

Measuring Change – Changing Measurements

MICHAËLE CUTAYA REPORTS ON THE CREATE NETWORKING DAY FOR THE COLLABORATIVE ARTS, WHICH TOOK PLACE ON 1 DECEMBER 2017.

FOR ITS 2017 ITERATION, the Create Networking Day for Collaborative Arts took place at the recently opened O'Donoghue Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance at NUI Galway. Sinead O'Reilly, Head of Local Arts and Arts Participation at the Arts Council, was tasked with delivering the opening remarks. She set out two themes which resonated throughout the presentations on the day, the first being the changing demographics in Irish society. O'Reilly quoted some numbers from the Central Statistics Office – for instance that 18% of the population speak neither English nor Irish at home – as a way to highlight the extent to which Irish society is changing and what it means for the arts, in terms of participation and representation of ethnic minorities. She also raised the necessarily complex question of measuring the transformative role of the arts, pointing out the Arts Council's commitment, in its new strategy, to “looking at the impact of its investment in the arts”. She added that one of the first principles to emerge was the uncoupling of measurement and advocacy, and that the collection of information about the impact of a project did not have to be a constraint on projects – a timely development that I welcome.

Selina Thompson's keynote presentation, 'Sand', opened with the statement: “my Create residency in Ireland was a disaster; there, I said it”. What followed was a moving, funny, insightful and lucid presentation, the likes of which are rather rare. Working through the difficulties she encountered (including sickness, logistics and misjudgment, amongst other things), in which she failed to deliver, Thompson also shared what she learned about her own practice from participating in the residency. We might fleetingly wonder how in such a scenario, we could measure impact. Thompson presented her work as being centred on her identity as a black woman, identifying two strands. The first of these is a socially-engaged practice in which she operates from the position of a community insider – in the Portrane residency she could only position herself as an outsider and found it difficult.

The second strand she identified was her work as a researcher and her participation in conferences across the world, bringing her into contact with vastly different contexts in which to address her identity as a black woman – the fluidity of which she likened to 'shifting sands'. She gave examples of different situations where her own position shifted each time. In Texas, for instance, she could address issues of race to an exclusively white audience because she had a British accent. In the subsequent conversation, Blessing Moyo, a human right activist from Zimbabwe, asked Thompson how she became an artist, to which Thompson replied that she could become an artist because two generations of women before her did the work that she, Moyo, was doing now in Ireland. Thompson added that she was constantly asking herself what she could do to pass on her privilege, which was one reason why she requests to have a woman of colour as interlocutor in conversations such as this one.

There was plenty of content and food for thought in the following panel discussion, 'Questions of Collecting; Refocusing Representation of Ethnic Minority Cultures in National Archives', chaired by Ann Lyons. Artist Seamus Nolan talked about his current research within national collections to identify artworks that represent travelling communities, whether circus performers, 'tinkers' or 'gypsies'. Nolan noticed rather romantic notions of 'nomads' in the nineteenth century,



Selina Thompson speaking at the Create Networking Day for the Collaborative Arts; photograph by Louise Manifold

who became a more sinister presence in the twentieth century. Two representatives of the Galway Traveller Movement talked about their endeavour to celebrate traveller culture and to change the perception of travellers as “failed settled people”. Dr Eve Olney, an ethnographer and academic, discussed research she conducted with Nolan about representation and public memory, and how national identity gets constructed through national collections. They are working on a project for a travellers' archive and facing questions about display as well as content. It was a fascinating presentation that could have done with some streamlining of the slide content, which was more distracting than instructive.

This was followed by a presentation from artist and filmmaker Jijo Sebastian, titled 'Art and Politics in Collaborative Filmmaking'. Sebastian discussed the work he has been doing with a group of friends and amateur filmmakers making films based on the lives of the Indian community in Ireland. He went through the collaborative process of developing content with a skeleton crew, drawing parallels with the practices of filmmakers like Pedro Costa and Béla Tarr. He showed a series of trailers of the movies he made, which surprisingly juxtapose the aesthetics of a Hollywood thriller – rapid editing, snappy one-liners – with everyday life in suburban estates featuring amateur actors. Sebastian explained that although the content is developed collaboratively with the crew and the actors, he controls the final form. But, beyond the technical feat, the sleekness of this format feels problematic for me. If Indian amateur filmmakers produce films that look like they were made in Hollywood, it raises questions about the diversity of expression.

'Scaling Up, Large Events from Intimate Tales' a presentation by Chris Baldwin, artistic director of Galway 2020 opened the afternoon sessions. He spoke eloquently about his process while working in Poland from 2012 to 2016, as curator of interdisciplinary performance for Wrocław European Capital of Culture 2016. Responding to the question of what it means to be European, he spoke about the development of The Flow Quartet. This project delved into the complex and traumatic history of the city whose pre-WWII name and identity was pretty much erased until the 1990s. Breslau, as it was called then, was a German city with a majority of Protestants and an important Jewish community, which contrasts with the majority Catholic Polish population of modern Wrocław. The whole region endured an ethnic re-engineering with massive displacement of populations followed by a phase of 'forgetting' orchestrated by the Soviet authorities. The project called upon this memory and aimed

to open creative reflections on the themes of diaspora, migrations and contemporary European identities. It is difficult to form an idea about such an ambitious project through a few minutes of footage, however its emphasis on large-scale spectacle conveyed little of the fascinating contextual research Baldwin articulated.

Afterwards, the audience split up into the four break-out sessions on offer: Diversity and Language; Hard Landings and Creative Intersections; Transformational Practice; and The Politics of Place. These sessions were cut a little short they ran late, but following a well-trodden ritual, mediators from each session later relayed feedback to the reassembled audience. After a flamboyant introduction by Charlotte McIvor, lecturer in Drama and Theatre studies at NUI Galway – which gave lie to the notion that biographical introductions are a rather bland exercise – the day ended with a presentation by American artist Rick Lowe, focusing on two community-based projects: 'Project Row Houses' in Houston, and 'Victoria Square Project', Athens, which was part of Documenta 14. Lowe talked about his projects as 'social sculptures' – to take a term coined by Joseph Beuys – thus harnessing an ambition to transform the structures of society. Disturbingly however, the two projects' impact was measured as per the number of individuals' success stories, not through any transformation of the underlying conditions that had caused the need for social transformation in the first place. This aspect was all the more striking in contrast to Thompson's keen attention and careful consideration of her position as an individual within a community.

The Create Networking Day offered many opportunities to ponder upon the potentials and pitfalls of collaborative arts through a range of diverse and exciting practices. As O'Reilly pointed out in her opening remarks, the transformations achieved within the arts are complex, while causalities are often difficult to establish. The day invited us to consider how the Arts Council's aforementioned strategy to separate measurement from advocacy might apply to actual practices, and how the dominant influence of metrics and statistics might be avoided. Of course, it was also a great occasion to meet and talk, with discussions extending into the evening during the launch of the A5 Art Fair at the Galway Arts Centre.

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