Collective Imagining


IN 2011 I was commissioned by Carlow Arts Office to make a large-scale, socially-engaged art work with people using Carlow Local Authority’s mental health services. The commission’s aim was to bring a hitherto invisible group into relief in the community, so that they could enjoy the citizenship and participation that others take for granted. The commission was supported by an Arts Council Project Award.

In some ways the project developed out of another work of mine, *Open Windows / A Clinically Useful Artwork?*, where I engaged with a group of patients in an isolation ward at the National Bone Marrow Transplant Unit, St James Hospital, Dublin. The concerns of these patients centred on being isolated within the architecture that had been developed to support their treatment. They experienced isolation and trauma as a result of this architecture, an unfortunate but tolerable by-product of a system that only focused on the physical aspects of their disease.

Isolation connected these two projects. I am interested in how human relationships are transformed when they are systematised, particularly in the area of care. What happens when care goes from the one-to-one to the one-to-many, and when it is administered within specific architectural environments? Care can become pathologised, resulting in relations that serve the system first and the person second. A hospital is an example of architecture that encapsulates a system of caring and modulates the behaviour of the people who inhabit it.

When I began the project, I engaged in a series of conversations with a number of consultant psychiatrists in order to identify the most relevant themes around which to make the work. Stigma and social isolation became the focus. We talked about the loss of identity experienced by people with mental health difficulties, and the attendant grieving for frustrated life expectations. It was pointed out to me that a diagnosis of a mental health difficulty in your early twenties can mean forty years of living on the outskirts of the community, with serious societal attitudes towards caring for citizens with mental health difficulties. The idea of an equal utopia, one that was available for all, became central to the making of the project in Carlow.

There were three phases to *Panchaea: In Search of an Equal Utopia and a Willing Suspension of Disbelief*. In the first phase, Emma Finucane worked with people who were attending a weekly clinic in Leinsterbridge (July 2011 – November 2012). She explored themes of location and identity. In this way we mapped the territory. In the second phase, Brian Maguire took over an old ward in St. Dymphna’s Psychiatric Hospital and turned it into a painting studio. He explored the ‘inner landscape’ of collaborators who came to paint each week. This is the way we got to know who we were collaborating with (March – November 2012).

In the third phase of the project we built a boat in the Studio Gallery of the Visual Centre for Contemporary Art in Carlow (February – 21 April 2013). For three months we worked alongside master boat builders in a gallery that was open to the public, to make the vessel that would take us to our mythical island, Panchaea, the equal utopia. All boundaries were blurred during this time. Everyone worked together to deliver the project in full sight of the wider community. The group felt elevated being on display. Collaborators were patients, clients and citizens, and this status was fluid depending on their physical location at any given time. Collaborators were patients in the morning while they attended the clinic and then walked across the road to the gallery to become collaborators in a public artwork. Photographs could not be taken in the morning but were allowed in the afternoon.

At the end of this period, we brought all the elements together in the form of an exhibition in the Link and Studio Galleries in the Visual Centre for Contemporary Art (26 April – 24 May 2013). In a ceremony at the opening of the exhibition, the group carried the boat out of the gallery and launched it on the pond in the grounds of the arts centre. In this final and public act of display, collaborators, community members and artists were revealed together in a new equality. The artwork became a public statement about quality of life for people living with a mental illness in our country. A publication documenting and discussing the project was launched this year by Minister Kathleen Lynch (22 April 2015).

In making work collaboratively, there’s always a tension between the uses of art and the needs of the community. Add in a clinical context and issues of value also come to the fore, when permissions and explanations are required. For this project value, use and need became salient themes in themselves. The collaborators’ own opinions about their needs and questions about how they were valued bit home in terms of asking ‘what use am I?’. Collaborators spoke about the importance of feeling that they were needed to help achieve a goal, as members of a team and in delivering the project. The collaborators also spoke of the value of coming together as a group with an identity for the first time. By the end of the project, this was an identity they were willing to share with the wider community in a public way.

My role as an artist in this project was to enable a particular community, increase their visibility, create genuine engagements and build trust among the partners and participants. There was a long process of negotiation, which took place over almost two years before the project proper began. This involved meeting with collaborators, HSE hospital management, consultant psychiatrists, care workers and local authority members. There was a constant dialogue with the commissioners, in particular Sinead Dowlings, Carlow Arts Officer, who demonstrated a rare level of trust and confidence in the process. There were over 100 people from right across the community who contributed to making the project succeed and embracing change.

If I ask myself what is significant about placing an artist in these contexts, and what the artist can do to make the work, I think the answers lie in the potential to suggest a collective imagining outside of the existing systems in which the artist’s project is being made. In essence, there is a new territory that can be ‘struck out’ for.

In working this way, the artist is in a sense suggesting that there is something around the corner that you can’t see yet. You just need to head out in some kind of direction. And once the artist happens upon that something, it is then their job to figure out how to get everything from it. There are always ethical questions in relation to taking on the responsibility of trying to make change happen for and with your collaborators, especially when you are mostly dealing with organisation that are resistant to this change. The answer we arrived at for *Panchaea: In Search of an Equal Utopia and a Willing Suspension of Disbelief* was to make a boat to get to a place that didn’t exist. It was the only material thing we could do.

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Notes
1. Further information: vivart.ie
2. Further information: visualcarlow.ie/exhibitions
3. Online publication http://issuu.com/panchaea/docs/panchaea_web/1