**LINA ATTALAH**

# Creating the Department of Civil Imagination

## An Interview with Peter Jenkinson and Shelagh Wright

S helagh Wright and Peter Jenkinson, both based in London, have been supporting creative and cultural work for progressive social and political goals throughout the world for many years. Their current projects include ODD, an action research ad/venture exploring positive deviance within socially-engaged cultural practice and creative activism. They are also involved with the pan-European Laboratories of Care programme and with investigating the contribution of cultural and creative activists to the new global Municipalist movement. In the context of RESHAPE, they have been the facilitators of the Art and Citizenship trajectory, asking the question: How can art radically reimagine new forms of citizenship and empower us to act? Here, active citizenship is a central connecting point, on which we expound in this conversation.

LINA ATTALAH: Let's start with the text you shared with me, and which came out of the group you have worked with throughout the project. A formidable text, playfully titled 'Care', both a character and an index to the notion of care. Can you tell me more about 'Care'?

SHELAGH WRIGHT: In RESHAPE we have been working with and supporting eight amazing women: An based in Brussels, Ana in Sofia, Chiara in Terni, Jessica in Zurich, Joon Lynn in London, Maria in Lisbon, Paky in Athens, and Virág in Berlin. Following many open and rich conversations amongst ourselves, 'Care' was written collaboratively by a team from within our family. And they were all writing in their second language or third language and collaborating across the distances, both physical and emotional, imposed by the pandemic. This text then became the basis for developing our collective thinking and feeling and our plans around approaches to a workshop – centring on care – intended to conscientise institutions and individuals to the realities, possibilities, and potential of care in their interactions with colleagues but also with citizens more widely.

LA: How did this writing process start? How did the idea of Care come about in the first place and how did it enter into this creative process of becoming both a character and a notion at the same time?

SW: When we first came together, we started by spending some time to get to know each other properly and to share our vulnerabilities, to be our true selves in a shared space and moment so that we could start to really trust each other. From the outset, the group worked in an incredibly connected way. Peter and I were both surprised at how genuinely and enthusiastically collaborative everyone was from the beginning. Often in groups you have a context in which one or two leaders emerge and they take on the majority of the work or the direction. But that hasn't happened with this group at all. It has worked on a very organic and collective level.

Over the course of RESHAPE, we've had many long, deep, and strong conversations about art and citizenship and how broad these terms are and how do we start to make sense of them. And care has always been a really strong theme. Then, as the pandemic started, everyone was dealing with

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different issues, some of which were very heavy. There has been this clear commitment to understanding what care means and how we work with each other, but also how vital it is as a political as well as a personal force as we start to understand what really matters as this pandemic reveals fundamental flaws.

Then we began speculating on the construct of the fictional Department of Civil Imagination or DCI: a shared idea that we urgently need to invite and ignite civil imagination, if we truly want to reshape at a systemic level. It became a subversive, playful idea of 'The Department', something that does not exist as an official institution but yet has its own life and mystery. We talked and shared a lot about the what, how, who, when questions and then we basically set ourselves a deadline that we were going to not just talk but do something. And about a week before our deadline, everyone was a bit like, oh, what are we going to do? How are we going to do it? And that piece of writing emerged probably out of just a few days and of small bits of time and in asynchronous ways, with someone starting, then handing the baton on to somebody else to develop it further and then onwards until Care was completed.

LA: Let's go back to what brought you to RESHAPE. Where does it sit within the landscape of your practice and your activism?

SW: I was approached by the British Council and they asked me to consider taking on the facilitation of the Art and Citizenship trajectory. Peter and I have been doing some work in the last few years with the Municipalist movement in Spain, across Europe and beyond, and we've learned a lot from their ways of working, including the vital feminisation of all their processes and practices, the disruption of hierarchies, and shared, co-leadership. Informed by these crucial imperatives, we have developed a sort of methodology of working together, which we felt would be important to bring to this shapeshifting project, as a means of getting away from the more conventional singular or individualistic perspective, privilege, and voice. So we proposed that we would do it together. We're a kind of BOGOF, Buy One Get One Free.

