

# Highlands Open Studios

EGM

2.30pm on 6<sup>th</sup> September 2009

Culloden Community Centre

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Present - Ruth Black, Valerie Ford, Carol Cocks, Helene Lister, Dorothy Francis, Vicky Stonebridge, Gillian Pattinson, John Nicholson, Alistair Smyth, Julie Cribb, Michael Stuart Green, Gail Steele

Apologies – Philip Gorton, Gwen & Fred Black, Jenny Hepburn, Claire Blois, Margaret Cowie, Jean Bell, Don McNeil, Joan Baxter, Susan Duncan, Joanna Christoferson, Jenny Turner, Joan Langtree Matthews, Richard Davies, Stuart Whatley, Avril Marr, Frances Baxter

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Ruth Black, Chairman welcomed all to the EGM

She explained that the meeting was called as the committee felt unsure as to how to take HOS forward.

Ruth commented that she was disappointed that Hi-Arts was not present despite both Robert Livingston and John Saich saying they would attend the meeting. John's remit is to support groups of artists.

Ruth read out emails from 11 members who were unable to attend the meeting but who wished to comment on how they saw the future for HOS

\* 9 said that the directory was the important thing that must be kept 'Highland wide'

\* 4 thought that splitting the membership into smaller groups with HOS as an umbrella was the best way to manage it all

\* 3 commented that the Open Studios Week did not work for them

\* 3 said that we should not do another 'Highland wide' exhibition but should encourage smaller groups to plan their own exhibitions

\* 2 felt that things should remain as they are

\* Other comments mentioned funding for the option of smaller groups, tying in with the Nairn Book & Art Festival, travel expenses for committee members, selection of HOS members, the need for more publicity, bursaries for new/emerging artists and the possibility of non artists being on the committee

\* No one wanted HOS to disappear

Ruth then invited everyone to state their views

Michael read his comments to the group, stating that he was speaking as a member not as one of the committee. He said that part of the appeal of HOS is that he loves being part of a Highland wide group

*HOS became, very quickly, to represent the whole of the Scottish Highlands area. Because of its geographical compass it attracted initial funding that, otherwise, would not have come its way. People joined HOS not least because it meant being a part of an organisation that was not merely local. It offered a*

*platform that smaller, more localised groups cannot, by definition, attain. Membership of HOS was, for many, a stimulus: a stimulus to work and then to promote that work. It represented a move into a bigger and more demanding field.*

*The number of members actually involved in the running of HOS has been small - but that is not necessarily a bad thing. What is important is that the committee is efficient, effective and appreciated for what it does.*

*It may help to look at two other arts organisations:*

*1 the Art Society of Inverness, a huge group (apparently the largest of its kind in the UK) which functions with great efficiency, thanks to a small, cohesive and superbly chaired committee, which meets no more than six times a year but which gets an enormous amount done for its members.*

*2 NEOS - again a very large and widely-dispersed group that seems to work well, no doubt due to its having a committee of 11 (+ 2 extremely well-placed advisors) in which every single committee member has a well-defined, executive role within a well-thought-out executive structure.*

*Organisations also need funds. How is it that this year NEOS received financial support from its region (Aberdeenshire); Creative Cultures, Scotland; the Cultural Enterprise Office; and Homecoming Scotland, whereas for HOS only HI-Arts offered any support?*

*Organisations also need publicity - a problem from the start for HOS and one for which an achievable strategy is urgently required. We do have both our directory and our website. Both are vital. Together they reach out to different audiences. But in themselves they are not enough. People only find them if they go looking. Somehow, far more people have to be alerted to their existence and to the organisation they encapsulate.*

*I should like to think, after all that has been achieved, that there is still a way forward for HOS - and a way forward that still embraces the notion of a pan-Highlands community of professional & semi-professional artists, craftsmen and galleries.*

*I reject the idea of retreating into little, parochial groups. Where is the ambition in that? Who is going to fund a network of village art groups? How could such a loose assemblage ever aspire to raise standards? How on earth could one publicise such a group coherently? Above all, how could one manage a plethora of little groups? Running one group is hard enough.*

Carol said that we cannot compare HOS to NEOS as we have a very different mix of artists and public in our areas. She stressed the need for a strong committee and that we need new people to come on board to promote HOS

Gail said that when she and Veronica Newman put out the call for artists to join an Open Studios group five years ago, they had seen it becoming an Inverness based group. The whole thing grew and grew and she now feels that it is unmanageable and HOS needs to be split into smaller geographical areas which could then determine their own OS dates, exhibitions etc.

