The Visual Artists’ News Sheet
July – August 2015

ART IN PUBLIC

Insider Witness

FIONA WHELAN OUTLINES THE MOTIVATIONS, AND THINKING BEHIND TEN- TERRITORY, ENCOUNTER & NEGOTIATION; A CRITICAL MEMOIR WRITTEN BY THE ARTIST ABOUT HER EXPERIENCE OF COLLABORATIVE ART PRACTICE.

The Artist’s Experience

I recently wrote and published a critical memoir, TEN Territory, Encounter & Negotiation, in an attempt to counteract the absence of written material from artists working collaboratively. This publication presents an artist’s personal and subjective insight into a socially engaged practice. Written a decade after I first positioned my practice in the inner-city village of Rathcoole, Dublin, TEN tells the story of my growth as an artist in that context. It aims to reveal the multiple layers of a collaborative process that often remain hidden and are misunderstood. Through writing, I explored the complex working relationships, the methods of engagement, creative processes and analytics. I wanted to make sense of the complexity of my durational art practice, which has operated across a decade, and to create a new type of learning tool for the field of socially engaged art and related disciplines. The book intends to position my experience and thought processes as the primary artist involved in a collaborative practice, at the centre of critical discourse related to this field.

I first took up a residency in Studio 458 in 2004, where I began working with Rathcoole Youth Project, a community organisation embedded within the local context from which I was exposed to a community’s life, its people and its politics. My position as artist allowed the practice to remain led by ideas, to be contingent, to change direction as the work required and to be sustained in one context for such duration. This publication focuses largely on a four-year project exploring power and politics, which included the events ‘The Ray in Questions’, at IMMA (2006), and Policing Dialogues at The LAB (2010). This work trespasses into other conceptual and disciplinary territories, the practice operating at the intersection of collaborative art, youth work, critical pedagogy and activism. While it was richer for its trans-disciplinary knowledge and form, engaging critically with such a practice and drawing out learning was not an easy task: identifying the time boundaries within which to critique work that has accumulated over years is complex, in addition to the multiple participants, collaborators and audiences engaged and the range of dialogical events that took place in both art and non-art spaces.

MEMOIR AS CRITICAL WRITING

Contingent durational collaborative practice is a complex task. In many recent publications, flaws in researching and writing about socially engaged art practice have been highlighted (O’Neill and Doherty, 2013, Bishop 2013). In 2011, critic and writer Grant Kester described to a Dublin audience a potential crisis occurring for contemporary art criticism, fuelled by the growth of collaborative and dialogical practice. Recognising a gap in the type of writing that existed, I began to consider the possibilities of articulating my experience, offering a witness account to the processes behind the work we produced collectively in Rathcoole. In this I was thinking of artist Athi-Patra Rupappa’s proposed critical framework for collaborative artists, presented in her keynote address at the Create, Artist in Community Scheme’s 10-year gathering.

Athi-Patra Rupappa proposed four levels of criticality for artists working collaboratively. Firstly she called for the phenomenology of the artist—the lived inter-disciplinary nature of the everyday practice—to be registered beyond private subjective experience so that it can enter the critical domain. Secondly, she argued for an exploration of the group process, where diverse identities meet and negotiate in order to produce work. In addition, an interrogation of the micro-political economy of practice would be required to include the matrix of intra-organisational supports, each of which has its own ideological commitments. Finally, one would need to examine the macro-political economy, which highlights the political and economic forces that, with varying degrees of visibility, come to bear on the work.

