

Boundary slippage: an SOS for artists integrity?

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This article considers the given idea of 'arts and health as an arts practice' and aims to position my response in relation to key influences which have informed and shaped my own practice within the field.

When asking: What is arts and health? The Arts Council (1) define it as 'a complex area of practice that involves a diverse range of a stakeholders, each with their own aims, objectives, priorities and approaches'. This conjunction of professions is critical and I will revisit the point later.

My understanding of arts and health is that of a Littoral Zone, a geographic term for the inter-tidal, ever-shifting interface of land, sea and air. In this instance, the interface is replaced by service providers, service users and artists. I propose that working in such a place of flux can prove personally and professionally challenging for artists; it can be a place of uncertainty, anxiety and disorientation and potentially a place of beguile and distraction. Of course the very nature of this context is all the more reason an artist would want to engage with it.

Grant Kester (2) in writing about Littoral Art says it is interdisciplinary, operating 'between discourses and between institutions'. For me, arts and health is a three-way interface certainly rooted in discursively mediated encounter, and the practice necessitates artists' ability for discursive engagement. There are challenges though to such discursivity born from the three-way interface and conjunction of two distinct professions centralising around issues of expectation, status and power.

As an artist, I seek opportunities to make work currently exploring the notion of ambiguous loss. This is a conceptual concern existent across various contexts; the challenge for me is to locate meaningful exchange to cross inform and influence a creative exploration and outcome. Within an arts and health context, I have to be mindful of the often contradictory complexities of the practice and remain cognisant of my priorities as an artist having primary regard to the artwork and its conceptual enquiry. While certainly adopting a listening carefully, participant-centred approach with wellbeing priority embedded, the notion of an engagement primarily serving art can still be a challenging position to secure and hold. It may be useful at this stage to outline what 'I am not' as a device to further laterally define what 'I am'... Engagement for me is neither educational or pedagogic, not being involved in therapeutic or correctional interaction, my practice is not at the service of a healing agenda although it may be claimed by others as an aligned consequential outcome. This index might appear dogmatic, perhaps a consequence of Littoral Zone practice which does require clarity of intention to capacitate vigorous partnership and prevent beguile by other worthy agenda.

Aiming to explore my practice in relation to arts and health further, I refer to a few key projects.

7 Shadows is an ongoing collaboration with Nic Piper; an arts intervention referencing the ex-voto where active engagement and invited consequential production is a fundamental part of the work as apposed to passive consumption. The work is installed in unlikely settings and may raise debate as to contextual alignment with arts and health; referencing this, Dr Ronan Foley (3) in writing about the work said 'One can see in this ephemeral artwork a strong connection to geographical research on therapeutic landscapes. The site becomes a setting into which passing bodies release a wide set of anxieties, hopes, dreams and needs. In so doing they perform an act of unburdening which is in itself therapeutic.' The work is intimate with engagement often revealing and deeply personal, while conversely the work also occupies the anonymity of the collective.

By comparison *Amulet* was an action research project based at Cork University Maternity Hospital exploring the concept of the amulet as an object signifier of ethereal farewell specific to pregnancy loss. Fragile, discursive engagement formed the bedrock of the work resulting in a physical non-entity, which as Grant Kester argues challenges us to accept the process as an inherent part of the work, all be it invisible. For me, this argument is significant to understanding meaningful arts and health practice, according invisible dialogue with status.

Claire Bishop (4) referring to the discourse around socially engaged art practice warns that the 'conceptual gesture of reducing authorship to the role of facilitation ultimately leaves little to distinguish projects from a slew of community-based practices that revolve around a predictable formula.' Her response to art criticism's tendency of evaluating collaborative work in ethical rather than aesthetic terms, focusing more on 'how' rather than 'why' has, she says, resulted in reducing art to 'moral criteria'.

The notion of moral criteria interests me and in collaboration with art therapist John McHarg was explored through 'Reverie: Locating Loss' an action research intervention. Exploring issues of power, obligation and authorship through gift economy, the work included art therapists' participation, while challenging art therapy paradigm prioritising clinical outcomes as the primary goal of encounter. The work invited physical response as a gift to inform a newly re-positioned work at some point in the future. Moral criteria as a concept was explored through dialogue with participants prior to engagement.

In wrapping up, I suggest a need for those of us engaged in arts and health practice to further interrogate Bishop's warning, as the argument of ethics verses aesthetic brings into question the very crucial issue of artist's integrity within the field, and this certainly is worth further exploration.

(1) Arts Council of Ireland Arts and Health Policy and Strategy

(2) Grant Kester. *Dialogical Aesthetics: A Critical Framework For Littoral Art*

(3) *Flags of Intention: Mapping Future Traces*. Blog entry by Dr Ronan Foley. Dept of Geography. National University of Ireland Maynooth. April 2011

(4) Claire Bishop. *The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents*