

# Salamanda Tandem Project 20

## The Provocations 2010 - 2012



*Image: salamanda tandem, Dancer: Faith, Design: Richard Hughes, Photo: Geoffrey Fielding*

Celebrating 20 years of salamanda tandem; Project 20 looks in forensic detail at the tricky subject of 'quality' in the field of 'participatory arts' – in particular we explored the way in which profoundly disabled people could be engaged in the process. One of the ways in which we did this was via a series of **8 Provocations** conducted over 2 years. Each '**Provocation**' presented an idea to stimulate deep thinking on aesthetic and ethical practice in the field and an invitation for you to join the debate. '**5 Provocations**'; were conducted virtually via this salamanda tandem's blog, 1 was conducted live in our seminar/studio space and 2 were conducted via our project partner's web site EMPAF on [www.empaf.org](http://www.empaf.org)

The **1st Provocation** was posted 6th October 2010 is '**a-round the subject of ownership**'. and was written and launched in a seminar led by Isabel Jones at Derby Quad as part of EMPAF's conference.

The **2nd Provocation** called '**The Touch Principle**' was written and launched in a presentation given by Isabel Jones at Nottingham Contemporary on 15th Nov 2010 with EM School of Social Entrepreneur's

The **3rd Provocation** on the subject of **authenticity** was written by Kevin Hodgetts and Isabel Jones, and launched live with a group of associate artists and academics at Salamanda tandem's space on 30th March 2011 (click on the blog for contributors)

The **4th Provocation** on the *art of disappearing* looks at the role of artists in participatory settings June 2011 and was launched at Rotterdam at the ICAF international conference by Kevin Hodgetts and Isabel Jones.

The **5th Provocation** 'on meeting' looks at the question of aesthetics in what we do and was written and launched by Isabel Jones in Oslo Norway at Signo a centre for Deafblind people in October 2011

The **6<sup>th</sup> Provocation** 'On the aesthetics (and politics) of working with people' was co-written by Tony Baker and Isabel Jones

Although this particular Project 20 debate is now over, the debate never stops. As a key part of our working methodology and practice at Salamanda Tandem is critical reflection. We continue to invite you to contribute thoughts, questions or solutions here in conversation with us. Comments and contributions have been collated at the end of this page as a downloadable PDF document.

In tandem with the debate, we created a number of bespoke live events, training events, and publications.

# Thank you

## Project 20 – Funding, Key Partners and Individuals

Project 20 was supported financially by Arts Council England (East Midlands), National Lottery through arts Council England and Nottinghamshire County Council

Salamanda Tandem launched Project 20 in October 2009 at the EMPAF Participatory Arts conference – Passion, Partnerships and Empowering People which was held at Derby QUAD and completed the project in Nov 2011

Partners supporting Project 20 were: EMPAF ( East Midlands Participatory Arts Forum), the Foundation For Community Dance, New Art Exchange, Derby Quad, Nottingham Contemporary, Embrace Arts, Lincoln Centre For Performing Arts Lincoln University, Nottinghamshire Bowls Clubs, EMARAN ( East Midlands Arts in Rural Areas Network), Leeds University – Department of Performance and Culture, EM School of Social Entrepreneurs, Nottinghamshire County Council, County Council Cultural Services – Diversity and Inclusion, Lincolnshire Dance, The Water Tower (Rosalind Stoddart), Arts Council East Midlands, Arty Party – Work and Play Project, Trent University and The Firebird Trust.

Key individuals Supporting salamanda tandem and the project were:

Stella Couloutbanis, Geoffrey Fielding, Duncan Chapman, Tony Baker, Mick Wallis, Lewis Jones, Francois Matarrasso, Esther Harris, Kevin Hodgetts, Dallas Simpson, Mickel Smithen, Lisa Craddock, Adam Benjamin, Kayla Doughan-Bowtell, Martha Blassnigg, Sarah Kettle, Ray Kohn, Fergus Brazil, Helena Nicolao, Andy Eathorne, Martin Knox, Richard Hughes and Rosalind Stoddart.

Board members: Chair: Sibyl Burgess and board members: Lyn Watson, Laura Guthrie, Lisa Craddock, Elaine Newton Fox.

All of whom have given time, serious thought, support and creativity to salamanda tandem. Thank You!!

# 1st Provocation – 6th Oct 2010

A-Round Ownership – 6th October 2010

Back in the mid 1980's I was inspired by Augusto Boal's 'forum theatre' method, the core principles of which formed salamanda tandem. Boal said that human relationships should be based on dialogue, but that in many cases these relationships became monologues between those who were oppressed and their oppressors.

There are parallels here in our work with profoundly disabled people. As facilitating artists, health care and education professionals we hold the power and the question is: How to we distribute it meaningfully?

Certainly distribution must necessitate handing things over and allowing others to share ownership.

What does this mean for participatory arts?

What does ownership feel like, sound like and look like? And what makes it worth having?

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## 26 Responses to “1st Provocation”

1.  [Sarah Kettley](#) Says:

[October 7, 2010 at 9:15 am e](#)At the moment, our design team is examining ownership amongst ourselves as co-authors. Our reactive textiles are at an early stage, and we are just beginning to put them on musicians and dancers. Peering into the future, it is hard to see how the design process will ever end, given that every performer has something valuable to contribute. We hope to bring the same inclusive approach to working with disadvantaged and disabled participants with the aim of creating a collection of open-ended objects for rich inclusive communication and performance.

[Reply](#)

- o  [salamandatandem](#) Says:

[October 13, 2010 at 6:42 pm e](#)Hi Sarah  
When reading your comment I was struck in particular by the phrase 'put them on' musicians and dancers as you describe the process of trying on garments. This is interesting, as choreographers often describe their work like this as they 'put movement on' their dancers. When you talk about your work your describe open ended objects and I know you are conducting a dialogue; what is that process like and how is it different from the more traditional choreographer who imposes movement on people's bodies  
Isabel Jones

[Reply](#)

2.  [Duncan](#) Says:

[October 12, 2010 at 11:35 am e](#)I think the key phrase here is

“How to we distribute it meaningfully?”

In my view its the “meaningfulness” that matters, its all too easy to create work that simply asks participants to make a sound, movement or image without really exploring the relationships. There’s so much “public” art about these days that seems to fill the world with texts collected by artists working with groups , every underpass and park is full of this stuff, but where is the meaning ? for those who contribute as well as those who experience it ?

Distribution surely involves creating contexts (Performance, exhibition, broadcast, listening) for the work. In my experience its a bit daft to spend large amounts of time creating a piece of music thats owned by us in collaboration if the quality of the work is destroyed by the context in which it is presented. Sometimes collaborative work is very “delicate” it has a fragility that is destroyed (in the case of music for example) by playing it at a party when it would be better listened to alone, late at night, through headphones.

As well as challenging WHO makes work we should be able to create a wider range of contexts for the work to exist in, music doesn’t have to happen in gigs, dance doesn’t have to happen in a studio and visual art doesn’t have to be displayed in a white box.

[Reply](#)

3.  *kevin hodgetts* Says:

[October 12, 2010 at 4:30 pm e](#)I agree Duncan. It is a pre-condition of any consideration of ownership that work is meaningful to those involved in creating it and in an ideal world to audiences. There is plenty of lazy work out there by artists who are doing little more than ‘collecting the fingerprints’ of non-experts. But i wonder how should we go about inviting and supporting participants to make work of meaning and value? This is how we engender a sense of ownership: by engineering meaningful transactions between individuals and the work they do.

[Reply](#)

4.  *kevin hodgetts* Says:

[October 12, 2010 at 4:43 pm e](#)Some more thoughts on this. When we talk of ownership it is usually to describe a relationship with an object or subject after a transaction of some kind has taken place. In the field of participatory arts this transaction can take a number of forms:

a sense of ownership can be brought about by an active involvement in making something happen.

a sense of ownership can result from a closeness (physical or virtual) to an object/subject.

So why is an involvement or a proximity to objects or subjects important to us? We are born into a world that is alien to us until we make it not so. We need to make a connection to the things and people around us to avoid being in a state of constant alienation. We go through life placing things in relation to us attempting to put some order into the world in order to make ourselves feel less alone. The act of doing this, of working out where our points of connection are and organising these is essential to our sense of self and well-being.

The beauty of the arts is that where these points of connection do not exist or not enough of them do we can make more. We can start again.

[Reply](#)

5.  *julie* Says:

[October 14, 2010 at 9:21 pm e](#)As artists and care professionals trying to bring together a sense of meaning,authenticity of artistic expression, and a flowering of quality for the individuals we are

engaging with. we need to be really creative and careful when we approach the multi layers and possible meanings of ownership.

An artist who is familiar with the success of showing and selling their work in traditional ways may be connected with the recognition and business elements of ownership.

where as an artist who may need support with everyday activities may connect to a sense of ownership in a completely different way.

For some individuals ownership may not be about attaching meaning and value to the longevity of an artistic idea, or its possible legacy. But is instead the briefest of moments where a sense of being creative is felt, expressed and belongs to the individual experiencing it.

Can anybody else buy, show, sell or own this moment? or could they too have the opportunity of creating, expressing, sensing and experiencing?

Maybe the challenge for us is to try not to view some elements of ownership as being worth less than than others.

[Reply](#)



6. *Linda Berry Says:*

[October 23, 2010 at 10:31 pm](#) eI agree with what has been expressed that the creative experience itself is something that one might own as it belongs to the one experiencing it. But equally I'd like to extend that it can also be a moment of acknowledgment and bring a deep shared sense of community watching someone else experience that moment, as those viewing are often left in awe too. And yet further it seems many times when those creative moments happen that we are left feeling that they cannot be owned at all and we were touched momentarily by something truly divine.

[Reply](#)



7. *kevin hodgetts Says:*

[October 29, 2010 at 12:48 pm](#) eI like that this discussion has broadened out from a consideration of conventional ownership (of things, of products) to how we can own a process or a moment. I am also interested as the previous contributors are in how the concept of ownership can feel inappropriate for describing what we experience when engaged in a shared creative moment. It often seems too territorial and total to make such a claim about a process that can be transitory, mutually generous and fluid. But maybe the transitory, slippery nature of creating something combined with the very human need to define and explain ourselves requires us to talk in terms of what we give and what we take from the work we do.

[Reply](#)



8. *Duncan Says:*

[October 29, 2010 at 1:02 pm](#) eI think (as Julie points out !) that its important not to confuse

Success with expansion : some things are better done on a small scale (cheese, beer and art for example)

and

Value with longevity ; the value and meaning of things isn't always diminished by the fact that you might only ever do them once ! (I'd quite like to try freefall parachuting but not on a weekly basis !)