PETER JENKINSON: Our work has a very social and political, as well as cultural, dimension to it. All three forces should be closely enmeshed. Consequently, we believe that the cultural sector should no longer be located in the isolated, and at times complacent, self-congratulatory and arrogant bubble in which it is currently situated but rather should be deeply and sustainably connected into society more widely. Culture, in other words, with a job to do. In this context, with the mounting disasters of Covid-19, there are very serious and systemic issues to address. Why, for example, are solidarities not being built horizontally into city-based movements, into activism, into community building, into civil structures? This is what really interests us. There is an artistic and cultural element in many political movements, yet, even today, many of these political movements are missing a trick when they fail to see the magic, the provocation and, most critical of all, the imagination and re-imagination that culture, broadly defined, can bring to bear on these democratic, participative, and collective processes, ultimately to make politics different.

sw: My real motivation at the beginning, was the looming catastrophe of Brexit, which will cut the UK away from the rest of Europe. We do a lot of work in Europe anyway, but it felt like a moment to work with our European neighbours and to put ourselves into that space in a deliberate way and build new cultural bridges.

la: **It also looks like you had diverse participation of people coming from different practices?**

sw: I think that's true, and that's been a real joy, but quite a challenge as facilitators. People are coming from different contexts as individuals, as practitioners, in terms of their geographical location and the kind of space that they're in and working with and crucially where they are in their lives. This was part of the reason we decided to invest quite a lot of the time that we had in just getting to know each other, building relationships together, so that those intercultural confusions and contentions were easier to navigate and became reproductive rather than reductive.

la: **I'm intrigued by a lot of the references and tools that you had put together for these workshops, starting with the Department of Civil Imagination. I want us to think through both words, 'civil' and 'imagination', and how you used them in the workshops. What have been new meanings emerging from your use of these two words?**

sw: The idea of the department came out of some long discussions about what it was we thought we might be able to do and the idea of trying to work with something that had the potential to expand as a kind of frame but also with an invitation that was imaginative and playful. There was also a long discussion about the civil versus the civic. For a long time, it was called the Department of C Imagination because we couldn't decide if it was civil or civic. I think the idea was that civic is more of what is widely understood as the infrastructure, government or state infrastructure. But there was something important in the civil as a development space and a counterbalance to that.

pj: Within civil, we can incorporate the broad and contested landscape of rights or the lack of them, of justice or injustice, of inclusion or exclusion. The civic may be a slightly narrower, more formal term, whereas civil is arguably a more open term.

sw: That decision came out of many discussions around citizenship and understanding citizenship not as a set of given rights, but actually as an expanding set of capabilities, as something that gives agency and, at its best, empowers people and communities.

As for imagination, we were asking the question: How do we start to create what isn't there? We had long conversations about how imagination is almost like a muscle that needs to be built and trained and worked with and nurtured. It felt vital to learn to develop the civil imagination as a way to even begin to reshape this reductive neo-liberal consumer or audience space. And there is

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purposefully something of play in there as well. The joy of possibility has been very much part of the work.

PJ: I also think that disruption is important so that we can actually enjoy being uncomfortable, willingly take risks and celebrate the imperfect. The Department of Civil Imagination is to some degree a fantasy to take us beyond the stark realities we all live in. Think for a moment about the many speculations within Afro-futurism or Arab-futurism, of multiple, and at times surreal, utopian or anarchic experiments or of the mobilisation of the powers of satire and humour in dark situations that suggest new and unexpected realities and possibilities. So here the application of fantasy and the imagination liberates us from the cages in which we are perennially trapped. We're very comfortable with this disruption. I mean, how could we have known when this programme started that we'd end up in the tragic context of this particular global crisis? We therefore believe that we've got to imagine our way out: imagination as a series of urgent practices and actions.

