than thinking 'how can we re- re-organise this festival in a way that is more socially just. That better benefits more people in the city. That doesn't rely on exploitation. That doesn't cause environmental havoc. How can we re-organise now that we've pressed pause?' I just feel like it's trying to come back in as much of the image as possible as before, except now it's going to be even more unequal. So that's kind of the opposite end of things that I'm very worried about.

Sam: Absolutely. And I think it's when... when we when we see things like that: when I see this big reopening, when I start seeing the press releases coming out and the kind of, you know, big international sort of artists presenting in Scotland again and things like this, that I also feel a sort of wave of panic of like 'have we missed the moment?' and of course that that moment of like 'oh, is it not there anymore?' but I think it is there, but there's this kind of- this facade that's happening. I actually think underneath this facade of what we're putting out there is still stuff happening under the surface, or at least I hope it is. And I think it's things like with everything, it's what- how artists are working and how artists are operating. You know, they will not operate in these kinds of neo liberal structures because that's not why they work. And I think it would be great to speak a little bit to the ways in which when you've set up previous collectives ways of working in the arts. Ehm I think it would be great to hear about those I think because these are some of the things that... bring me hope, anyhow. That actually, you know, institutions don't need to operate in hierarchical structures, and I think we see a lot more of that happening in... uhh in some parts of Europe where we see different different structures or playing with these structures a little bit more as we are- than we are seeing here in the UK and specifically in Scotland.

Harry Josephine: Yeah, I think you're right. I think, I think something the pandemic did was like a tremendous stripping away of allegiance. Ehh, that we saw very clearly and very nakedly what many people - most people - already knew which is: who is assigned the resources that they need to live in our society; who is assigned for social death and how is that organised. And that became so naked and so clear to so many people in the last year [sucks teeth]. And if you didn't know that before and you do understand that now - as many people do - I think most people won't forget that, no matter the temptations that are laid. And there will be temptations now. That the declaration of a return to normality, the declaration of opening up - some people will take part and some people will choose their own safety and their own profit and their own sense of an individual life over ehm the reality and the truth was revealed to so many people in the last year. So, so we will see that and we'll see organisations doing that as well. And this will always be, I think, a tension, you know, we can't fix everything at once; we can't hope that every organisation is going to change; we can't hope that every person is now going to get involved in a social movement that's- that's not how change happens. Change is a place of contestation. It's a constant, you know, struggle between forces and different forces have different upper hands at different times. So so I don't think that, you know, it's either win or lose, it's either everything's going to be better or everything's going to be worse. It's you know, engaging in that struggle. So that's my kind of how-I-feel and how-I-think about this situation that we're in.

But you asked specifically about modes of organising that I've been involved with. Ehm I've been an advocate for quite a while of the the workers' cooperative ehm model of organising an- organising an arts collective or an artist or producer or an arts organisation. I've co-founded two workers cooperatives. One in Edinburgh called Anatomy Arts, which puts on ehm cabarets and sort of extravagant live art events. And one in Glasgow called The Workers Theatre, which has been building towards trying to open a small-scale venue in Glasgow. And both of those organisations work as as workers' cooperatives and aw that means is that everybody who owns and directs the organisation is also working for the organisation, and everyone who works for the organisation is also a director of the organisation. So you don't have a hierarchical structure. You have collective decision making. You have collective ownership. And you have collective distribution of profits if there ever are profits ehm there haven't been [laughs]. But there have been some wages and actually we wouldn't aim for profits. Both of them are also community interest companies, so we do not make profits for the owners, which is another thing that is different right. So we're not trying to make profits and we're also not trying to distribute money upwards. And although most artists' organisation are charities, it is the case that a lot of high profile organisat- arts organisations, even though they don't tick that they create profits, do create extraordinarily extravagant salaries for people at the top of the pile. And that, I do not think is sustainable and I- I think it's a... [sucks teeth] I think it's a profit motive by any other name, even if it comes under the charity model. Something else that's- there's an issue with the charity model there, which is that a charity has to have a board of trustees and in the arts in the majority of cases, boards of trustees are run by people with extraordinary social power and that creates the kind of inequalities and lack of diversity that you would expect. But even if there is diversity of gender, diversity of race on charity boards, it's still almost always entirely run by people from the ruling class. By people who have a lot of personal assets. By people who are very invested in the existing structures of society. And when charities are overseen by boards that have that kind of social power, it makes it very hard for charities to be accountable to their communities; to be accountable to their workers and to be actually involved in social change work.