[Reply](#)

9.  *Ray Kohn* Says:

[November 17, 2010 at 5:36 pm](#) eAs artists, we occasionally overlook the fact that everyone is actively creative all the time – even if they do not always realise it. Just when we hear someone speak, we create a meaning to their words (i.e. listening is not passive). So in participatory artistic activity, we are hopefully generating awareness of others’ (and our own) creativity. “Distribution” assumes that power relations are paramount: perhaps our radical agenda is to ensure that this is not paramount?

[Reply](#)

10.  *kevin hodgetts* Says:

[November 29, 2010 at 11:39 am](#) eI believe the ambition has to be to carefully manage our own power and capacity to influence outcomes rather than hoping power goes away if we don’t think about it. As facilitating artists we need to remain active in our behaviours and not collapse into passivity for fear of dominating others. It would be nice for sure to live in a world where power didn’t matter or was equally distributed but we don’t. And because of this we need to do something to address this.

[Reply](#)

- o  *salamandatandem* Says:

[December 4, 2010 at 2:25 pm](#) eAs part of Project 20 Salamanda Tandem have been issuing a series of provocations on the subject of ‘ownership’. The following discussion was hosted on the East Midlands Participatory Arts Forum website:

‘Who gets to paint the bird?’ is a provocation intended to generate debate on the issue of ownership in the field of participatory arts. It is the first in a series of provocations distributed under the Project 20 banner.

Work+Play is an arts project based in Telford supporting learning disabled adults. Salamanda Tandem has been a key partner delivering evaluation and training to the project. In a recent series of workshops project participants were given the task of designing their own ‘bird’. This original design was then made up with the support of other artists and craftspeople. For some participants the prospect and/or reality of working alone to produce a design was too demanding or else didn’t interest them. For these individuals, those least inclined or able to take up the original offer, the lead artist devised a way into the project which was more collaborative. She delivered a 3-d ‘skeleton’ of a bird made of timber and chicken wire: a raw form waiting to be covered and developed into a finished piece.

Over a number of weeks the bird skeleton was covered with paper mache and then white emulsion by at least 5 participants from the group, many of whom spent hours on the task.

Given the collaborative nature of the project a question presented itself towards the end of the work:

Who gets to make the all important finishing touches to the bird, applying the final painted finish?

The best painter in the group?

The person who spent most time on the construction of the bird?

The person to whom it means the most?

The person who is least capable of producing anything else?

If a painted finish is to be achieved collaboratively, how could, how should this be done, bearing in mind the involvement of a number of competing but 'entitled' individuals? We are interested in hearing possible solutions to the above problem and in hearing from colleagues who have experienced similarly difficult questions to do with ownership in this field.

Fiona Waddle

2. Posted: Fri 22nd October, 2010 @ 12:46pm

Hi Kevin, I think that in this situation everyone who has participated should have the opportunity to paint the bird, could the bird be considered in different bits – the beak, the eyes, the wings, the legs the tail, the left side feathers, the right side feathers etc so that each person takes responsibility for painting a bit?

All best wishes

Fiona

Author Message

kevin hodgetts

3. Posted: Sat 23rd October, 2010 @ 2:07pm

hi Fiona,

There speaks somebody who's carved up plenty of birds in her time! Thanks for this suggestion. A good idea definitely although i guess it raises the danger of the bird looking a mess if the contributions are not co-ordinated – if the individuals are determined to go their own way with their apportioned bit. That phrase "work by committee" comes to mind. A necessary compromise in the process leading to possibly compromised final outcome?

By the way, I think we know each don't we? Didn't you do some work in Telford a few years ago for Arty Party ? i used to manage the project there. If it is you good to know you're out there!

This is a blog we are running on the Empaf site but we are running a corresponding discussion on <http://salamandatandem.wordpress.com/the-1st-provocation/>

Author Message

Fiona Waddle

Posts: 2 • Report

4. Posted: Mon 25th October, 2010 @ 9:23am

Hi Kevin, I agree the designs would have to be coordinated but what an interesting bird it would be!

Yes I remember working with you and Arty Party, really enjoyed it and have been doing a but of work in Telford recently on one of Helen's projects.

All the best with the bird!

Fiona

Author Message

julie hood

5. Posted: Mon 25th October, 2010 @ 8:33pm

Hi Kevin and Fiona

I have spent some time with thoughts on who gets to paint the bird and have moved in and out of them! it crossed my mind too about the participants each choosing a part of the bird to paint and how this would be facilitated. Then I imagined myself as participant and would want to paint the wings. I then wondered if any of the other participants would also want to paint the wings and wondered how this would work out. Maybe images of the bird parts could be put into a hat with each participant drawing out the image they would get to paint, if i got the legs i would be disappointed !and maybe the other participants would also be disappointed with their image to paint. I moved on to thinking about the descriptions of the participants and found it impossible to decide if one individual would be more connected to or deserving of contributing

the finishing touch. I was especially drawn to the individual who was least capable of contributing and wondered what the bird may mean to them. How might this individual communicate, has their been enough time for them to explore and contribute. This thought led me to sound/songbird participants exploring the possibility of the bird remaining white within a sound-scape they had created/recorded. Maybe they could explore a symbolic circular nest for the bird. Visit a wood, each being supported to choose a stick or twig, paint or decorate it. Choreograph a dance of the laying of the sticks around the bird, maybe this would be a finishing touch in itself. Using a projector maybe they could project their personal patterns onto the white bird continually changing the finishing touch. The more I dwell on the unfinished white bird and its possibilities, the more alluring it becomes. Its unfinishedness and ambiguity invites me as a viewer to think more creatively especially when I am trying to imagine the participants involvement in the making.

Author Message

kevin hodgetts

6. Posted: Wed 27th October, 2010 @ 12:56pm

dear Julie.

how nice to hear from you! I trust you are well. Loved your response...really got me thinking. You are right of course. Some parts of the bird are intrinsically more valuable than others.

Depending on how the bird is exhibited – standing on a post at eye level or suspended from a ceiling say – some sections of the bird will obviously be more prominent and therefore sought after than others. There is no perfect equality in dividing up the bird as even if we could apportion an exactly equal amount of surface area for each participant to paint, some surface areas are clearly worth more than others. If we were stuck with the bird as the final moment or opportunity for participation we would be a bit stuck as all solutions seem to involve imperfect compromises. The idea of leaving the bird un-altered and then using it as a focus to create new work – moving through the art forms – is a very imaginative and inventive solution and if we had the opportunity to do this i would also favour this approach. Once we think about how photography and projections can help us it opens up the possibility of many and various birds being generated out of the first. The bird gives birth to new birds...hallelujah!

I was also very taken by you admitting that you would be drawn towards the participant who found it most difficult to contribute and I'm sure many individuals working in this field would share your empathy. Indeed, in the case study we are using here, the ownership claims of one individual (who was previously the most alienated participant in the project) ended up being privileged over others as it was clearly more important to him. So maybe ownership shouldn't be about establishing who did what. It's more a matter of who cares most?

[Reply](#)

11.  *julie* Says:

[November 29, 2010 at 2:42 pm e](#)Hi all

Would like to say a couple of things here. First I would like to acknowledge my time with salamanda tandem for enabling me to open out my thinking concerning working with people in the field of participatory arts. My response to who gets to paint a bird comes from the experiences I had working with them.

Secondly I would like to mention here an experience of seeing a performance at Tate modern this summer which relates to Kevin's comments on the ambition of the artist and the power of active facilitation rather than a kind of artistic domination over participants.

The performance I saw involved 75 members of the public with little or no experience in dance techniques, who had volunteered to participate in the process of learning the choreographers steps and then performing with the company in the turbine hall.

I watched both rehearsals and performance and searched for possible meanings in the process of participation being presented.

I found the often unspoken agreement between dancer/participant and choreographer. An agreement where the dancer/participant uses their creative power to copy, replicate or interpret the steps given to them by the choreographer. For this process to work the dancer/participant has to allow themselves to become empty, a kind of active blank canvas ready to observe, absorb and reflect the choreography. The



choreographer has to effectively communicate the steps, how to move. While I acknowledge their is great skill involved in this process, and there is kindred beauty in witnessing the transferring of movement from choreographer to another person. It only presents one aspect of participation and would not be a fair creative exchange open to all. While I was a member of the audience I overheard many different people being verbally cruel about some of the participants. Comparing their abilities of moving with the choreography to the professional dancers in the performance. It was a shocking level of cruelty against people trying to dance another's steps. I left with a feeling of sadness for the participants and was unsure of the purpose of their involvement. I imagined a person with a disability within this setting, how potentially impossible and uncreative it would be for them. How irresponsible it would be to expose them to this environment of comparisons.

Which brings me to connect to Kevin's words of remaining active in our behaviours of artistic facilitation. We are working with people who each come to participation with their own imagination and creativity. As artists and experts of facilitation/participation we have a duty to work with the individual creativity of each person and provide environments where this becomes possible. There is power within this way of working, and I feel it to be the opposite of a domineering/limited approach to participation. The power lies with the artists gifts of sensing another persons creativity, meeting it with their own, and letting both come into form. If the artist is actively engaged their power does not diminish but is being used to ensure the process of creative participation is continually fair. My ambition is for this form of participation to be fully recognised by the wider art world as an art form in itself.

## [Reply](#)

- o  [salamandatandem](#) Says:

[December 21, 2010 at 10:21 pm](#) eHi there Julie

thank you so much for your thought provoking contributions here. As a dancer with enormous skill to be that blank canvas for the most brilliant of virtuoso choreographers, what you have said is made even more poignant. So few people really will ever know, or appreciate the creativity involved in 'meeting' another person on shared ground through dance. I will always remember working with you on the Indigo performance; where circles of coloured light and a palate of sounds acted as a call or response for dancers to make playful invitations to each other. This was an example of finding, allowing, making, remaking as well as shifting the platform of support, done moment by moment in creative dialogue with people; responding as it worked or even failed to work.

I remember too that the work was misunderstood – this might partially explain why some facilitating artists may never get beyond the starting block. When presented with a 'show' to deliver, choreographers easily fall back on impositional ways of working, it probably seems quicker. The healthcare equivalent might be the hospital gown – one size fits all! It also takes a discerning audience to know the difference.

To be honest this is why I wanted to start these debates, because unless we illuminate the underlying thought processes and show the depth of critical thinking that needs to go on to enable empowering participation to happen – then the dance world will never change. Herd some non-professional dancers on stage, and treat them to the same methods and approaches that have produced generations of emotionally damaged dancers; its cheap, cheerful, and ticks the boxes for 'inclusion' and 'audience development'!

The alternative takes time, skill and interest in the human beings involved, and it takes imagination and creativity too. Collaborating on something taylor made which emerges both from the creativity of each individual participating, and from the sensitive pooling of shared interests and resources – I agree – this is an art form.