LA: **Because you're talking about discomfort, and there is comfort in habit, do you think there is a crisis of imagination?**

SW: I think there is a fundamental crisis in the broader imagination, because it feels that we've been so closed down in many ways. A friend of ours, Declan McGonagle, who has written a piece for the RESHAPE Zeitgeist[01], at the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak was saying to us that the original meaning of the word apocalypse, in Greek, is revealing, uncovering, unveiling. And it feels that this moment is giving us a chance to pull back that which is clouding our vision and has prevented us from seeing, and therefore from being able to imagine the possibility of change.

PJ: Part of our journey before we came to RESHAPE has been around issues of care in particular. A small group of us across Europe, are staging a series of Laboratories of Care and the urgency of pursuing feminisation that is vital in movements and in all kinds of cultural initiatives.

LA: **Two more things on syntax. Let's unpack the words empowerment and solidarity. What do you want to say about the use of these two words in your description of your intervention, and what you've tried to do in the workshops held in Barcelona and Edinburgh? Empowerment of whom? By whom? Solidarity with whom? How can we think of solidarity as something that is more embodied and less of an altruistic position, for example?**

PJ: One of our perennial inspirations is what is known as the shortest poem ever written in the English language. It's by Muhammad Ali. He was speaking at a graduation ceremony at Harvard. At the end of his speech a student shouted 'give us a poem Muhammad'. In reply he said just two words: 'Me We'. This poem inspires us all the time in all that we do because people for

01 see: https://reshape.network/article/hope-through-the-fog

far too long have concentrated on the *me*, the self, the solo, the ego, including disappointingly many people in the cultural sector, and there has been far less focus, and action, on the *we*, the sense and practice of us all being and working and dreaming and imagining together. Of course, there has to be a balance between the two realities and behaviours, but currently we are still trapped in the solo, individualistic space and we all pay the price for it. Thus there is the idea of the co: not the co in Covid, but the co in collaboration, collectivity, community, cooperation, co-creation; there are so many co forces that we should use and prioritise. And in this particular world of culture and activism, there is an enormous shared possibility for growing solidarity. I think our priority is to break out of our complacent bubbles and be willing to have conversations much more widely, on a horizontal, interdisciplinary basis, where solidarities of multiple types can be built and strengthened to bring about change.

sw: My Dad established the peace and reconciliation work of Coventry Cathedral and then he chaired the work of the Scottish Constitutional Devolution Convention. And he always said two things that have stayed with me in terms of empowerment: If you are giving power away, the implication is you are still holding it: power devolved is power withheld. And, the second, was that power is not a zero-sum game. Power is like love. The more you give away, the more you get back. You have to see power as something that is not about accumulation, but actually about redistribution.

Part of the development for the Department of Civil Imagination was trying to think about how to create a framework, something that other people could take and shape and frame in ways that made sense in their own contexts, but with an understanding of a core set of values or code. The idea of empowerment is really trying to grapple with an understanding about where power sits and who holds it and what other kinds of spaces and frames and relational possibilities let us collectively realise it.

LA: Can you walk us through the build-up from the first workshop in Edinburgh until now and what you think were the main outcomes. What do you feel you've done so far between those two physical spaces and the intense online encounters you've done?

PJ: I think the first thing to say is that it looks like a long stretch of time. But actually, when you look at the amount of time we have had together, it has been very short. There was Barcelona. And there was Edinburgh. And these workshops were three days each. And we were supposed to be in Tunis, but couldn't be because of the lockdown. And then there were the Intensives, but again in these we had just one day to work intensively together. I think we all recognised early on how limited our time together would be and worked to find ways to create but also to care.

sw: I also think, in terms of that little time we had together, that we took a decision pretty early on to say, well, don't worry about it, don't feel pressured to produce stuff. Let's just talk together. Let's just work together. Let's just

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see what makes sense to us. Let's just see what's important. Edinburgh was probably more about exploring the boundaries of some of these issues that we've been talking about and where people stand from them because they're complex issues and quite personal and very political at the same time.

