

Witness Writer

Sheelagh Broderick

One Artist's account of the
Regional *Dialogue Sessions*

Text developed for the
National | *Dialogue Arts + Health*

RUA R&D, Tallaght, Dublin

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Nothing is as powerful as an idea whose time has come.

Victor Hugo

The opportunity to be a part of a big idea is something special. To become part of a big idea you have to recognize it and engage with it – look for its structure and coherence, play with it, find its aesthetic, know it.

The emergence of arts and health as an area of practice is a big idea. It knits together two disciplines that had been separated in modern times. As a big idea it warrants attention. Grappling with it, turning it over to see the underside, looking within to see the inside and, from that position, looking out to see the outside. Holding a mirror to see yourself within it, meeting with others to locate yourself in relation to them and their position. Moving around within it to find points of ease and discomfort, finding edges, seams, creases, tripping and slipping, holding, letting go, sinking to the bottom, floating up, floundering, grasping a thread and following it.

This is my witness account of the three *Dialogue Sessions* held in Limerick during Autumn 2011. They were nine hours of carefully structured encounters that allowed me to wallow in the company of my peers. We were all artists, curious about the big idea, bringing with us our own experience and understanding of our practice. We were a diverse bunch with practices that encompassed music, dance, sculpture, ceramics, storytelling, visual art, gardening, yoga, performance; travelling to Limerick from far flung places, like Tipperary, Clare, Cork and Kilkenny to talk about arts and health. To just talk in confidence with no expectations and no pressure lifted veils and uncloaked convention. A lot of listening happened too – the airy acoustics of Church space¹ demanded effort in speaking to be heard and listening attentively to hear, in literal and figurative senses, and there was such a lot to say and hear.

Marie Brett began by *Unraveling Arts and Health Practice*, picking out policy, projects, practices, places – there is so much happening so many things to consider, how could this idea be so prevalent and yet invisible – my mind is full. Throughout Marie maintains a strong position returning to her own visual arts practice to orient herself within the healthcare context and provides a text which is a really useful reference for subsequent discussions. Later Sean O'Laoghaire, a puppeteer, storyteller and practicing community artist of twenty-two years standing (half his lifetime he says) demonstrates his way of working with elder care groups. He provides us artists the opportunity to talk and to make. With *Conversation Pieces* he provides topics of conversation, clay and tinfoil as materials – we get stuck in. Some conversation is fluid and easy, others more stilted, but our hands keep working. We show and tell – everyone has something to say. Then its time to think about our next session and the challenges of Pecha Kucha before we all disperse to mull over the provocations of the day.

I like that I have a month to carry the conversations in my head before we meet again in October. Recalling snippets of conversation over coffee, contacts made, plans put in place – all the richness of getting a group of people together resonates without settling into any pre-formed shape. Visual artist Jennie Moran leads out *Dialogue Session # 2* with a facilitated workshop *Mind That Art Practice*. Over twenty of us huddle round tables under the arches and struggle with thinking. In relation to our individual arts practices we are asked: ‘Why are you doing it?’, ‘Why are you doing it?’, ‘What’s the difference?’. Communicating a real urgency that these are important questions for us Jennie brings us to a ‘terrifyingly wide open’ territory in which an arts practice needs protection and celebration. Topics related to context, engagement, magic, emerge and we become embroiled in intense discussion. This intensity is repeated with the Pecha Kucha presentations. Twenty slides and twenty seconds per slide concentrate the mind. It seems like a big ask, but the participating artists really take it on and give coherent presentations illuminating their practice. This is the heart of *Dialogue Arts + Health*; individual artists giving expression to their arts practice, contributing their piece of the jigsaw. Eight artists present work, some of them have been working in healthcare contexts for many years, others are newer. Combined they establish a significant professional identity for artists working in healthcare contexts. They present in practice much of what had been discussed earlier that day. Health contexts are exciting places to work. They are tedious too. Confidence and excitement grow in the room. We are stronger together. This is a critical point in the *Dialogues*. We had originally come as curious individuals, but through structured and unstructured discussion we had become a collective. Supporting each other. Leading to a final session in which three artists would present their own work for Peer Critique. Gulp.

Funny enough its warmer in November than it was two months previously at the first session in the Church space. There is no chill in the conversation as we arrive either. Small groups meet and exchange greetings, updates, observations, anticipations. We are busy with ourselves. Curator and *Dialogue Arts + Health* Artist Liaison Annette Moloney and visual artist Lucia Barnes facilitate the Peer Critiques establishing a safe and open space for discussion. Three very different presentations follow. All relate to current work in progress but each has reached a significant stage in the process. Discussion revolves around the reading of an artwork and related ethics, the intimacy of the body and its potential to provoke strong reactions and the challenges in developing a project that addresses social issues without actually becoming implicated in being a solution for these issues. Everybody without exception contributes. Time is pressing, but everyone has something to say. The feedback is taken in two parts. First we give an initial immediate response then, having had a chance to think, we suggest trajectories prefaced by the statement ‘I wonder if...’. There is a lot of wondering before we are skillfully returned to final presentations. Mary Grehan, Waterford Healing Arts Trust presents the new online resource artsandhealth.ie²

and Katherine Atkinson, Create introduces the Artist in the Community Scheme as a possible support for future arts and health projects³. She is also the *Dialogue Arts + Health* evaluator.

And then it is over. I am hanging onto the bitter end, still tossing ideas around, but feeling part of a great maelstrom of intellectual activity. It’s hard to let go. I went to Limerick three times this Autumn and I got lost every time. Signs pointing to Galway, Dublin made me realize my misdirection. I will miss that lost feeling, and intend to make a commitment to getting lost more regularly. I don’t have all the answers to the big idea of arts and health, I do have lots of questions and now I have lots of people with whom I can talk about these questions. Roll on the National | *Dialogue Arts + Health*.

About the Writer

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About the Event

National | *Dialogue Arts + Health* was a one-day event which aimed to explore shared outlooks for arts and health practice in Ireland. The event was the culmination of twelve regional professional development events for artists, which took place in Cavan, Offaly, Galway and Limerick between September and November 2011. *Dialogue Arts + Health* was developed by the Arts + Health Coordinators Ireland (AHCi) in partnership with the Association of Local Authority Arts Officers (ALA:AO). It was funded by the Arts Council of Ireland and supported by numerous regional partners.

For more information about the overall *Dialogue Arts + Health* project please see <http://dialogueartsandhealth.wordpress.com/>

¹ The Limerick *Dialogue* Sessions took place in the former Daghda Dance Company Building, a converted church space in St. John’s Square, Limerick.

² See www.artsandhealth.ie

³ see www.create-ireland.ie