How do we know we have achieved it?

I believe that a sense of shared ownership could be the litmus test – when participants recognise themselves in the final work – and audiences too.

Warmest Wishes

Isabel

[Reply](#)

12.  [Simon Steptoe](#) Says:

[December 4, 2010 at 2:14 pm](#) eThere is a wonderful passage in Chapter 3 of Nelson Mandela's autobiography whilst recounting some of his early childhood experiences about his admiration for the leadership of Chief Jongintaba Dalindyebo, acting regent of the Thembu people of the time. The passage, which describes how tribal meetings were run, really needs to be read in its entirety to gain a full appreciation for what Nelson Mandela is saying. But there are a few key elements worth extracting:

Everyone who wanted to speak could do so, no matter what their status or role within the tribe (although Nelson Mandela does point out that in those days women were an unfortunate exception to the rule).

People spoke without interruption. The Regent just listened.

Many of those who spoke overtly criticised the Regent and his regime. Often the Regent was the principle target of their vehemence. But no matter how serious the charge the Regent simply continued to listened.

Meetings continued until consensus was reached. Unanimity might be an agreement to disagree and wait for a future opportunity to present a solution.

Only at the end of the meeting did the Regent speak. He summarised what had been said and tried to establish consensus. No solution was forced on those who disagreed.

And at the end, a poet would deliver a "panegyric to ancient kings" – a mixture of complements and satire on the present ruling elite.

For me the interesting aspect here regarding the nature of leadership is the manner in which the leader holds back from voicing his own opinions, waiting until everyone has spoken before respond and then sometimes only summarising what others have said. It feels that this model of leadership is rare in society today. But the special relationship described here between "leaders" and "followers" seems to be underpinned by an understanding of leadership that ensures "ownership".

[Reply](#)

o  [salamandatandem](#) Says:

[December 4, 2010 at 3:58 pm](#) eThank you for your response and for bringing Nelson Mandela description of leadership to us here. It's deeply pertinent.

In this 30 second culture where we have to get across our 'point' in a few characters, and are flooded with information and choices; the person who can 'listen' to another fully, who can savour and value different contributions and draw them together is the kind of leader we need. This is distributed power at it's most essential. When such a dialogue happens, then we can embrace people who have different perceptions from our our own. If we manage it, we therein escape the rush – what better antidote is there than that to our problems of isolation.

It is sad that we have lost so much in the so called process of civilisation.

## [Reply](#)



### 13. [Duncan](#) Says:

[December 5, 2010 at 3:51 pm](#) eAs the title of this is “provocation” I thought i might drop a little provocation into the discussion ! (apologies for the slightly random order of these thoughts !)

Whilst consensus is sometimes useful and desirable sometimes I do think that in our work we need to guard against always trying to find a point of “agreement”. Sometimes I don’t want to be consulted, i want to trust and follow someone who i respect and feel inspired by. This is a tricky area when one is talking about working with people who have been historically disenfranchised from decision making processes.

The place where I would probably part company with some (not ALL !!!) people in “community art/music” is summed up in the quote from Simon

“Meetings continued until consensus was reached.”

I’m not sure that I want art to be made by consensus

but at the same time

I don’t want it to be imposed

which raises several important questions about how we negotiate our way to making work with people.

If I am making a piece of music with a group of young people I usually will resist the desire that many have to “vote” on what should be in it, voting is useful for working out who empties the bins but not always a useful strategy for creating art that has a real character and relationship to those who created it

“sometimes liking something can get in the way of understanding or even appreciating it” .....

## [Reply](#)



### o [salamandatandem](#) Says:

[December 21, 2010 at 10:50 pm](#) eHi Duncan

sorry it has taken me an age to reply in writing – and we’ve had various skype conversations since.

I wonder if this question of consensus relates to collaboration and to the care and time taken to make decisions? Of course as you know I’d never be in favour of watering things down – but doesn’t our collaboration work in the end on some consensus? Or rather I mean the relinquishing of individual territory in order to make something greater than the sum of the parts. One of the provocations should be on collaboration in due course as it’s a fundamental principle for ST – I know its another misunderstood word; but I was struck by the thought on reading your blog contribution, when I considered how we made ‘Corrosion’ and for that matter most of our collaborative works over the last 18 years.

We try things out, debate, bring new things to each other, join in, go off and eventually agree before releasing what we do into the world, and that’s not the end of it – we then go live, take on board feedback see the potential of change re -edit and go again. Is this not some sort of consensus?

I reckon, that there is something in this sort of agreeing process that ensures a universal quality in the final work – in the tooing and frowning decision making business – we have to go beyond personal meanderings. That is why we love the final works, and why others seem to want us to

keep making them. Certainly in my case, working on something alone has no meaning, the process of negotiating co-ownership is the bit that makes it so creative.

I hope the wood burner is still burning – its up to -2.7 degrees here and rising!

Isabel

### [Reply](#)



- *tony baker* Says:

[December 27, 2010 at 10:05 pm](#) eI'd have thought that there's probably a degree of non-consensuality about the idea of 'provocation', so I'll just throw in this story from John Cage. I reckon Duncan'll like it

Cage is at the first performance of a new work of his and the public's been seemingly attentive until, after about 20 minutes, someone starts shouting from the audience, the usual disatisfactions... "this isn't music" "a load of noise" "rip-off of the public" etc etc. And Cage, hearing this, rubs his hands together and says, "ah good – finally – it's started"



14. *lisa* Says:

[December 6, 2010 at 12:15 am](#) eHi all, great to read these comments.

I am not sure where to start, so many responses and ideas to express. So i need to give myself some time... Isn't this how we feel as participants? When asked for that contribution, our mind goes blank. Or else, preoccupied with the state of our lives behind the scenes. Or so full of ideas we could burst and we don't know how to begin. The only thing that can heal this feeling when you have been asked for response is time, and a good listener.

this is a blog, so i have to assume you are listening like a tribal meeting! time wise i have no limits right now. i have also been talking with isabel today, so have listened, been listened to and encouraged to write. fully facilitated, i am now participating in something that is intrinsically uncomfortable for me, but i want to, it might open up something new.

When i apply my feelings now, to the participant in an art making context, and the pressure they may feel to "do" something i wonder about time and the quality of listening that they might get. The time it takes to help more creative action happen for someone who is anxious. The skill needed to put the participant at ease, in safe hands, and one of the most effective ways to do this seems to be with intense attention, and time. Often the time it really takes is more than the artist or facilitator is paid for. Time is money (for many) and so on. Efficiently, artists can adopt strategies and develop enormous skill in creating the perfect pod and quickly, in which to put people at ease, dictate some of the less interesting decisions in order to give freedom on those decisions that the artist knows from experience are liberating for people.

Duncan, you described the struggle to negotiate the way...when you don't want to impose but you don't want a session of consultation either. I know you involve your participants in listening, recognising quality of sounds and you work together on the interesting part which is possibly the content; the sounds that were found, the sounds that were made. Okay, so in the final composition you might use your skill without consultation so that people can enjoy what they contributed together rather than getting stuck in technicalities that they have no interest in now (they might do later) but the voices in it are always unique and they shared it. You deliver a balance that suits your style of delivery but i am sure in your own way you do allow for consensus even though you wouldn't choose a vote on what would go in the composition.

The level of consensus i reckon an artist or facilitator can bear must depend on the luxury of time afforded to arrive at the consensus.

It seems to me an important point from Simon's extract also is acknowledging that there might never be agreement, and that this is okay.

Gaining fully shared ownership requires a great amount of time and has the capacity to bore people along the way. It seems to me that there is still a leader in there, a good listener, and one who neutrally reflects back what they have listened to so closely. When listening so closely to people, you are no longer on a meter, but you also have to have an instinct for when to stop too. All the many thoughts that are gathered need to go somewhere for people to feel they are making something together. So here comes the spark,

Once you have listened, what do you do with what you have heard?

Is it always just a neutral reflecting back?

..or to go back to what Ray said, with the act of listening not being passive; you are interpreting and adding your own opinion... the leaders opinion?

So as a leader, you are not just reflecting back there comes a point of opinion, informed by your personality and experience; the best effort you can make is surely to be self aware, decide on where you can confidently facilitate consensus listen and reflect back, and where you feel you have the skill/experience to make some decisions on behalf of a group/individual in their interests, and where you will need the help of other leaders to let an idea grow.

[Reply](#)

15.  [dallas](#) Says:

[December 6, 2010 at 7:01 am e](#)Duncan raises some important points. I'll try and focus on some general principles rather than specifics.

There are many layers of collective organization that can be engaged to achieve a variety of ends. Sometimes the end is the journey itself not the destination, and sometimes the preparation for the journey is a most important step. Several journeys may be required to gradually develop, hone and refine a set of skills for a totally different or related task.

In the arts, as in the general process of education, we recognize pupil centered activity and learning, teacher centered activity and demonstration, the importance of individual and group work, working in pairs and so forth, each offer an opportunity to convey information and develop particular skills and also to encourage a particular set of outcomes. There are differing tools of instruction and participation, education and learning, and the maturity of experience can evolve through the application of consensus or difference engines.

'It is from the clash of differing opinion that the spark of truth arises'

One aspect of creative expression is to draw on differences and antagonisms for creative tension and power. But it is important for such tensions and differences to be focused on the creative process, not to become a source of personal prejudices, contentions and antagonisms.

The faculty of abstraction is extremely powerful. It has profound implications for the ownership of collective visions and ideas. One exercise I find useful is to take what appear to be incompatible ideas and create a form of understanding that unites them. It often involves going to a higher level of abstraction through metaphor. An important consideration is that realms of abstraction unify differences, whereas the pursuit of logical (rational) definitions and distinctions emphasize and enhance differences that can easily become personal and antagonistic. In art we often use provocative antagonisms to stimulate the audience to engage with our works, and ideally this provocation eventually forms a deeper sense of unity and understanding of the work if the audience is prepared to engage with it and work at it.

I also feel it is important to consider the purpose of artistic expression and creativity in participation projects. In those where the journey is more important than the destination it is wise not to get too hung up by the quality of the destination (outcome), but to consider what has been achieved on the journey. On the other hand a high quality outcome can give a great sense of achievement...

[Reply](#)



16. *kevin hodgetts* Says:

[December 6, 2010 at 11:27 am](#) eyes! down with consensus.

The arts are attractive because they offer us a space where we can't or shouldn't be owned by others. Speaking from past experience, perhaps the most depressing aspect of working for a local authority (and it would be the same with any large employer i guess) is that idea that they own your work and by implication 'you'. In the arts we should aspire to more than this and appreciate the rights of individuals to refuse to give of themselves, to refuse the uniformity of the group, to refuse generally. This has to be a starting principle for any discussion of ownership: the right to own yourself!

