Artistic Encounters in the Interstice of a Healthcare Workplace

A reflective review of the TODAY Photography project in St Finbarr’s Hospital Campus in Cork City by artist Colette Lewis

Over the course of this text I endeavor to map the working process that unfolded in the TODAY Photography project during my time as artist in residence in St Finbarr’s Hospital Campus in Cork City during 2013 to 2016. In particular I am interested to reflect on the ‘place’ of a socially engaged art project within the workplace of a healthcare institution and to think about the kind of ‘knowledge’ an artistic engagement and process brings to healthcare staff experience.

ORIGINS AND AIMS

In July 2013 Aidan Warner, Principal Community Worker for the HSE South Arts and Health Programme, invited me to develop a photography arts project within the hospital campus. The project was to have two distinct
strands – one in participation with staff using their own digital camera devices and the other would be an Artist response.

As is suggested in the title, ‘TODAY’ intended to capture a moment in time in the life of the hospital campus. This moment in time was deemed noteworthy marking significant structural and personnel changes in progress on campus. Old buildings were being renovated and repurposed as new workspaces while maintaining the overall original layout in separate blocks. Large numbers of HSE staff were relocating into these rejuvenated workspaces creating a new assemblage of healthcare activities operating within the grounds of the hospital campus.

A key aim of the TODAY project as initiated by the HSE South Arts and Health Programme was ‘to support staff integration of personnel on campus’ amidst this climate of change. The intention was for staff ‘to capture through photography aspects of life in the hospital from their own perspective and experience’.

SITUATING THE ARTISTIC ENCOUNTER

In thinking about an arts practice and its place within workplace settings can raise some curiosity. Entwined within this thinking lies also a mind-set that the place of creative practice in our society for the ‘non-artistic professions’ lies somewhere outside of our daily work life experience. Instead it is often understood to be something that we do in our time off in the evenings or over weekends.

In the context of a healthcare workplace the relationship between creative practice and patient care is well established for the purpose of stimulating the restoration of health and wellbeing. So what new purpose and value could this art project bring to healthcare professionals in St. Finbarr’s embedded within their place of work?

From the perspective of an artist entering into a new social encounter with staff in a hospital campus, I was mindful of the challenges and opportunities that this new encounter could bring to bear. A key challenge would be how to situate the project within the workplace and the schedule of a busy working day that would attract and enable staff to engage. A key opportunity would be for the project to open up a kind of interstitial or ‘third space’ within the institution for staff to experience being together in a new social form, not defined or determined by their professional identities but would be
a ‘new community’ formed around a shared interest in a creative act. Forming this new kind of social gathering within the institution was central to my artistic intention in order to cultivate a setting for critical reflection and creative action to emerge.

**TIME TO ENGAGE**

Unintentionally at first, the project unfolded over three years as oppose to six months, which was the original proposal. At the proposal stage the idea to organize a mass participation photographic event ‘a day in the life of …’ sort of narrative was discussed. It was thought of as a strategy to succinctly access and engage numerous staff across all departments to capture their perspective and experience of the hospital campus.

A concern with this type of approach to engagement in a large workplace environment, with over one thousand members of staff, is sacrificing quality of engagement over quantity. The original intention was quite ambitious yet I feel it would have yielded a superficial gesture in its aims to capture perspective and experience through the photographic image and support of staff integration. Such a process would require a more sustained engagement with the photographic creative process, critical thinking and reflection that could best be facilitated and mentored through a workshop format. Allowing more time and duration would therefore enable the project to unfold along a pathway of discovery, growing and adapting as staff engagement with the process deepened.

**LOCATING A COMMUNITY OF INTEREST**

Already an established insider, Aidan Warner was central in facilitating my initial introduction to many departments and staff in November and December 2013. This was followed up in May and June 2014 with more introductions and a series of job shadowing with staff in maintenance, security, domestic, blood bank, nursing and transport departments and Chaplins. The plan at this stage was to initiate a series of digital photography workshops in a variety of workplace settings to create a ‘community of interest’. Offering to ‘learn about digital photography skills’ was used as an introductory strategy to engage staff interest. In June 2014 we launched an official call out for staff participation on these workshops advertised through work e-mail from centralized administration, posting posters in staff tearooms, notice boards etc and handing out flyers in person.
Networking and navigating the internal ecosystem of departments and workspaces within the campus proved to be foundational in establishing contacts and embedding the project within the working life of the hospital. This also served the purpose to promote the project, gauge the potential interest in participation and locate suitable places to form working groups. It was equally significant for my own research to gain insight into the complex structure of the healthcare system departments, services and roles operating on site. However gaining access to this complex web of relations required a diversity of approach ranging from the formal to the informal.