So I think that the charity model, particularly in the arts, sometimes helps to sustain existing social structures and helps to prevent social change and change within organisations rather than to facilitate it. So I'm quite skeptical of that. Whereas I think when you have collective ways of working; when you have equal ownership of an organisation; when you have equal stakes in decision-making; when you have equal pay in an organisation, then there is greater flexibility, sometimes greater sustainability because you can be more flexible in response to crises and there's a greater ability to respond to local events. They're more agile organisations I would say in business-y lingo - which we could use sometimes - they can be a bit more flexible and a bit more agile. But more importantly, in a politicised situation, that means that they can respond to social change and be part of social change. So that's something that I've been involved in and advocated for for quite a long time. Ehm and I would say if anyone's interested in workers' cooperatives get in touch. I've helped advise on quite a few others starting in different sectors and it's something I'm a little bit evangelical about.

Sam: And I think it's so great as well that you- you talk about that and you have experience of of setting these things up, because I think people... you know, feel so much pressure, especially on smaller organisations I think, of like, you know 'what is best practice or the things I have to do?' you know. There's so many things now as a funded organisation that you need to be able to provide. If you are a small team, mostly part time, you know, with other things happening in your life - which you could ever possibly have you know - ehm how do you deliver on all of these things? You know, I think actually we've kind of painted ourselves into a corner a little bit in a kind of- the way in which we organise now that I see things like, and I'd love to hear your thoughts on it but maybe it's a tangent I don't know, but when- when I see things like Scotland's new National Cultural Strategy or you know- and I take thing- taking these things very much on face value of what they're saying and things like Arts Council England's Let's Create strategy, tw- you know whatever thirty year vision of the arts in England. Things like this, I think actually if you want to do these things, the way in which you're organised is not going to enable that to happen. So there has to be a mass reform of how we organise our cultural sector in order to be able to do this. And I'm sort of interested to hear what you think about that [chuckles].

Harry Josephine: Absolutely. And I- I love that you started with 'best practice' there, which is like, when you look at it so obviously like a term and a tool of social control. How can there be one best practice? How can there be a best practice for [inaudible]? If there is a best practice that means that change is impossible because it means that you've already figured out what's best, mmm [sucks teeth]. I think if if- if an organisation with a lot of power is telling me what's best, then it's probably best for them and not necessarily best for me. I think that also comes from a deep risk aversion in arts funding and in government funding in general, which is the fear of getting it wrong; a fear of failure; a fear of putting money into something that will then end up being splashed over the Daily Mail, you know.

Sam: And then you're the ones who are then paying the £50 for the 'insert' Leadership Programme whatever, telling you how to do that work, which you then feel you're totally unable to do because how can you? Because these are structures, these- these are best practice, like you say, set up for people working at the highest ends of these things. People who have cleaners at home and people who, you know, have people picking up their kids and have an infinite workforce. You know, these are not best practices that are for for small organisations, for organisations doing those things.

Harry Josephine: Yeah, no, the result of that is ehm, a huge amount of- amounts of money spent on on eh management and administration, and monitoring, and reporting and all of these areas of arts administration to prove that you're doing the right thing. And to prove that you're doing what you said that you're going to do. And to prove that you're proving it this- here's these layers, upon layers, upon layers of artist administration, which incidentally, create a lot of jobs for people with a lot of social pow-, a lot of well-paid jobs. A lot of well-paid jobs that are generally better paid than artists. And all of that money is being spent on management instead of on the actual commissioning of art; the paying of art and the distribution of art to communities that want art. That like, there are- there's way more money and way more security in artist administration than there is in making art and that is absurd. And I say that as somebody that has made a wage from artist administration in the past as well like I've been in that game too and it it really worries me. Ehm because that too is the system that reproduces itself, that administrators create money for administrators, that create money for administrators.