[Reply](#)



17. *julie* Says:

[December 6, 2010 at 2:33 pm](#) e words like  
open hands  
i want to meet

words like  
wagging fingers  
overhead

[Reply](#)



o *salamandatandem* Says:

[December 21, 2010 at 10:58 pm](#) eI agree – it's time to meet. Is anyone free on January 20th? We are running 'Living Room' at Rufford Crafts Centre and we've just scheduled in a interactive debate / play get together from 3 – 5pm. The Living Room is also open on friday 21st 10.30 – 2.30pm if you would like to bring groups along to play.

If it's too far and the weather foul – how about a provocation group get together at ST offices on March 30th 2011 at ST offices in WB?  
Isabel

[Reply](#)



▪ *Ray* Says:

[January 14, 2011 at 10:25 pm](#) eI would love to come to a provocation group get together, Isabel. Not back from Brazil until the end of January but free on 30th March.



18. [Kayla Dougan Bowtell](#) Says:

[February 1, 2011 at 9:18 pm](#) eSince I've been slow off the mark I am working backwards and contributing to the first provocation now. To get me started I have simply splurged, and so apologies for the lack of reference to other contribution...it will happen in my next quiet hour. Here we go....

Freedom, Uncertainty and Responsibility: These three words pull together (although are not exhaustive) my ethos of facilitating ownership in the workshop space. They are certainly three aspects I find myself managing when working with people and of course when working with myself. They can be arranged in any order, one is not more powerful than the other, all three illicit a response, and all three require a dialogue of negotiation from each individual, between participants, and between the facilitator and participants.

The kind of environment created for work is imperative to the outcome. Too much freedom might leave some overwhelmed with uncertainty, too much responsibility might suffocate the freedom, too much uncertainty might scupper participation at all. Certainly, this last sentence relates to both facilitator and participant. Often before work can really begin with participants, work has to be directed towards the institution/organisation from which the commission has come. Without this groundwork it can be difficult to facilitate ownership because there are too many agendas on the loose, which can be detrimental to the environment and sensitive levels of participation most hope for.

I've noticed a development in my way of working with people. There was a time when my 'formula' was to teach a bit (steps), set a 'creative task' usually based on some abstract choreographic tool, followed by splicing both sections together and treating the movement with yet another choreographic device to 'finish it off'! For a while I was happy with this, I spent a lot of time working with very large groups of junior school children and this jigsaw mode of making and remembering was successful, the children were energetic, motivated and seemingly proud of what they had made; teachers were impressed with the children's abilities to manipulate movement and more than anything remember the complex sequencing. And why not, this formula is not too dissimilar to what many professional dancers are asked to work with each day. However, I started to question the origin of movement presented and the assumptions which informed my choice of movement for particular groups of people. I started to realise that what I needed was a framework (score) through which a group could find their own movement language and the ways of treating that language appropriate to their goal/purpose; in doing so, increasing the levels of freedom, responsibility and uncertainty.

Suddenly the responsibility of the group and the facilitator changes and the whole experience of a workshop becomes much more reflexive, and with this, more exciting! Possibilities open up because more questions are asked; the framework allows space to notice what is arising and offers the space to respond. Maybe this brings liveness to the work and therefore a heightened sense of experience and thus ownership. I am interested in not only creating processes, products and artefacts in which each participant is invested, but in finding ways to enhance each participants' embodiment of the moments they've manifested. Projects are time based, I endeavour to facilitate ownership of experience which transcends the duration of the project, leaving a visceral residue of experience in the body's memory.

[Reply](#)

Posted by [salamandatandem](#)

Filed in [Uncategorized](#) | [Edit](#)

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## **2nd Provocation – 21st Dec 2010**

**April 25, 2011**

The Touch Principle – 21st December 2010

When we were children, my father Lewis used to send us off on our favourite beach in Criccieth to find 2 identical stones. I believed it possible and ran about the place searching – because as a girl with 20/20 vision I thought I could ‘see’! Then having found what I was after, I’d place the stones in my father’s hands, satisfied as I watched and waited eagerly for the verdict. Time seemed to stand still as he explored, turned and held the stones in his hands. I felt both impatient and fascinated, as part of me surveyed the beach planning my next stone hunt, whilst noticing that his pace had slowed and the stone had become very very still....Then I could see a smile break across his face as he spoke:

*“I can feel a rough patch – there – on this one” and “notice, there is an indent on that one”.*

Then I’d look again and question, because I was sure there had been no difference between the stones. Then he’d encourage me to hold one stone then the other with my eyes closed, and I’d search with my hands....sure enough, there was the indent, and yes, I could feel that rough patch clearly now. Feeling a little down hearted I’d then try to pin him down to choose the ‘best’ one. But my father seemed to find interest and beauty in each and every stone we found, and often in the stones that seemed the least remarkable. My eyes weren’t a match for my father’s hands. He ‘**saw**’ something that I couldn’t see;

like people – there are no identical stones in the world

like stones – people are ‘equal’ to one another

Every day for about 30 years, Lewis held one particular stone which turned from grey to shiny black in his hands. He says that it acts like a kind of mantra, enabling him to access his imagination; an ever increasing sense of inner space and connection with humanity.

My father believed in, and stayed with the moment; somehow entering a parallel time frame to my own. Perceptions were slowed down, enabling him to ‘sense’ things that couldn’t be summed up and rejected like I had done in a momentary glance. Yet it seems as though such qualities are rare and undervalued in society today, and in the process of art making.

*“For many people, touch is a menial thing near the bottom of the hierarchy of senses. This attitude prevents us from creating things as deaf blind people”.*

Lewis Jones 1992

Thus, ‘Touch’ is one of the organising principles of salamanda tandem; acknowledging the role of touch and embodied ( physical) experience, in working on ourselves and with others. Where sight is judgmental and can render us numb to the beauties of the world as we attempt to deal with over stimulus, touch can be the stuff of creativity and of appreciation – the means to connect to others and to awaken the imagination.

*“The impersonality of life in the Western world has become such that we have produced a race of untouchables. We have become strangers to each other, not only avoiding but even warding off all forms of “unnecessary” physical contact, face-less figures in a crowded landscape lonely and afraid of intimacy. To the extent that this is so, we are all diminished”*

The Human Significance of Skin page xiv 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition 1986 ©Ashley Montague

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**8 Responses to “2nd Provocation”**





1. *tony baker* Says:

[December 27, 2010 at 9:51 pm](#) eNot really a commentary on the paragraphs above, more an extension or further illustration of the misgivings concerning touch in our part of the world:

the citation from Ashley Montague reminded me of a passage in the poet Charles Olson's *Mayan Letters*. He's been traveling around in the Yucatan in search, perhaps, of the kind of immediacy of contact with people and the world that he couldn't experience around his home in Massachusetts. The American experience for him was mediate, ie. contact with the world was mediated, interfered with, too indirect... and what he sought was something immediate, a direct contact with things, not just in the day to day way of living, but in the way the Maya had articulated their experience in what they created. And he writes about this in letters to his friend Robert Creeley. Somewhere he explains that he's sitting in a bus, it's crowded and – if I recall his phrase aright – he says of the way people crush against one another that “the contact is granted.... There's none of that pull away of the flesh...” that he was accustomed to.

It's that phrase “pull away of the flesh” which stuck in my mind. I feel that this is particularly true in relation to disability. In so far as the experience of disability for most people is a-normal (though possibly not for many people visiting this site), uncertainty about how to relate to it translates into uncertainty about how physically to make contact with another person. How do you embrace a person who can't reciprocate in the same way, or who has a different physical rapport with the world? Well I suppose in the Yucatan Olson visited the question might not occur but the pull away of the flesh certainly seems part of the social world in this part of Europe. As if it were a manifestation of misgiving about the Other, a cultural mistrust at some basic level, a shrinking from the im-mediate...

[Reply](#)



2. *Ray* Says:

[January 15, 2011 at 8:54 am](#) eFascinating provocation! May I add an experience of my own? When I was taking music making workshops for adults with severe learning difficulties, it became clear to me that the touch of certain “instruments” was a significant factor for a few of them. One of the pre-workshop procedures that I undertook was to separate out the instruments into rows according to material. So, for example, I would place about 20 metal instruments on a line of tables, another set of wooden ones on a different row, drums made with hide were set apart, string instruments separate etc. I would invite the dozen students (all of whom I worked with for 2 years) to choose where they would like to play. Four or five of them would walk around and, literally, feel the instruments before choosing.

I worked with this group in a variety of ways. Active listening sessions, storytelling that involved narrative (this measurably improved their memory faculty and ability to recognise causality) and critical sessions where they could respond to the recordings that they made. However, my inexperience of how to work with touch probably meant that there were many missed opportunities to explore ways forward with the four or five who were clearly more aware in this area of sensation.

I do not know whether this experience is where my slight trepidation comes from when working with electronic music making. I have worked with people using cubase – but these were advanced students and my admiration for Duncan's work probably stems partly from my appreciation of how difficult it is to work in that medium. But I can see no part for touch to play once we take away the tactile potential of handling instruments. I guess that I am uniquely unqualified to comment on how this potential might be realised as I remain inexperienced in taking forward what I might have been able to with my severely disabled students.

[Reply](#)



3. *tony baker* Says:

[January 16, 2011 at 2:17 pm e](#)The ‘tactile potential of handling instruments’ that Ray mentions is surely so fundamental that there isn’t really any music without it. I always like it that you can recognise a musician by his or her ‘touch’ ie. I mean the way a musician feels, or responds to contact with, his or her instrument, becomes a revelation of the individual playing. In French, the notes of a piano are actually called les touches, a reflection I suppose of the fact that they are the interface between a person playing and an instrument that sounds, so that to touch becomes not just an action but actually an inter-action— to touch and to be touched become part of a single gesture. And of course you hope that a music you play will eventually prove ‘touching’ for anyone listening. These uses of the word I think demonstrate the degree to which touch isn’t just a matter of reaching out to make physical contact but is in fact a close questioning of ourselves and our capacity, or not, to make contact ie. actually to construct contact. Or you might say that Ray’s remarks ‘touch on’ these issues. At least it seems clear to me that touch isn’t simply a matter of physical sensation but, more essentially, a mirror to our own natures and how we feel about ourselves and the world.

[Reply](#)



4. [Ray Says:](#)

[January 19, 2011 at 8:53 am e](#)Isabel describes the significance of touch for her father when he held stones in his hands. And for many of us, touch is perceived principally as a hand-centred sensation. Music, however, resonates the whole body. (Interesting that Ulysses ties himself to the mast as his boat passes the sirens as he knows that sound does not only affect the ears). Ignoring the impact of sound as a tactile sensation may well be another aspect of our degrading touch (which, itself, may have roots in the peculiarly religious equating of just one aspect of touch (sex) with evil).