Informal encounters with staff happened on walkways and in car parks, on corridors and stairwells, in clinical waiting rooms and staff tearooms. Knowing one person in a department could potentially open the door to a whole web of new encounters. More formal introductions took place through internal email circulars sent out through official channels and line management. Meetings were arranged and visits to offices and meeting rooms took place with key management staff. Employing both a formal and casual approach had a mixture of success and failure. Casual encounters were sometimes fleeting with no contact details attained while communication through official channels sometimes got lost amidst a glut of administration and work related emails to tend to.

Establishing consistent points of contact within a range of departments was key at the initial stage of the project to help generate interest with co-workers and get them on board with the project. On occasion the transitory nature of staffing within the healthcare service due to retirements or relocation of staff interrupted this continuity.

In essence, having a presence on campus and gradually building up a network of relations, trust and familiarity with staff was core to the project being implanted and implemented.

ACTIVATING THIRD SPACES

Having located a ‘community of interest’ the next phase was to establish a series of workshop forums in different settings to function both as an organising structure to gather people together and to anchor the project within the workplace environment. Situating these workshops within the workplace opened up an essential creative thinking, action and reflection
space within the working day, connecting workplace activity with creative practice processes.

A total of five workshop forums were established, with up to twenty-five staff participating at various intervals (twenty one women and four men). Locations were chosen based on interest and accessibility. The project developed over two distinct phases. The first phase July – December 2014 focused on learning basic technical and creative aspects of digital photography. While the second phase February – October 2015 focused on developing individual projects for a group book publication in response to aspects of life within the hospital campus. Both phases included an in-house public exhibition of twenty selected framed photographs in the Social Centre Restaurant in December 2014 and 2015.

In phase one, three workshop forums were established in the Public Health Department, Primary Community Care and IBTS. IBTS workshop amalgamated with Public Health after two months due to irregular attendance from work priorities. An additional two workshop forums were established in the second phase in St Claire’s Ward and St Elizabeth’s Ward. It was agreed with staff to schedule meetings fortnightly during lunchtime from 1-2pm. Initially we used ‘Doodle’ a web-based meeting scheduler to organize meetings to take into account the week-to-week changes in participant’s availability. In time as the groups settled down a set day of the week was established for each group to meet.

This workshop strategy to integrate the project into the schedule of the working day had a degree of success as regards staff participation. In order to participate staff had to be willing to attend during a set lunch break. This tended to favor administrative type roles more and proved restrictive for staff with variable work patterns those who worked off campus, did shift work or didn’t take set lunch breaks such as care based staff and catering. One solution was to locate workshops in St Claire’s Ward and St Elizabeth’s Ward so staff could drop in during their break and leave if they needed to.

This worked really well in St Claire’s Ward. However in St Elizabeth’s Ward the workshop discontinued after two months and amalgamated with St Claire’s because of regular interruptions from work mainly due to understaffing. This pressure from work highlighted a second restrictive factor for staff participation. For one participant in St Elizabeth’s she attended workshops on her days off as she found it easier to engage with the project when not under the pressure of work.
WORKSHOP FORUM – PHASE ONE

The workshop forum opened learning, reflective, creative thinking and a social space for staff to meet, explore ideas and share experience. My role alternated between that of facilitator, teacher, mentor, artist, curator and at times provocateur. Being situated in the context of the hospital campus set within historical grounds informed and framed our encounter with each other, synthesised through the aesthetics of photography. This created an overall fertile set of conditions to engage with the subject of place and subjective experience of staff.

The workshop forum became integral to my own artistic research process. It gave me an insight into campus dynamics and the concerns and personal experience of staff. It enabled me to develop a bond of trust that would later permit me to photograph staff for a portrait project central to my artistic response.

The first phase of workshop forum developed over four months between July and December 2014 and focused on learning basic technical and creative aspects of digital photography. Staff could use whatever type of camera they had, a smart phone, computer tablet, compact digital camera or DSLR. The majority of staff used a compact digital camera. The focus was on developing a visual vocabulary through looking at and photographing the built and natural environment on campus. Discussing these images afterwards naturally stimulated conversation around shared and individual experience of the hospital campus. Through conversation and looking at images we slowly began to unpack layers of narrative in the historical, professional and subjective embedded in the hospital campus. Working through a visual language and creative process assisted staff to explore the familiar with a new frame of reference and skillset – one that was sensory based, affective, imaginative, intuitive and reflective.