Ruth said that she was on the original committee but came off it due to family commitments. She allowed her arm to be twisted when Fred Black resigned as Chairman and came back to the committee first as Funding Officer, then as Chairman. She is a full time professional artist and does not have a lot of spare time, which is the same situation for the rest of us who make a living from our art. The NEOS committee seems to be mainly non artists, who do not have to do the same balancing act as our committee. Whatever happens to HOS we need to decide if this is a route we wish to take.

Vicky said that she joined HOS this year. The members that she has spoken to are ambivalent about the OS week but all love the directory. She is not sure about HOS being split as the smaller sections would find it hard to gain funding. We need to be professional but not elitist.

John Nicolson said that a lot of the emails Ruth had read out had a common theme which reflected his feelings. The directory is superb and inspirational and is a very good book for tourists. Michael has done a super job and will be a hard act to follow. John feels that HOS covers too big an area and would work better if broken down into smaller groups under a HOS umbrella. He feels that each group should have its own section in the directory and its own OS timings. Each area should then organise its own exhibitions. He feels that a Highland wide exhibition is too big and that the organising of whole group exhibitions should be left out of the remit for HOS. As for quality of the membership, John commented that who are we to say who is good or not, he joked that Van Gogh would not have been accepted as he wasn't a trained artist. He feels that if someone is prepared to pay the membership fee then they can join the group.

Alistair Smyth said that he has been a member for just a year. The OS week did not work for him, but he admitted that he did little to promote himself before or during it. He feels that the directory is superb and the website invaluable and it would be a pity if the whole thing disappeared. He is a member of two local groups which work really well and feels that the immense area covered by HOS doesn't work. He said that we do need professional fund raisers to be on the committee.

Dorothy agreed with a lot of what Michael said. She feels that the size of the group doesn't matter, it takes the same amount of time to organise a small group as it does a large one. She feels that the members look at the committee as their agents and that there is not enough social interaction between the members, but had no suggestion as to how to improve on this other than at exhibition launches. She said that without HOS her work and her commitment to art would not have improved. She feels that HOS needs the patronage that NEOS has managed to gain from the wealthy art buying public. She feels that smaller groups would be too disparate and that to secure funding we need to stay as a large group.

Helene said that she is in favour of smaller groups within HOS. She feels that the directory is brilliant but should not be free to the public. We all sell our art and should consider selling the directory. If we made it a larger publication with more information about each member, then we could place a value to it. She commented that we need to have a larger advertising budget.

Julie said that she felt the same as Dorothy about the way HOS has impacted her work. She feels the idea of HOS being an umbrella for smaller groups would just add to the work load of everyone involved. She likes the idea of smaller groups 'doing it for themselves' and commented that there is nothing to stop groups of members doing this at present. She feels very strongly about retaining HOS as a Highland wide organisation. She feels that exhibitions could be done locally but said that if it had not been for HOS she would never have had the opportunity to exhibit at Eden Court. She suggested that HOS considers having an e-commerce website

Gillian said that the directory is excellent. She would not like to see a price on it, it needs to be free. She feels that smaller groups within HOS would work. She feels that the OS week for the West coast was not as successful as it was around the Inverness area. If the West coast had its own timing then it would be better.

Val said that she has been Treasurer since the start of HOS. She feels that to lighten the workload we need to go web based for our paperwork and payments. This will also cut costs for us. She said that 95% of the membership fees went towards the costs of the directory, the website costs were paid by the funding we received from Hi-Arts

The discussion then opened up.

Ruth said that Len could easily do forms online for us and can make an e-commerce site as well. The website already has the facility to allow each member to change their own details. She said that the overwhelming majority want the directory and the website. On balance the OS event may be better handled on a local level but still needs to be advertised in the directory. This would mean that there could be OS events spread over a longer period of time with the smaller geographical groups determining their own timings.

The consensus was that HOS remains but should be there to facilitate OS events, not to organise them from a central point. The membership is to be asked about this at the AGM. The group voted on the principle of HOS organising a highland wide exhibition. It was a unanimous 'yes', but the feeling was that an exhibition should not necessarily occur annually. The discussion went on re juried and themed exhibitions. It was decided to bring this up at the AGM.

It was decided that the membership fee should be raised. A lot of members look at the directory as a cheap form of advertising, Ruth said that she had been offered a half price advert recently at £280 plus VAT. The cost of £95 will be proposed at the AGM.

The AGM date of 22<sup>nd</sup> November is not suitable for Ruth and Val so a new date of Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> November was decided on. As this is the delivery day for the Eden Court exhibition Dorothy was asked to book a room there for the AGM. This should give us a larger number of members present at the meeting.

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The EGM closed at 4.30pm.

Ruth thanked us all for attending, especially the three non committee members present.