One personal musical example of how the hand is not the sole purveyor of touch: as a violinist I can testify to the sensation of the skull being vibrated by the instrument as it rests beneath the chin. Different instruments really do FEEL different – it is not just the sound that differentiates them. I suspect that most fiddlers would agree that their attachment to their violin has a significant tactile element.

[Reply](#)



5. [Kayla Dougan Bowtell Says:](#)

[January 30, 2011 at 5:40 pm e](#)I am a bit nervous about contributing to this blog because I know that my words are not as articulate as my touch, and so I have given myself permission to write in the way that I might improvise: To chew some material, to depart and then to come back to it with the trust that throughout the process I will make sense of what is emerging and be able to structure it for others to make sense of too.

I am sitting at my work desk and my left leg is rocking from side to side, marking the pulse of my thoughts. I have just listened to two play readings: *The Nightmare before Christmas*, and one other, I wonder how the pacing of those plays is shaping my contact with this keyboard. I wasn’t ‘touched’ by either of the plays but did engage. I ‘oohed’ and ‘aahed’ at the suspense of the plot and I looked across at the actors reading, turning from one to another to another but after the readings I was quick to clap and move on to the next thing. Why didn’t I need to sit quietly for a moment? Why didn’t I need to gush about what I had just heard/watched/experienced? How did I enter the space to meet those readings? How do I enter spaces when I suspect the predominant language will be spoken? How open am I to the touch of language?

My route/root in to touch is guided by what I see, what I smell, what I perceive and how I feel. My memory of the two readings is based on the images I created, triggered by the rhythm, the movement of the

readers', my movement in response to the readers' and the words used to express the narrative. My description of the readings for others would take the form of a series of postures, behaviours and expressions; organizing myself in space according to the ways in which the scripts/actors/words/rhythms touched my landscape. There would be few words in my telling of these scripts; maybe I'm not describing the scripts but the manner in which the script manifests.

I work with people, and the scripts which shape their bodies and their bodily responses. I am negotiating with my own experience, my script, the other person's scripts and the ways in which these scripts meet. Emerging scripts are a constant, as are responses to lived scripts. Nudging, feeling, witnessing, supporting, allowing – time. By anchoring in, it is possible to extend out. I am content in my body. I am interested and curious to meet other bodies. Each individual's landscape is full of textures, strengths and vulnerabilities, questions and opinions. The ways in which these characteristics manifest is unique to each individual. The pleasure of meeting these through touch is the directness of transaction. Movement: such a refined language. Tuning into their direction through touch is revealing and exciting. Listening closely to another's extreme of movement is absorbing, forgetting my own possibilities, my own extremes, my own idiosyncrasies, and responding as honestly as possible to the initiations received through a nudge, a push, a lean, a sustained pressure, a brush. The separation of the two becomes miniscule, two subjects connected; two scripts merging and establishing something interchangeable; each individual supporting and enabling the possibility of a new, shared potential to become embedded in the landscape of the body.

[Reply](#)



6. *kevin hodgetts* Says:

[February 1, 2011 at 3:53 pm e](#)A very stimulating and diverting discussion! Interesting how touch is discussed here as a theme across different art forms. We might expect after all that touch would be a subject claimed and owned by the dance fraternity.

What i take away from this blog is how an awareness of touch is a means to re-sensitize us to the world and how we experience it; whether we are artists facilitating workshops or members of an audience taking in a play. This heightened awareness – of our bodies, the presence or absence of others and objects, the environments we move in – is what we aspire to as creative people wanting to take full account of what is about us.

Implicit here is the suggestion that touch is somewhat of a 'lost' or forgotten sense which reminds us that the way in which we as social animals process reality is contingent and subject to cultural and historical forces that we rarely notice or comment upon. It is i think good for us from time to time to step outside the everyday consensus and remind ourselves that our 'natures' are historically produced and we have the capacity to refuse the programming, to become new again and re-prioritize our senses as we see fit. This potential for starting again is enormously empowering.

[Reply](#)



7. *Ray* Says:

[February 1, 2011 at 4:33 pm e](#)I think Kevin hits the nail on the head (if you'll pardon such a visual/sonic/tactile image) when he writes that our sense of touch is contingent and subject to cultural and historical forces. A few years ago I was investigating and writing about how the different senses are described in our

language and noting how dominant and rich the visual vocabulary is. For touch I wrote “Considering how significant this tactile field is for human beings as it includes much of our experience of natural forces, violent death and making love, it is astonishing how functional the vocabulary is. Although there is some variation and development beyond the bare minimum, it is surprising how much is described just along the lines of hot/cold, sharp (rough)/blunt (smooth), hard/soft, heavy/light and wet/dry.” So if language tends to orientate us into visual and intellectual sense, perhaps music and dance are the routes through which we can escape the hegemony of the visual and experience sound and touch as equal partners?

## [Reply](#)



### 8. *julie* Says:

[February 6, 2011 at 12:58 pm e](#) Touch a feeling not in words, a gathering of impressions, images or a single source of silent communication.

when I'm with people who have a different way of communicating, touch and how it may be perceived, initiated and responded to has the possibility to become a living creative language.

I find i have to give time and really take care for this language to develop and exist on equal terms. so many times I have witnessed a care professional trying to enable a person to join in by physically prompting them. the moment for creative language on equal terms disappearing in an instant, leaving the person being supported unable to initiate their own response. touch as a sense for communication between people needs time, sensitivity and understanding.

for some people a touch may feel like a frightening trigger, an overload of sense information, at the same time for others touch may be the only way to communicate freely, and creatively.

as care professionals and artists working with people we can become scared to use touch but this can have the effect of denying some people the opportunity to become comfortable with touch, while keeping others in isolation with no way to experience communication.

when I'm dancing with a person or just sitting with a person who does not use spoken language, touch does not have to make sense in the ordinary way. it does not have to be based on practical, academic or therapeutic ideas and outcomes.

it can be a quiet creative exchange, where there is opportunity for people to feel equal.

### 9. *salamandatandem* Says:

[October 28, 2011 at 11:24 pm e](#) In the course of this debate I've formed a close connection with Martha Blassnigg who is an academic studying based at Plymouth university in the psychology department. After I wrote the 2nd Provocation she wrote this extra-ordinary reply to me about intuition which I am very grateful for. Click here: [Martha Blassnigg Intuition for Isabel Jones March-1](#)

Posted by salamandatandem

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## **3rd Provocation – 30th March 2011**

**April 25, 2011**

Provocation 3 – What is the value of originality and authenticity in the work we do?

Salamanda Tandem Principle 1993- “Anything we create for ourselves is intrinsically better than what we are given; when we adopt styles, or assume / mimic existing ideas they can lose their original significance. We need to make our own culture which has relevance to who we are and which reflects our own experience. Authenticity is therefore central to our work”

vs

The fallacy of originality: “all ideas are secondhand and drawn from a million different sources” (J.Lethem, ‘The Ecstasy of Influence’)

The conceptual boundary between us and the world we inhabit – the device by which we get to conceive of ourselves as discrete individuals – is, in truth, a very porous (if not completely imaginary) separation.

We are made up of each other and the things that surround us, now and in the past.

In the light of this, where does originality stand and is it worth striving for?

And the how:

How do we aim to produce original work and how might we put structures in place to encourage others to do so?

How might we produce work that surprises – that avoids us repeating ourselves?

We begin with a quote:

In “The Ecstasy of Influence” Lethem writes, “The kernel, the soul – let us go further and say the substance, the bulk, the actual and valuable material of all human utterances – is plagiarism. For substantially all ideas are secondhand, consciously and unconsciously drawn from a million outside sources, and daily used by the garnerer with a pride and satisfaction born of the superstition that he originated them; whereas there is not a rag of originality about them anywhere except the little discoloration they get from his mental and moral caliber and his temperament, and which is revealed in characteristics of phrasing. Old and new make the warp and woof of every moment. There is no thread that is not a twist of these two strands. By necessity, by proclivity, and by delight, we all quote.” (1)

On 30th March 2011 a fantastic gathering of practitioners, musicians, dancers, carers and designers got together at salamanda tandem’s space to debate and explore this provocation. Present were: Isabel Jones (Artistic director) Sarah Kettley (Senior Lecturer in Textile Design, Nottingham Trent University), Sara Sanderson (Diversity Officer, Arts Council), Duncan Chapman (composer), Ray Kohn (independent quality assurance consultant and musician), Julie Hood (dance artist/care professional), John Mitchell (architect), Kevin Hodgetts (writer/film-maker) and connected remotely via Skype from France, Tony Baker (writer and musician).

The following contributions were as follows:

Tony Baker – Glad to have been able to listen in on skype; if I’d had the chance to say anything my pennyworth would have gone for authenticity because I think ‘originality’, in so far as it exists, is in any case subsumed within authenticity, though I feel more relevantly that originality doesn’t really occur. We all steal and rework from our own histories and never reach a true ‘origin’. I probably feel too that ‘originality’ is a buzzword in a culture that hawks its cult of personality through all the markets it can find so that as a quality it’s vastly over-priced: witness Susan Boyle if you like who, poor soul, had the misfortune (I’d say) to be able to sing fine well for the context in which she found herself and possibly quite authentically – in relation to herself, who knows ? – but of course was taken up because she seemed such an ‘original’, such a one-off. Which, in terms of the music she actually made, was patently and ludicrously obviously not the case. She may have been nearly ‘an original’ but she certainly wasn’t ‘original’.

I also like the ambiguity of forgeries in painting: I mean, a forger undermines the notion of ‘originality’ by actually faking an origin, but he/she does it so well that it appears real even to those who are paid to say otherwise, so that they achieve authenticity by spoiling the notion of ‘originality’ without which the art market can’t justify its commodification of the art-object. To be honest I can’t see why a forger, if he/she can produce ‘Rembrandt’s’ to the point that I can’t tell the difference (and don’t care anyway), shouldn’t be celebrated for a talent. But the economy requires unique, ‘original’ objects so forgery is a crime.

Probably the real debate in an ST context is over the relationship between the maker and the thing made – to what extent it’s an ‘authentic’ thing so far as the maker is concerned (and the maker may be – in fact probably usually is – more than one person, often an ‘artist’ in tandem with another): to what extent is what’s made the outcome of freely made/spontaneous choices, or felt to be satisfactory, by the maker, and to what extent is it imposed (stick your bit of colored paper in the box provided etc.). It’s the question we all face I guess: does this or that

ring true or not. Which reminds me of the poet Tom Meyer who said of a poem that it's like bread: you know that's done right when you can tap it on the bottom and it makes the right sound...