The outcome of this first phase of workshop forum was a series of photographs that focused primarily on the ephemeral qualities of the built and natural environment of the campus, of quiet and fleeting moments in time and space. Twenty images were selected and exhibited in-house in the Social Center Restaurant in December 2014. This exhibition was the first social event for all participants to gather and meet for the first time as a new ‘community of photographers’ on campus. The formation of social bonds through this new group identity was now being consolidated and celebrated. Putting staff creative work on display in their professional place of work was significant in opening a space for this aspect of themselves to become visible.
and present within the context of their professional lives. The photographic work on display revitalized the familiarity of the workplace offering a more poetic impression and sensibility. These captured fleeting moments become an invitation to staff on campus for pause and reflection. Exhibiting the work in the Social Centre also served the promotional needs of the project to inform the wider staff community about work in progress.

Photo Credit: Claire Stack

Photo Credit: Vicky O Connor

Photo Credit: Eileen Murphy
WORKSHOP FORUM – PHASE TWO

The second phase of workshop forum developed over seven months between February and October 2015. Up to fifteen members of staff participated in this cycle of the process with nine completing the project. The main focus was on developing a deeper enquiry through individual projects for a group book publication. Their brief was to produce a six-picture story or thematic collection of images in response to specific aspects of life grounded within their own perspective and experience.

During workshop forums we looked at a variety of photographic practices to introduce ideas of visual narrative, choice of subject matter and photographic techniques. Ongoing group feedback and discussion of images and ideas became a core process of the workshop forum. An emphasis was placed on peer-to-peer sharing to build a supportive creative community among participants.

The range of project ideas that emerged, unveil an insider’s perspective and intimate knowing of a place. Their images take us on a journey through interior and exterior settings, traversing time and space, giving the viewer a multitude of entry points with which to glimpse a ‘momentary snapshot’ of life inside St Finbarr’s Hospital campus.

In December 2015 a selection of twenty images were framed and exhibited in-house in the Social Center Restaurant. The book publication was launched in June 2016. 100 copies were printed and distributed to staff.
Vicky O Connor

Vicky’s work reflects the vulnerability of the body connected through images taken inside the blood bank laboratories. Her work now also serves as memento as many of these labs have since closed due to IBTS centralization.

Claire Stack

Claire went inside the old children’s ward in St Agnes, closed in the 1970’s, to capture relics of the old ward before renovation work. The building has since been renovated for new office space signifying the new order and function of the hospital today.

Eileen Murphy

Eileen focuses on exterior views of the campus framed through office windows, juxtaposing segments of the building with the natural world. Her work draws attention to the relationship between both, at times in quiet harmony with one another and yet always in a state of flux.
Máire Fitzgerald

Máire uses the only visual depiction of staff in her images by creating a series of portraits of hands of her co-workers in the physiotherapy department. The work makes a gentle reference to the caring and healing gesture of hands in patient care.

Olivia Wall

Olivia extends the presence of the natural world through emphasizing a sense of open and expansive skies that appear to dominate above the buildings on campus.

Maria Hanley

Maria takes us down hospital ward corridors showing its transformation into office space. The hospital function of the past is juxtaposed alongside its function in the future.
Eileen Ryan

Eileen reflects on layers of time, making reference to both ephemeral moments in nature entwined with the enduring legacy of the past inscribed in the walls and buildings still in use today.

Alice O Mahony

Located in the Rehabilitation Unit, Alice brings us into the quite spaces where patients and staff come together to socialize and relax.

Rosalind Condon

Rosalind uses a poem to introduce her images referencing the cycle of the working day in her role in clerical administration in the Public Health Department.
A MEDIATING TYPE OF PORTRIAT

The working process on the staff project was completed by October 2015, neatly dovetailing the beginning of the second strand of the project – my own artistic response. From time spent working in St Finbarr’s I was interested in the social fabric of a healthcare institution. The idea of an institution as a system of relationships, with over one thousand staff working onsite forming a complex web of interaction.

I considered that I would photograph staff to encapsulate a sense of this social web. An influencing factor in my consideration to photograph staff was also the absence of people in the photographic work made by staff (except for physiotherapist hands in one project). This was partially due to some colleagues not wanting to be photographed and a condition that no patients were to be photographed.