Sam: And I think if anyone's interested in that as well, Suzanne Jones' work in the area is so important. And you can pull out some really amazing and quite scary facts about where the money is going now these days compared to thirty years ago.

Harry Josephine: Right. Thank you for that reference. It's a brilliant reference and Scottish government has put out a culture strategy. I- I've been part of those- personally I've been part of those conversations. I gave evidence to the Culture Strategy panel. I've been along to their working days. I've distributed my texts at those things, and I've said like very blunt things like, "We need to disclose how much money is being spent on art and how much money is being spent on administration. We need to cap executive salaries. We need to spend as much money on community art as we do on professional art." And these are actually very simple proposals. Very, very simple proposals, that I can say, "Look, there shouldn't be anything anything more than a three to one ratio of art executive pay." And even that I would say is way too much. Ehm and and- and if every organisation instituted some quite simple stuff like that, I think we'd start to see a lot of transformation very quickly. But there's a reason that those aren't the proposals that make it into a culture strategy. And there's a reason that those are the proposals that get elided, because when we talk about the arts we are talking about a system of power that seeks to reproduce itself. But that in the arts - as in the NGO sector, as in the charity sector - a lot of exertion of social power; a lot of abuse; a lot of practices that are not in the interests of the majority of people get covered up by the sort of general idea that they're a good thing.

"The arts are nice." "We like the arts." "Charity is nice." "Charity is good." And this sort of general wash of good feeling over the third sector in general I think often masks the fact that when we talk about the arts, it's an institution of power. That theatres and art galleries - even when they don't want to be - are institutions of social power that need to be critiqued. And I don't- I don't trust them. I work in them. I founded them. I am part of them. And I don't fundamentally trust them as a segment of society. There's a reason that there is mass... hmm, suspicion of the arts. And there's a reason that the arts are a thing that a lot of people are like 'well, if we're going to cut something, let's cut that'. And it's because the arts have lost the trust of a great deal of people, because they've pulled further and further away from the interests of the majority. And that that's a very dangerous situation for the arts to be in and if it doesn't change, it will reap the results of that in crisis, upon crisis, upon crisis.

Sam: Yeah, I think it's really important what you bring up about reasons why it can be cut, but I also think that there's also something in the vital-ness of that that possibility that I always want to hold on to. But I do think there's a lot of people also who are trying to do this rethinking and who are coming from different backgrounds as well, that are like making these changes happen. But I think it's just there's something there of like, I feel like passionately hopeful that some places will change and these structures will change. And I- it's looking to people like yourself, Josie, like who prove that these things are vital; that they can make a difference; that we're learning from political organising over decades that makes me think these things will change.

Harry Josephine: Yeah, I- I mean I absolutely think that that creativity and culture are vital to human life. I think that that- I I don't- I don't know a person that doesn't need to make art, share art, enjoy art and be part of art. That that- though they are a human need and they're a perennial abiding human need art is.

When I talk about the arts I'm not not talking about that spark of creativity, I'm talking about an institut- a set of institutions and social structures that have been built to to manage and distribute the resources for creativity. Ehm that actually have created a- created social structures that prevent a lot of people from accessing the very kind of spark that you're talking about and that the problem there is in the institution. I do think that there is a danger sometimes in how many of us, including me, talk about the arts as a positive good in itself. That we get very excited about radical images and radical words and radical ideas, including the kind of words I'm speaking right now, and and we allow the- just the the transmission of images to stand in for the work of social and economic organisation. That we think if we just transmit enough radical ideas we don't have to reorganise our social systems. But the result of that is that the so-called radical ideas become an alibi for the concentration of wealth and they become an alibi for not being part of social change. And that's very- and the ideas themselves start to hollow out and you can feel it. I can feel it. There's been times where I've presented what I'd hoped or thought was a radical artwork and then I've looked at the context I've been presenting in and I've looked at the audience I'm speaking to and I've just thought 'why- why am I even doing this?' My words are turning to ashes in my mouth and I deserved to taste those ashes because everything is everything is being hollowed by the situation that I'm in. So so I think both of those things at once. It's not about dismissing the value of the spark. It's it's not even about saying everything has to be like populist and mass audience. Like everyone deserves weird, weird art that like that like weird art should not be a bourgeois thing. Like weirdos are every- in every strata of society [chuckles] weirdos are in every class so it's not about not being freaky. We need freaky. It's about who has the resources to make art; who has the resources to enjoy art; and how do we ensure that those resources are spread rather than concentrated and hoarded?