Anyway, so to the live debate...

Sarah Kettley (SK)- began the live debate by saying that conflating the terms originality and authenticity is unhelpful as there is a tension between the two. While aspirations towards originality can lead to a desire to create something that feels new for the sake of it (pointless), authenticity – which is more about being true to the essence of something – can be practically useful in steering us to create new work of integrity. Authenticity confers an authority to work. It is a quality that emerges through a good artistic process and is within the power of an artist to deliver. Claims to originality, on the other hand, are often arbitrated and decided upon by others, by critics for instance, after the fact.

Ray Kohn (RK) – posited that if there is value to be found in the qualities of originality and authenticity, we need to ask 'valuable to whom?' To artists, to audiences, to critics....? Depending on our position (our role) in relation to the work in question, descriptions of originality and authenticity will achieve different things. To an artist they might confer status, to an audience they might encourage identification and affiliation, to a critic they can be useful indexes by which work is placed, received and ultimately understood.

In response to SK's point about the necessity of understanding these two qualities separately, a clarification of terms was attempted:

Claims to originality are often about separating off – the attempt by an artist (consciously or otherwise) to occupy a space of their own, to assert their individuality and unique status. This can be a powerful motivation for any of us to achieve our art and help others to do so as in the act of doing it we assert our presence, we fight 'invisibility' and alienation: we refuse power.

The quest for originality has a downside!

John Mitchel (JM) raised an issue around the unhelpfulness of originality in the context of architecture. Specifically he was concerned that expectations to deliver a very visible originality (as demanded by the market) now seem to trump other fundamental concerns such as the integrity of matching design and use which is more often a quieter yet more significant achievement proven over time. In other words, new buildings now have to be created with a view to establishing a specific identity: they are serving as advertisements for themselves rather than meeting the real needs of people. This focus on creating the noteworthy ultimately ends up encouraging a kind of second-guessing of what might thrill others (– and often it is the acclaim of professional insiders, of peers, that is courted the most). Originality is increasingly achieved at the expense of authenticity (2).

While there is a danger that the quality of originality can potentially crowd out other – equally desirable qualities to be found in work – it is true that the original product has an aura, and a power in this aura, which can cut through a crowded world of communications and deliver messages of urgency and power that have real resonance (3).

Duncan Chapman (DC) raised the point that originality is a quality that is associated with Western traditions of art over Eastern. He talked about the closed repertoire of Japanese classical music in which the point is not to innovate, but to follow and connect to an age old tradition. This is where the power is in this form of music. A similar point can be made about Eastern traditions of visual art (4).

Kevin Hodgetts (KH) contrasted the values seen as important in the crafts tradition – humility, belonging to a tradition, belonging to a narrative of making, responding to materials and environments – against the fixation with originality in the arts world (5). In a sense the quest for originality in the field of participatory arts is a difficult fit. Do we use the arts to bring ourselves closer to others or further apart?

On authenticity:

We discussed how authenticity could be a feeling, a thought, a quality in a text, but it could also be seen as a commentary on a process, on the integrity of relationships involved in the production of work, on responses to materials and environments.

There is an issue around rationality. Julie Hood (JH) wondered, drawing on her experience of supporting dance works with learning disabled people whether authenticity can be planned. Is it possible to consciously produce the authentic, or, rather, is the authentic arrived at naively, by refusing to know that which might get in the way of an honest response? Often, it is what we do not know which releases us to achieve authentic work.

On the other hand RK talked of the conscious effort he deliberately brings to his work to achieve the authentic. Asking yourself 'how could I be truer' is an approach we are all capable of taking on and applying to work. Being conscious of the game and what is at stake is all part of our creativity.

According to KH this notion of choosing to be truer connects to an idea developed in the field of cultural studies by academic Judith Butler about how there is an increasing sense of individuals performing themselves in the contemporary world (6). She suggests we are less convinced by the concept of the one true self and instead navigate through different life situations choosing actions to perform that best fit the circumstances. This sense that performance is not just something that happens up on a stage but is deeply implicated in every aspect of our lives speaks of a playfulness and new creative licence in the way we all now live our lives. Of course this problematises ideas of authenticity. How can we be true to situations and contexts when we are not being true to ourselves, when our essential true self has ceased to exist or refuses to be identified? We could call this the problem of the fractured self. That there is never one 'I', but a number of competing 'I's.

This isn't to say that authenticity is impossible. Indeed authenticity is often a quality we can identify in a piece of work or in the actions of somebody. It is more that the decision to be authentic is one discourse among many and relates not to a description of real relationships between people, materials and contexts, but a perceived quality we can discern in these interactions or project onto them.

In summary it is possible to see that while originality and authenticity are obviously good and worthwhile aspirations (who, after all, would aspire to create work that is unoriginal or inauthentic?), there are limits to how far these values help us in the search to produce meaningful and satisfying work. Although the two values can often co-exist in pieces of work, we discussed scenarios where authenticity could only be guaranteed by relinquishing the commitment to originality (in the example of architecture), and where originality can only be achieved by eschewing the old, the familiar, turning away from the authenticity of where we come from and who we are.

As part of the day participants were asked to bring 2 objects; 1- an object of significance and 2-an object of insignificance.

KH shared a story about the significance of an important object – his cloth cap. Coming from a solidly working class family and neighbourhood, KH was the only member of his family and local community who went to university and subsequently entered into a professional life and a lifestyle most commonly associated with middle class people. This has left him with a lasting sense of disconnection from his roots and an anxiety of betrayal about wanting away from where he came from. Wearing a flat cap was identified by KH as a symbol of political solidarity with where he came from; a form of public acknowledgement of his roots. He feels this is important to him, a political duty of sorts.

At the same time KH shared his concern that this issue of social class as a predominant point of identification in his life was potentially limiting in that it could make some advances in personal development difficult if not impossible. He therefore harboured mixed feelings about the cap: on the one hand it conferred a sense of belonging and affiliation with others (authenticity), on the other hand he knew this identification couldn't be all consuming as it would close down new opportunities and the possibility of change (originality). In this example, the values can be seen in an oppositional tension with one another.

Artists then talked about their different approaches to work revealing how a similar tension exists for them between the significant and insignificant, between what they know and hold to be important and that which they encounter by chance in the world. DC talked of finding a group of pebbles on a beach and using these as an inspiration to create a new sound work. He enjoys finding starting points for new work in random elements and events. In this way he can surprise himself and be challenged to respond creatively(7).

JM followed up on the idea of how something apparently insignificant opened up a whole new way for a project he did; talked of a consultation that took place prior to a new school being planned during which a throwaway comment about whether the new premises would contain a shoe shop ended up being taken seriously and followed through into the final design.

Sarah Sanderson (SS) talked about a memento from her wedding ceremony as an object she placed enormous value in and store by. She talked about exchange being important in any notion of authenticity.

JH contributed a prepared written tribute to the beauty and design integrity to be found in glass marbles.

Isabel Jones (IJ) brought an old and heavily used braille scrabble set used by her blind father until the dots had become too worn to read, she shared memories of its importance and how the set constituted a continuous presence in her upbringing.

RK brought a violin he was given as a young boy and talked about its value as a means to separate off and become immersed in his own creativity. It represented something pure and uncontaminated as opposed to the compromise he saw all around him in social relationships and contexts. RK went onto to his object of insignificance, and he introduced x-rays of his chest that he was instructed to keep after an operation. These x-rays would be taken by many as objects of significance telling the story as they do of mortality and bodily limits. RK refuses this definition. He deliberately refuses to place any value on these objects or give them any power over himself. As authentic as the x-rays are, RK chooses the originality of his own imagination over and above these official verdicts of who he now is (8).

This potential of our imaginations allowing us to escape limitations imposed on us is something we obviously have to hold onto very carefully. DC talked about his participatory work in schools with children bringing very narrow ideas of what music is. There is a need to escape questions of existing taste and to move participants beyond what they already know or think they know. The only way to achieve distinctive quality work with non-musicians is to broaden out the definition of what music is, to widen the repertoire of choices and responses.

This of course can be difficult because it cuts against common preconceptions and expectations as to what music is, as to what dance is, etc. IJ talked about her experience of working with non-artists. Participants can potentially be left feeling estranged and alienated by encountering strange new artistic forms so part of the job is for artists to build trust, to put in place supportive structures and contexts, to enlist participants in the adventure of doing something different (9). As DC reported the response of one young person to hearing a piece of avant-garde composition: "I don't like it, but it's good isn't it?". People can be opened up.

RK agreed adding that instead of asking groups what sort of music they would like to make, a more productive starting point would be to ask them how they want to feel.

SK talked about this ground-up originality being rooted in an attentiveness to the world, being alive to the detail and to the nature of the materials we use. In this way, we can start again in bringing forth an authentic response to what we find in the world rather than being inhibited by the pernicious influence of others and what has gone before.

It is clear that originality has always been critical to Salamanda Tandem's work but that this originality is rooted in a particular set of practices that serve to guarantee integrity is present. This can be best summed up by calling it a "ground-up" approach, a process that starts with the person, a process uncontaminated by audience expectations, the market, or by the traditions of previous work.

This discussion has revealed that another kind of originality is out there, an originality that is more concerned with noteworthiness and playing to the gallery of received opinion. But the existence of some bad faith at work elsewhere in the creative industries shouldn't deflect the company from the critical importance of originality in the work that it does. While originality and authenticity are clearly not the same thing, it is worth concluding that a combination of both principles applied to the work we do serves to ensure that our art continues to be distinctive but not at the expense of its integrity.

Notes and references

1) from Jonathan Lethem, 'The Ecstasy of Influence', Doubleday, not yet published (to be released Nov 2011). Extract found on website <http://www.themillions.com> in a very interesting post by Bill Morris about the sanctity of authorship and copyright in the literary world. Go to <http://www.themillions.com/2011/01/jay-z-is-not-a-proudhon-of-hip-hop.html>



- 2) There is a fascinating novel of ideas by Ayn Rand called “The Fountainhead”, Penguin Classics, 2007, in which the internal and external struggles of an emerging American architect in are discussed. Although the book champions a rampant brand of free market individualism bordering on the fascist, it raises interesting questions about the ideal contexts in which great architecture and great art is achieved.
- 3) The notion of original art work containing an aura of power wrapped up in its singularity was introduced by Walter Benjamin in his seminal work “The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction”, Penguin, 2008.
- 4) A novel brilliantly documenting the clash between different traditions of visual art in Istanbul in the 16th century was produced by Orhan Pamuk “My Name is Red”, Faber and Faber, 2002. As well as being a riveting whodunnit, this book contains a fascinating account of the different values at work in the Eastern and Western traditions. While the Western tradition is all about leaving a mark on a piece of work to signal its uniqueness and establish a singular reputation for the artist, the Eastern tradition instead insists on the submission of the artist to the glory of an established tradition. In this world the job of the artist is to produce work that contains no trace of originality at all.
- 5) see very interesting book on this by Matthew Crawford, “The case for working with your hands”, Viking, 2009.
- 6) Judith Butler, “Gender Trouble”, Routledge, New Ed Edition, 2006.
- 7) There are numerous examples of artists making use of random stimuli to enhance their work. Notably Brian Eno and artist Peter Schmidt (thank you for pointing out their joint ownership Duncan!) invented a deck of cards called the “Oblique strategies”. Eno has used these to support him in his music production work. On each card there would be a different prompt statement such as “trust in the you of now” or “question the heroic approach”. These lines of thought would then be applied to his decision making processes.
- 8) This theme of refusing the definitions of others, of refusing power, is much discussed in the work of Michel Foucault. See “Power: the essential work of Michel Foucault, Penguin, 2002.
- 9) Salamanda Tandem is planning to publish a handbook of practical techniques and methods by which work is achieved in 2012.