LA: **Were there any unexpected encounters or collaborations within your group?**

PJ: I think it was extremely helpful in Barcelona to have the benefit of the expertise and networks of Lupe García from the Goethe-Institut, one of the 19 RESHAPE partners. The great majority of Lupe's work is as a determined activist at street level. So rather than going through a conventional visit, passively receiving talks from 'experts', Lupe was able to create a rich programme of meeting, talking to, and engaging with people and organisations on the ground tackling multiple social and political challenges and struggles, including the negative impacts of over-tourism, artwashing, gentrification, and racism in the city. These were people and organisations we would not have met without the enthusiastic support and wisdom of someone with rich local networks of mutual respect and trust.

SW: We were afraid that, in Barcelona, we might inadvertently replicate that very kind of damaging cultural tourism that the activists vividly described. But it really didn't feel like that. It was more about spending time in more marginal places and engaging with a very active community. Everyone loved it. Overall, and this is going to sound really trite, but in the group that we've worked with, I would say every single conversation with them feels like a privilege and a learning experience because there are such richly different perspectives and such wisdom and honesty of where they are coming from. There's something in the space they created between them. I've been in these kinds of programmes so many times, but there's something in the collectivity of our group that actually managed to lift almost every conversation.

LA: **Were there any collaborations that you're aware of that emerged out of these encounters among the participants?**

SW: There's been some input into each other's projects but, as yet, no kind of formal collaborations in the sense of a new piece of work, at least as far as we're aware.

PJ: But we always talked about what we can do together beyond RESHAPE. I think the commitment is to carry on.

LA: **Can you tell about the digital assembly idea that emerged during your work with the Reshapers?**

SW: The idea for the digital assemblies was to start a series of them. We did the first one within RESHAPE, which was just for us to try to get something out there. But the intention was to think about expanding that outside the confines of the network that is RESHAPE and to find rooms to grow, with things we

felt were critical such as care, unlearning, disruption and positive deviance, wet and dry knowledges, and so on. We were thinking about the possibility of moving into wider digital assemblies that involve very different people who are interested in some of these issues. We've also created a series of formats or invitations to others to try some new practices, exercises or small, intimate interventions that could release some of our civil imagination and build up the muscle.

LA: **You laid out a number of ambitions in your process, ideas around hope and agency, ideas around what culture does in times of crisis. There are also ideas around creating connections between the cultural sector and other sectors. What do you feel your process within RESHAPE has ended up focusing on or taking you to, among these different ambitions? And what do you feel has been a challenge?**

SW: The thing that's been most activated has probably been this sense of intersectionality and culture as a site of resistance rather than culture as the site of something else, or its own site, its own reference point. But there have been challenges stemming from the initial design and demands of the programme and the fixed timelines and expectations which have been primarily focused on productivity rather than on reproductive work, in spite of the context of the pandemic. With so many partners and participants, it has been difficult at times to hold an overview of how all our work creatively builds into a whole that is bigger than the sum of its parts and remains responsive to the moment.

PJ: RESHAPE has been an exciting opportunity not only for practitioners and intermediaries, but also for funders and partners, to stop, reflect, and then radically rethink conventional ways of working and behaving. In this context, disappointingly throughout the programme, a challenge has been having to look at targets and outputs that we soon realised were inappropriate or too inflexible in the contexts and daily realities that we were all having to negotiate, not least living through a pandemic that no one could have predicted. We think that this is not the kind of programme that lends itself to specific and rigid outputs but could instead be more fluid, speculative, and experimental, if not piratical and disruptive, as a positive outcome but simultaneously we understand that sometimes that is the unintentional constraint of funders who want to know the answer or product that they think they're buying. This created pressure that was not always helpful. But we've learned that it is possible for a group of disparate and engaged participants, chosen and grouped at a distance, to work closely together through the building of high trust, shared values, intimacy, openness, honesty, humour, and humility – and obviously the employment of care throughout. And this probably reflects the fact that the group are all women. This has all unfolded in the context of the Covid-19 apocalypse and yet this sense of collective responsibility to the work and to each other has deepened, rather than reduced. This has been the greatest collective achievement of our short journey together.

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