Sam: Absolutely and I think it's that exact reducing of these things that we intently believe to a thematic in a program, to a curatorial statement on care, when actually how is that manifested? How is that working in in reality, rather than like by an educated person's words that sound really great on a website? You know [laughs]. I think it would be great to be moving away from that and towards the real change that can actually happen.

Ehm one last thing that I just wanted to pick up on was about how you feel your upbringing on Orkney has really impacted you and your practice and how you operate and how you work?

Harry Josephine: It's a tricky question. I'll tell you one thing which is too good a metaphor not to say, which is that in Orkney we would say "in Orkney" rather than "on". And that would go for individual islands. So I grew up in Westray, which is one of the outer islands in Orkney. If you're from Westray you live "in" Westray, you don't live "on" Westway. That's a quirk of local language and it's a quirk that holds a great metaphor in it, which is that you're- that an island isn't something that you just 'land on', it's something that you have to 'live in' and be part of. But if you're an island community, you are connected to everybody in that island, for better or worse. And I did grow up somewhere then with a strong sense of what the word 'community' means. And I don't know if anybody in those islands would necessarily talk about what happens in a rural Scottish community as mutual aid, but it's certainly very often the same thing. That, you know, I did grow up somewhere where people didn't want for a home. Where people didn't necessarily want for food because if somebody did want for a home, everybody in the island would know and somebody would sort out a home. So there is a- a kind of utopian hope there. At the same time, communities, strong communities are also places of... often places of exclusion and violence and silence. And this as much goes for- this goes for urban communities as much as rural communities, goes for communities across classes, that wherever there is a tightly bound community there are people here and there are people who are out. And a long term kind of social and political transformation has to grapple, I think, with both of those meanings of tight community. That community is the thing that we rely on for life. That that- that strong personal connections with the people in your local area, with the environment in your local area is necessary for a good and meaningful and sustained life. And at the same time, if communities aren't able to continue changing and meeting new people and don't have mm ethics of justice as part of their life, then there could be a lot that can go wrong in those communities as well. And there can be some quite painful and powerful exclusions in those communities as well. And to bring that back to even something like when we talk about abolition as a political principle and somebody that has advocated for and been involved in police abolition movements for a long time, I also grew up in an island where there were no resident police. Where, you know, you knew when the police were in the island because they came over on the boat and everybody phoned around and said, "the police are in the island". And I'm not saying that the island I grew up in is an abolitionist community, but it is an island had a very different orientation towards the police than is often the case, let's say, in Edinburgh. And so words that we see in kind of leftist political slogans, you often find crop up in interesting places and where where you wouldn't- where you wouldn't expect them. And that that's shaped my imagination a lot.

Sam: And that's I just think's such a wonderful way of us kind of coming to a close at both the sort of start of your thinking and towards what you're doing now as well.

Thank you so much for doing all of this. It's been such an inspiration to us at SSW so thank you so much.

Harry Josephine: Oh thank you for the conversation and and thanks also to Dean for our conversation earlier in the week, which ehm give me a necessary lift amongst all.

Jenny: Thank you so much to Sam and Harry Josephine for such a great conversation.

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We hope that you'll continue to tune in at 87.9 FM or online at www.lumsden.live. to hear the rest of the conversations, interviews and broadcast we've got schedule for the rest of the week.

Thank you for listening.

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