The idea was to create environmental portraits that would depict staff in a range of settings and roles across the campus. Initially I thought that I would photograph about 12 people. However this grew to 151 people (111 women and 40 men) working in 50 different services. It became apparent to me as the project was unfolding that it was necessary to capture a broader spectrum of roles and management levels for the project to be more effective. It was also important that the portraits were constructed and posed in a consistent manner, three quarter length standing pose, hands by their side, a fairly neutral facial expression, with their workplace as a backdrop. This worked to simplify the pose and create a uniformity of style. As the collection of images grew they began to take the form of a sort of catalogue of types reminiscent of August Sander’s social types atlas in Germany pre WW2. While the work makes reference to this typological format my intention was to foreground the person, identified by their name, occupation and department. Portraits were arranged alphabetically by surname in book format, juxtaposing two people, possibly unknown to each other, across a two-page spread.

The book as an object would also function as a form of intervention, circulated throughout the campus and finding its way onto the desktops and tabletops in offices, tearooms and clinical waiting rooms. I envisioned that the book would mediate a personal encounter between staff working in separate yet interconnected departments in the campus ecosystem.
Navigating and negotiating staff participation on this project was certainly an engaging and challenging aspect of the project. Having established a network of connections with staff through the previous project greatly facilitated the development of this project. The first portraits I made were with staff I knew through the workshops. This gave me the opportunity to do a number of test shoots to figure out the logistics of composition, posing, lighting etc. When this was formatted I compiled a mini presentation of portraits on an iPad as a sample reference to show and recruit other staff.
Staff I knew were a great support to me accessing and convincing new recruits for the project. This really got the project rolling at the initial stage.

After a certain point I needed to make contact with people outside of my established network so with the help of Aidan Warner we personally contacted people by phone or email first and then visited in person. The typical working process was to first arrange to meet with a key person in a department to introduce myself and the project, show them sample images, be introduced to their colleagues and arrange a day and time to come back to do the photo shoot. When I arrived to do a shoot I would usually have to work quite fast, as people were usually in the middle of work and quite busy. Setting up the portrait shot was often a collaborative effort, from arranging themselves in front of the camera to the staging of the background scene. On the whole, the majority of staff I approached were very keen and responsive to the project. A few people declined mainly because either they didn’t like their photograph being taken or just weren’t interested in taking part in the project.

The book publication was launched in June 2016. 300 copied were printed and distributed to staff.

STAFF RESPONSE

In a follow up email correspondence with staff participants in November 2017 I asked about what influence the project had: a) on their creative life, b) doing a creative project within their place of work.

The following summarises their key responses:

- Developed an appreciation for photography and art.
- Understand how to better use their camera for creative purpose.
- Look at the campus with fresh eyes.
- More aware and in touch with the physical and natural environment on campus.
- Enjoyed the opportunity to meet colleagues and new staff without the pressure of work.
- Welcomed the diversion from the serious /stressful side of the workplace.
- Understand how other people look at things.
- Watching other staff photographic work develop enhanced the experience.
- Appreciated the time and resources dedicated to staff not directly linked with patient care.
ARTIST RESPONSE

In the opening remarks in this text I specified my intent to reflect on the aspects of ‘place’ and ‘knowledge’ of a socially engaged art project within the workplace of a healthcare institution.

Locating the project within the flow of the working day I felt performed an important intervention, that opened up a new kind of workspace within the institution, enabling a particular kind of thinking and action to emerge. A kind of thinking and action that is sensory based, affective, visual, imaginative and intuitive. One that is discursive, critical and reflective. It’s with this new sensibility that staff investigated and reflected on their own experience. It’s with this new sensibility that staff encountered the familiar with fresh eyes. The images they created offer the potential of another way of seeing and looking at life on campus. Their images propose a moment for pause and reflection within the flow of the working day routine. Their images are an invitation to look beyond the surface and operative reality of the workplace by drawing attention to the more ephemeral and relational qualities, the more deeply connective aspect of our experience of place and being.

It’s at this deeper level of relational connectivity that the environmental portraits of staff function. At the core of this project social engagement has been fundamental in navigating and negotiating along intricate routes and intersections of connectivity between staff and institutional networks. What emerges in visual book form is an intricate ecosystem of roles and activities operating onsite. The project endeavors to draw attention to the social fabric of the institution. Rather than being a catalogue of professional services and roles the book mediates both an introduction to personnel and personal encounter.

The real potential for socially engaged art projects to operate within a healthcare workplace lies in its interstices and capacity to cultivate an expanded sense of oneself beyond fixed identities, to access a deeper sense of self, connection and place.

Colette Lewis
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