## 2 Responses to “3rd Provocation – 30th March 2011”

1.  [Duncan](#) Says:

[April 25, 2011 at 8:07 pm e](#) Great to see all of this up and lots to think about and respond to a couple of points (after a quick read)

“Duncan Chapman (DC) raised the point that originality is a quality that is associated with Western traditions of art over Eastern.”

I don’t think its a case of one tradition “OVER” another, there’s plenty in the Western traditions of Art that is not about originality (Classical Ballet or the way in which you might perform Wagner or certain folk musics for example)...

I do think that there has been a pressure to try and always be “innovative” which often becomes conflated with being Original. A little story (as Tony is probably listening !)

A good friend of mine is an organ consultant and advisor, if you build yourself a concert hall or cathedral he will come and be able to help you commission an instrument or restore a historic one taking into account the acoustics and potential use etc, One of his big jobs is looking after the Organ at the festival hall in London which they are about to restore and put back in the Hall. Some “innovative” arts consultants were part of the overall planning for the Southbank centre and suggested a heap of “Original” and “innovative” events that they could do with the (pre)assumption that people would need a careful introduction to the idea of the organ in a big hall etc When the final proposal went to the

Heritage Lottery fund they asked whether in addition to the Hip Hop Dance project, poetry competition, primary school history projects etc etc there would be an opportunity for people to simply walk into the hall and hear the instrument playing music that worked for the space ! With the desire to be Original the “innovation” people had almost missed out on the very reason why the Organ was put there in the first place something they would have found out had they asked the person who looks after it, but that’s not “new” and “sexy”...

Sometimes you have to simply do the thing that works even if you have done it a thousand times before , with integrity it will always be different and with authenticity it will have the power to inspire.....

my second point is a bit more pedantic ! (sorry)

Oblique Strategies was a collaboration between Eno and artist Peter Schmidt who sadly died in 1980 Eno is one of those “brands” (like apple ?) who has the ability for people to believe that they invented things or were the originators when often they were the force that brought them to the public attention .....(something that we might want to discuss in terms of visibility of our work at some point ?)

[Reply](#)

2.  [salamandatandem](#) Says:

October 28th 2011. Apologies dear friends for the sheer amount of time it’s taken me to upgrade this blog. I’ve been sent some fascinating contributions from [Ray Kohn in response to the 3rd Provocation](#) who has written an article on authenticity, a time lapse recording from Duncan he took during the day and words from [Tony Baker on the 3rd Provocation](#) who took part in the debate via skype from France and as he tapped onto his keyboard the sound of us talking cut out so he snatched corroded moments!

Posted by salamandatandem

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## 4th Provocation June 2011

On The Art Of Disappearing

The idea of disappearing has long since been a fascination for salamanda tandem. In the early days of ‘Eye Contact’ (a company of blind and sighted performers), Duncan, Lewis and I had witnessed how an experienced blind performer could be ‘rubbed out’ in a moment, by the presence of a less experienced but more confident sighted one. This troubled me deeply and in 1992, I gave a presentation to the board of East Midlands Arts in Loughborough, where I suggested that I’d found a solution: via ‘advocating vanishing’ from the finished work so that others could be more present; where eventually the mark of my success was the emergence of another person as artist and my own redundancy. Afterwards in conversation with Francois Matarrasso who was also speaking at the event, he disagreed with me and said that the artist had value and that we shouldn’t be thinking in terms of making ourselves redundant. I was young, and knew intuitively that he was right but couldn’t see how I could bring this together in tandem with my politics. I think this question still drives salamanda tandem.

The following Provocation was posted up for salamanda tandem on the EMPAF website by Kevin Hodgetts in June 2011 following a trip we made to Rotterdam to the International Community Arts Festival there. If you read to the end you will find a wonderful response from Julie Hood who without realising has answered so many of my long and soul searching questions

**What is it about the role of the artist working in participatory settings that excites so much passionate debate and strong feeling?**

As part of the recent EMPAF delegation at the International Community Arts Festival in Rotterdam I witnessed an arts event that sparked no little controversy and animated discussion. A composer by the name of Merlijn

Twaalfhoven previewed a new piece of music called 'The Air We Breathe'. The performance was billed as an interactive concert featuring professional singers, amateur choirs and audience participation. Sure enough, the composer, aided by a number of rehearsed vocalists and choirists 'planted' in the theatre crowd, led the rest of us through his score encouraging co-ordinated vocal contributions from the assembled ranks. The result was very impressive and left many with the feeling they had really been part of something bigger than themselves.

The question that dominated conversation afterwards was this: could such an event be classified and accepted as community art? As accomplished as it was, what right did the work have to claim a platform at a festival meant to be celebrating community art?

The problem for many delegates was around the role of the professional artist(s) who undoubtedly played a very visible and substantive part in the proceedings. Conversely, the public participation was seen as insubstantial and limited to the performance of pre-figured vocal parts. The role of the non-professionals in this process could be characterised as colouring-in a picture already drawn by someone higher up the artistic hierarchy. The event annoyed many delegates because it seemed to do nothing to dispel the idea that some of us are more expert than others. It reinforced notions of hierarchy, it reminded us that distinctions between performers (and the skills they bring) are inevitable. As a community art event it was seen by some as close to heresy.

I was reminded that the function of community arts is to reinforce a sense of togetherness and solidarity. To emphasis equality and unity over difference. So if the nature of the artist's role in community settings shouldn't be a determining one, what should it be? There is a body of opinion which believes the role of the community artist is to bring to the surface, and make visible, the talents and capacities 'found' in community settings. This is the community artist as benign archeologist, an explorer with a remit and duty to report back only that which is already present.

I am left wondering, is it possible to conceive of a role for the artist working in community settings that is less passive, less concerned about disappearing themselves from the production of work, or is this a betrayal of what community arts has always been about? And where does this anxiety of influence leave us as politically committed individuals wanting to make a difference through the work we do?

These are 2 interesting responses that came via the EMPAF web site from Julie Hood and Kevin Ryan

#### Julie Hood Posted: Thu 30th June, 2011 @ 9:29pm

i feel sad for all artists here. people who try to sense and bring creativity. to be bound both by the perceived rules of community art, and the hierarchy of professional artistic expression. there is no freedom to move here. boxed in by the boundaries surrounding these seemingly different ideas. are artists not part of community? is a community not allowed to express the differences that make it? this distinction between non-professional and professional is a dangerous tool. being used (consciously or unconsciously) by people to justify the action of keeping others separate within a creative environment. how can we move through these boundaries if we continue to refer to each other as non being or being. there are only two shapes here. why is it so impossible for us to honour our instincts and sense a recognition that equally. a person with lots of artistic experience will bring creative elements that we may not have experienced before. at the same time a person who comes to an art form for the first time may reveal creative ideas of their own. both have the possibility to inform and enrich the other. for me it is not a question of whether the artist should or should not disappear, the artist is part of community and also has the right to creative expression. the question for me is how the artist meets the creativity of others. the air we breath is common to each of us and i believe the capacity for creativity is also common to each of us.

#### Kev Ryan: Posted: Wed 20th July, 2011 @ 7:24pm

Moving with the immovable...from the bone..the ossified centre of this or that theory brings structure...maintains form...yet the bones have joints which articulate....vary....what is immovable has means to make itself move...within a range in different ways....shaping itself and creating shapes in the space around it.....combining with others in a million different combinations....

...and then the muscles.....the strength and power of the movement .....

...the fluids which give the movement life and energy....

moving from these is different than moving from the bones...power and flow...not opposities but infinite possibilities.....

...and the organs...the larger structures which maintain a focus on sustainability of the whole organism, which beat with a pulse, which give us the ability to meet with and build with other organisms over time through continuing to exist.....moving from the organs shapes the world in different ways too....

...and the nervous system.....sensing...feeling.....finding a way which is out there and now...responsive,,, fresh...tingling with what a billion possibilities and approaches and experiences might bring.....

We don't deny our bodies flexibility, adaptability, possibility or the process of doing one thing that seems at odds with what we need to do to achieve another that we do.....to ossify...to structure...to question the limits to which the muscles drive the bones...yes why not? To sense and draw those bones somewhere new...yes why not? The body is always learning adapting, moving.

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The body of work we call community arts called (calls) itself a 'movement'.....movements in the social sphere interweave in complex ways....simplifying our approaches to the bare bones, important as it is can only ever be part of the story of something as dynamic as a movement.....a movement which requires many things, over time, to work together.....

We can influence the movements of other bodies...but we cannot make all of their movements for them.....

.....and we haven't even begun to think about other processes like breathing, digestion, elimination, thinking and feeling.....

My body, my heart, my mind, my soul does not require a parent to tell me where the limits of my practice are, or how I should be engaging in this process and how i should not be doing this. My body, mind, heart and soul requires an openness, friendship and shared dialogue with others committed to this work to help me explore and understand how it all fits together from time to time.....

To re-member...put back the bits that have become dominant...or lazy...or lost...and celebrate the remarkable achievements when it all works and comes together.....to work to understand, as fully as I can what is beyond my knowledge and experience.....

.....whoops...wake up!!!

just lost in the flow there for a moment!!

Posted by salamandatandem

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## 5th Provocation October 2011

October 28, 2011

5th Provocation: “On Meeting”

It’s a tremendous privilege to ‘know’, and experience ‘meeting’ another person through sound art.

I had such an experience last week in Norway where I sang with a young singer Tine, and a musician/composer called Jon from Signo a centre for deafblind people. Unable to communicate through words or signs as neither of us spoke the same language, Tine offered me a wide palate of vocal sounds that grew and expanded there and then between us. This was an example of finding, allowing, making, remaking as well as shifting the platform of support between us, done moment by moment in creative dialogue with each other; responding as it worked or even teetered on the edge.