I was committed to producing a publication rooted in the phenomenology of the artist but I was aware of risks attached to writing subjectively about one’s own work. This concerns is not unique to the arts. Writing in the 1990s anthropologist Ruth Behar described her frustration with the cold process that was expected of her profession. She was interested in the subjectivity of the observer but detailed the risks attached to being too personal when writing: Such a practice was frowned upon in most scholarly fields the writer was required to be distant, objective and abstract. Practices in anthropology have moved on since then and I found myself inspired by Behar and others’ subjective voices. Using notebooks, emails, photographs and records of meetings, much like an ethnographer’s ‘field notes’, I re-watched and re-presented my practice as a critical memoir. I recognised my writing not as the ‘try’ revealed, but as a partial perspective on a shared process. I approached it as an act of representation, adding new reflections to older field notes and commissioning new drawings to re-present undocumented moments in my foreword for the book. Anne Ó Broláin, Co-Director of Counterpoint Arts, writes that a reader of the book becomes like philosopher Jacques Rancière’s ‘emancipated spectator’, entrusted to render his/her ‘own translation and ongoing redefinition of the story’ I had told.

New Learning

The memoir form is often associated with older writers reflecting upon a career or a life. My decision to use this form was not intended to signal the end of this collaboration or to put forward a fixed or final position on the knowledge produced. While remaining aware that my reflections on this practice may change in the future, I recognise a value in telling the story while my practice is still positioned in Rathcoole.

The production of the book becomes like any other public moment in this practice, which considers reflection, analysis and action part of an ongoing cycle. The book is inducted in the artist’s experience and aims to test that experience to reveal the multiple layers of the practice and the trans-disciplinary knowledge that was produced collectively. The subsequent promotion events further highlighted the complex cross-organisational matrix of the practice and the broader economies of practice in which it operates. New learning from the book’s production, distribution and reception now feed back into current work.

TEN was launched at NCAD, Dublin bringing together activists, youth workers, artists and educators in an inter-disciplinary seminar. A series of presentations from wide-ranging professionals external to the process highlighted some of the macro-political economy of the field of practice, including the charity model of social justice organisating in Ireland and the state of youth work in its ultimate usefulness. There were followed by a public performance reading of an extract of the book—staged by myself, the youth project manager, a youth worker and a former youth collaborator—bringing the focus back to the micro-level of collaboration within the organisation and the group.

A subsequent launch in Galway intersected a further discipline as curator Megan (Johannes’ experience of ‘slow curating’ engaged in conversation with the practice). More recent presentations with PJ, Belinda and Maynooth University have involved other issues being put on the work, the complex of collaboration in the former, the politics of voice and listening in the latter.

As I continue to position and re-position my practice art in an uncertain space at the intersection of a range of diverse knowledge and disciplines, the book continues to be reviewed, discussed and in a range of diverse contexts. Writing the book has been an informative experience and process in itself. I welcome the new learning that will take place as TEN encounters each new public, each audience will render their own unique translations. I look forward to developing this learning process over the next decade, whenever that will take me.

Fiona Whelan is an artist and Joint Course Coordinator of the MA Socially Engaged Art at the School of Education, NCAD. ‘TEN Territory, Encounter & Negotiation’ is available to purchase at fionawhelan.com and select bookstores.

NOTES
1. Create, Artist in the Community 10-year gathering, Belfast, 27 November 2012
2. See https://vimeo.com/88691899
3. The project of ‘TEN Territory, Encounter & Negotiation’ was inspired by Fiona Whelan and Róisín Ní Chomhánach’s Youth Project: Galway launch of TEN was hosted by Rosc Initiative in partnership with the Community Knowledge Initiative of NUI Galway and SELECT COMM, audio / video documentation of presentation from Dublin and Galway. For information on Rosc Initiative’s Community Knowledge Initiative see https://www.rosc.ie/comm/.
4. The Belfast event was part of a joint event: NORTHERN Conversation (and the presentation in Maynooth University was part of the national Irish Contemporary Art Biennial)
5. Research 1

Biographies

Róisín Ní Chomhánach is the Director of Counterpoint Arts, founded Youth Project: Berea 1994. She is a member of the Art Worked From Home Network, Action on Domestic Violence, 1990. In 2005, she was awarded a Senior Fellowship of the National University of Ireland. The Blue Jays, Róisín Ní Chomhánach, The University Press, 2004.