**Anthony Schrag**

Artist and lecturer in Cultural Management at Queen Margaret University Edinburgh

Hello, my name is Dr. Anthony Schrag. I'm an artist and researcher based at Queen Margaret's University in Edinburgh.

Just start you off with the statement “Everything is going to be okay”.

I was invited to provide a little bit of a provocation for you regarding cultural developments that are happening in Renfrewshire over the next while.

I'd like to start with this little video. It's a video I made decades ago now. It's a video that I made with the I suppose assumption that I was going to make a single authored piece of work. And so this is me. You can see I am now upside down, you could see that the gravity is pulling my my shirt up and the blood’s running to my head , and what I'm doing is I'm hooking my feet into the underneath of the stairs as I walk upstairs but if you actually look, I’m actually upside down. And originally thought it was going to be the single authored piece of work. But it wasn't to be and this clip which is playing now was my practice run. And as I was practising to make sure I didn't fall in smash my head open … which was possible … I had forgot to lock the doors and it's very busy office building. And because I forgot to lock the doors … what happens is that, the lady comes down the stairs. And when I looked at that video a second time, I thought … hang on, that's much better than anything I could ever had planned for the single authored work that I was doing. And so I suppose one of the thoughts that I want to sort of pass on is … how within culture do you make space for true conversation where people actually feel like they have ownership and a part of the work but also feel like they can challenge and conflict does not shut down within work. And I think that's really important, because … culture is a highly complex situation in which there are many different perspectives within a given geography such as Renfrewshire. And I think of this as my grandmother problem - that’s her on the left with my siblings, - all four foot 10 of her and hair like the Queen. She presented a problem to me because while she was this person who loved me fiercely, who would have jumped in front of the bus to protect me, who wanted only the best for me and the world around us. She also happened to be a racist from a very different political perspective than my own. And I think what's difficult within culture is to recognise that people who have different perspectives to you are not “bad people”. We have to understand that because the world is plural we have to engage with people who have different concepts and different perspectives. And especially in works that are aimed towards - participation, participation and engagement …. all those sorts of ideas … we have to also recognise that when we talk about participation, there's an irony that participation is in fact exclusionary. We can't participate with everyone because of the plurality of the world … and that's not necessarily a bad thing. What I suppose the question we have to remember is … who are we trying to participate with? We have to remember, in culture that if you look at … and Sophie's Hope Works does this excellently … is if you look at participation and participation in engagement projects, they're normally aimed towards: … “black minority ethnic”; towards “people of lower socioeconomic incomes”; towards “people who are unwell”; towards “women”; towards “the criminal” … You don't generally have a participation project that's aimed towards … “cisgendered middle class white men”. And the assumption is that (as Sophie's Hope explorers) is that the assumption is that there are certain kinds of culture that's already good, that's already fine, that's already perfect, that people are already participating in “the right way”. And so we have to make a decision, when we start to talk with engagement with with cultural people, in a cultural context … who is making decisions about what is good? and what is right? and what is proper? …. and how are they silencing other voices? …. and how do you ensure that culture is not just a propaganda stick/tool, and how do you make space for plurality? I think within that, for me is a question of risk. And for me, we have to kind of recognise that culture and the best kind of culture is a risky context. And there's a beautiful work by Lewis Hyde called “Trickster makes this world - how disruptive imagination creates culture”. And in this in this book, he talks about the fact that in every culture and every human culture, culture is developed by a boundary crosser. And then every culture has its edge. It's in from out … it's good from bad … it's men from women … it's living from dead. And what a “trickster” does is he crosses that lines, they crossed the boundaries, and a trickster is therefore an essential part of the human psyche … and so that crossing is risky. But that disruptive imagination is an essential part of culture and an essential part of normal functioning politics and power. So the challenge, I suppose, for a cultural organisation is to think about how do you make great culture … and for me, great culture is risky. But that's worth it! It's worth the risk of the good culture, because I suppose the other thing that I always go back to is …. and forgive the swearing elements of this poster … is this this poster that I saw in 2011 in Dublin Contemporary which says “Art won't save the world, go volunteer at a soup kitchen, you pretentious fuck”. And while humorous and critical, there is an essential truth to that statement … that actually there are far more effective “ways” to “change the world” to promote better outcomes … to promote goodness … to promote rightness, specific politics … than art. Because art has actually **never** succeeded in serving other agendas. Art is not about serving an economic agenda … It's not about serving a health agenda. I'm not saying it doesn't have parts to play within those. But if you position art as something that is in service of other agendas, it's not going to go anywhere …. because we have to remember that the proper contribution of art to society is … art. That's not to say that it should be good for you, or that it's supposed to be a particular kind of art … but merely that the purpose of artists ask difficult questions. And so how do you support those difficult questions? If we reflect on the fact that the evidence suggests that the best kind of art … and the one that makes the most sort of developmental progressions in culture, in society … are those that ask those difficult questions … and so really how do you provide spaces that give art and culture the chance to do what it does best … which is to problematise the world … and that's arts job, nothing more, nothing less. And so the question is … how do you give space for that? Culture in which risky, exciting, interesting work asks difficult and exciting questions.

And that's really over to you.