This was a performance full of complexity, even virtuosity and it was nearly 45 minutes long, but most of all it was both beautiful and a journey into the unknown, where shared senses of loss and wonder met through this world of sound. I have never experienced the like – we gave and received, as mutual appreciation healed us. Was this therapy for me? for her? or was it art? I’m sure the music we produced was worthy of an audience, but we had no audience to speak of, only this acute sense of listening to one another and Jon there too joining in as both witness and participating musician.

It worries me though, that when presented with a ‘show’ to deliver, us artists can easily fall back on impositional ways of producing the work, marshaling the sounds and movements of others, or over tidying up their canvasses. Perhaps it’s to remove the fear of failure or is it because we aim for an ‘aesthetic’? One thing I know for sure is that the alternative is in a very different register.

### 2 Responses to “5th Provocation October 2011”



1. *Julie Hood Says:*

[October 31, 2011 at 4:35 pm e](#)

finding these words, allowing my own to rest a while, I follow. letting images and impressions move around until they settle into meaning. there are no expressive faces for me to read here, or living persons to touch, yet i am able to listen for the voice in these words and can nearly hear their song. i imagine the artists Isabel, Tine and Jon; i imagine the space between and around them. voices unfurling, turning to one another, communicating feelings through tones. i imagine the air moving and shaping with sound. i wasn’t there as audience, witness or participant but from Isabel’s writing I can sense the at once combination of both complexity and extraordinary simplicity. the complexity of being ready to recognise, being receptive to impressions forming in the moment. being enabled and enabling a sense of permission to move with ideas or change them. the extraordinary simplicity of stillness, emptiness, a kindly nothing, a waiting for.....  
interplay of movement and stillness, the pace we give these in our minds and bodies. the qualities and feelings we bring with them when communicating or collaborating with others. all these expressions are alive with meaning when we bring this art into form.  
it is difficult to make this art fit in neatly with our current ways of identifying, categorising, and re-packaging for sale back to ourselves. I am not at all sure if it is even fair to try, as sometimes the process of trying to make someone and their art fit in with our preconceptions can be damaging. the stage is set

for fear of failure or an overwhelming thirst for success. we already know these things; we are familiar with their effects upon us in our culture. is that why we need to fit in with and perpetuate this process, repeating it time and again, because we are so familiar with it?  
In all this effort of repetition we may miss the opportunity to be brave;  
we may not notice the enrichment held in the art of the unknown.

## 6<sup>th</sup> Provocation October 2011

October 2011

### On the aesthetics (and politics) of working with people

What follows is a beautiful piece of writing from Tony Baker, which he generously wrote for me in 2008, at a time when I felt salamanda tandem was profoundly misunderstood and the company's future was threatened. Here, Tony grasps the nettle on the question of aesthetics.

Dear Is

When you voiced your anxieties about recent misunderstandings of your work at our French concert, I suppose in some ways I wasn't surprised. While I've always known you as the most dedicated and scrupulous professional, I've always known too that your methods – or I should maybe call them your 'politics', as in this context I see the two as integral – were necessarily open to misunderstanding. And I mean 'necessarily'. If the politics are to have meaning, I think the risk is necessary to what you're doing, and have been doing for more than 20 years. But that can't make misunderstandings any easier to deal with.

Back in – when was it, 2003? – we did a week's work in Tamworth with a group of young people with disabilities. I think there were five days of workshops, using all sorts of techniques and materials; we made dance, music, diapos... the floor sculptures using those sticks I remember particularly vividly. On the Friday afternoon we made a performance exploiting all these different elements, a sort of Cage-like happening though I know we planned pretty carefully how to prepare the space (including how to exclude, indeed vanish the proscenium arch in the hall!), and pace the event. At one point in the performance a lass of about 16 got up and danced in the light of a diapo she'd made to music that I made with another of the participants. She was a heavy sort of person, her movements wonderfully and effortlessly ungraceful in the classical sense. It was all profoundly natural. The sort of thing actually that Régine Chopinot, whose words I've been translating recently and who's something of an enfant terrible in French dance, works hours to get from the best contemporary dancers in this country. After our performance, which was attended by, I think, 2 people other than those directly concerned with the workshops, I was talking with someone, a parent or a social assistant of some kind, I forget now which, and she was both bewildered and delighted. Never before had anyone known this girl to want to dance before. And on this occasion the girl seemed to enter the space and dance utterly without misgivings, as if she'd always been doing it.

Now I do, currently, around 50 gigs of one sort or another a year, and am lucky enough to work with a number of terrifically good musicians and artists, but I don't think any performance I've ever done has been better than that in Tamworth. Of course, every gig's different and none really comparable, but the point is that I'd have been glad to present that Tamworth performance to any public in any place for I know by any appropriate standards it was good. I'll bet Régine, who's just finished an enthusiastically reviewed show at the Beaubourg in Paris, would have been inspired and figuring there and then how to use what she'd seen.

But this is the difficulty and why I say you're open to necessary misunderstanding. When I say that gig was good I mean it as a professional musician who struggles with his art, practices it day in day out in the hope of making something as meaningful as I can from whatever skills I have—in the hope of communicating, involving, stirring... moving anyone listening, whether it's two people or a thousand. I believe none of the very few who were there on that Friday in Tamworth weren't moved, but here is where the misunderstandings arise. Had there been anyone from the press, or a representative from any body supporting the project, I'm confident the responses would have been enthusiastic; I'm sure they'd have said how extraordinary it was to see such creativity from such a person, indeed such a group. Which would have been totally true. But it would have been only half the story. My approach is aesthetic – learning disabled or no, it was a moving performance on aesthetic grounds.

I suspect for anyone from outside it would have been moving because the dancer happened to have a learning disability. And in that distinction – between the aesthetic concerns of the artist inside the work and the often socially-orientated concerns of those who come from outside – is built the whole arena of your methods which I'm calling 'political'.

These are subtle distinctions. If we could have magicked that performance to the South Bank in a suitably arranged space and had an innocent public to watch, it would more likely have been seen on the right terms; the environment would have invited the public to respond aesthetically. A hall in Tamworth that might be used for badminton later in the day or a pensioners' lunch club later in the week, is bound to invite different responses even though for me, as an artist, there is absolutely no difference in my motivations and commitments. We all see what our preconceptions encourage us to see. And our politics are inextricable from our preconceptions – politics are after all in the literal sense about 'people'. If I have a prior concern that says I'm committed to working in the arts with people of limited capacity or opportunity because that is a means to the end of dismantling a little those limits – god knows a worthy aim, surely – then that's how my work will tend to be understood. Your misfortune (though I really think it's your fortune: certainly it's what makes you unique, even if it's problematic) is to be an artist whose politics are framed by art and not primarily by your art's social consequences, however vital they may be. Yet it seems your work is often understood as if the social consequences were the purpose.

Probably this doesn't matter when it concerns your own creations with professional artists – Triptych, Corrosion and on down the list over the years. Because the technical capacities of those you work with are so high, such performances come sufficiently clearly within the domain of what looks like art that the work, at least at that level, isn't misunderstood. No one would think to say of Corrosion that it's remarkable because dancer X is actually a mother of 4 children, two of whom don't sleep at night and whose partner's away on a 6-month contract in Bahrain, or singer Y is currently going through a crisis of religious faith and a divorce &c., because their technique – their artistry – makes such things irrelevant. But to say of the Tamworth performance that it's remarkable because the girl was disabled is, to me as an artist, a response of this order. She obviously had no technique to overcome the expectations of her. Corrosion is judged as dance, the Tamworth work is judged as exemplary work in a field closer to therapy. And yet, if we only knew how to apply appropriate standards I don't think such distinctions could be made. A good performance is a good performance is a good performance (and vice versa – to be measured in terms of what it says that's not already been said, and how far it moves those who witness it).

It's really difficult for a public to have an appropriate measure for what you do through Salamanda Tandem. The range of the company's work is so great that there can be no uniform standard by which to understand its quality. If one has certain expectations appropriate to one aspect of the work and not another and yet applies them throughout, one will misunderstand what one sees. It would like getting a plumber to repair a leaking tap and then complaining that he hasn't stopped water coming in through the roof. It's here that the issue is political, for ST's performances (and I'd regard workshops as a kind of performance) begin with the potential of those participating. It's a human choice. It's not a choreography that says "I intend to do this", who/what can I use to realise that end? The work begins with the who/what and its intention is to discover what is latent there already. In that respect Corrosion and Tamworth are all of an aesthetic piece. A sculptor or a potter does this all the time – drawing out that which is latent in a piece of wood or a lump of clay. In performance work one is confronted often by the expectation of a certain prior accomplishment that will allow you to express something but which, if lacking, means the performance doesn't work (he didn't play in tune, she didn't move in time &c); and this is simply not always your aesthetic. Your political choice is to start with what is humanly possible in any given context and create with that. You don't explain this – you have positively not to try – because you won't trespass on the human potential by defining your meanings in advance. I see this as necessary to your stance, but it's also why I think you're 'necessarily open to misunderstanding'. The lass in Tamworth was plainly not a dancer. How then does an innocent public recognise her dance? My answer is that she isn't a dancer because that is not her life. But for 3 minutes in a stunningly vivid way she was permitted to become a dancer on terms that were hers and which the occasion transformed on to an aesthetic plane which couldn't be mistaken if one knew how to look. That she ceased to be a dancer the moment she ceased to move (as your collaborators in professional work do not, because it is their life and work) says nothing about the quality of what actually happened.

I think in the end an artist can only be a witness; anything else devolves sooner or later into propaganda. Post facto art becomes evidence, but that isn't actually the work itself. If what I've written here looks like an attempt to summon evidence, well, maybe it is, but primarily it's a witness to what I know of you as an artist. I hope it's of some use to you. I hope it's of some use to you to know that there are witnesses here in France who, knowing you exclusively as a performing artist and having no other preconceptions, recognised instinctively the direction of your work. After our concert in June one woman, as she explained to me later, was particularly moved by the final dance. She had never seen that sort of vocabulary of movement exploited in that sort of way. She recognised

a skilled artist not least because she recognised elements of the material the dance transformed. But then she would – she had a preparation few have: her day work, she explained, was the administration of a centre for people with disabilities.

And on....

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Dr Tony Baker: Poet and Jazz Musician, Loire Valley France



1. [string quartet ensembles](#) Says:

[October 17, 2013 at 11:46 pm e](#)

Great goods from you, man. I have understand your stuff previous to and you're just too excellent. I actually like what you've acquired here, really like what you are stating and the way in which you say it. You make it enjoyable and you still care for to keep it wise. I can't wait to read far more from you. This is really a terrific website.