

Egress: Dancing on the Edge of Risk

by Julie Murphy

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“He wanted to limit me to his own investigation of who I was....” Sheridan Hay

E.gress is not *about* people with dementia. This project does not present any statements or offer any opinions about what it is like to live with this condition either as the person who has it or as the one in a caring role. And so in this sense it cannot be said to be an instructive project – it does not seek to teach any lessons. E.gress rather is a collaborative arts project *with* people with dementia. It involves the creation of a space whereby those experiencing dementia are seen and heard. It creatively presents the transformative impression made upon artists by the people with dementia that they collaborated with – and invites the viewer to respond. What emerges through this response is open ended and undetermined and this is what makes the work exciting and adventurous. It is a work continually in the process of being created through the response of the viewer. In this way the field of meaning of dementia is open to ongoing proliferation; diffuse and unbound by certainties. It seems to me that this is a way of approaching dementia that is novel, expansive and potentially liberating not only for those connected with the experience of the condition but for the wider society also in which people with dementia live and belong.

Unlike more established evidenced based modes of enquiry into dementia – (including the bio-medical discourses of neurophysiology, psychiatry and geriatrics and the social scientific discourses of sociology, social psychology and ethnology) – E.gress does not involve proposing explanations or advancing hypotheses on the condition of dementia. Undoubtedly all of these domains of discursive enquiry generate very valuable knowledge that expands the range of understanding of the genesis, treatment, care and social dimensions of the condition*. What interests me in the context of E.gress however is the question of whether within all of these analytical fields – (which almost always involve people who do not have dementia writing about those who do) – those with dementia become structurally positioned as ‘the other’ assigned to a passive role with regard to the knowledge that is generated and produced about their otherness?

The French cultural theorist Michel de Certeau had a particular ethical and epistemological interest in the construction of otherness through written discourses (scriptural practices) and the relations of power and disempowerment generated by and sustained through these practices**. Essentially his view was that analytical writing is an act of power that captures and paralyses the experience that it seeks to explain. The raw, messy, inchoate stuff of lived experience is contained literally and metaphorically in written discourse and the vitality of lived experience of some people is erased and supplanted through the containing written account of more powerful others. This is a dynamic that occurs not only in analytical writing but within the structure of any relationship where one person is ‘authorised’ to inscribe the experience of another, whatever the medium of inscription might be.

De Certeau's quest in his work was not to eradicate inscription but rather to cultivate spaces where the author and the one inscribed could form an encounter that would lead not to a captured content but rather an altered understanding of both. This entails a radical shift in the practice of relationship between those enquiring and those enquired about from one of active-passive to one of reciprocal engagement.

As someone involved in an advisory capacity on E.gress I had a worry at the outset that the project might carry within it an implicit (thought not intentional) impetus towards inscription.... a desire to capture someone else's experience of dementia. Historically there have been many arts practices where the viewed subject is passive and determined under the all powerful gaze of the viewer artist***. Given that personally and professionally the value of safeguarding space for every individual to hold autonomy, dignity and self-determination is important to me (no matter how restrictive their health might be) I would have found it difficult to collaborate with this kind of approach.

However, having talked at length with the artists Kevin and Marie and listened to their approach and the details of how they practice, I realise that E.gress demonstrates a very different kind of arts practice and mode of enquiry; one that is oriented towards reciprocal relationship, partiality of perspective and the necessity of movement by both artist and subject in the space of encounter. In another essay in this catalogue Sheelagh Broderick has written about 'something happening' for the people who participated in this project. Something happened also for the artists... their encounter with people with dementia moved and changed them (a change further deepened by their connection with family members and carers) and so rather than being in the all powerful position of authorising meaning they found themselves within a space where meanings emerged (egressed) through the relationship formed between them and the people with dementia that they encountered.

From the outset of this project both artists were adamant that this was a participatory arts project. For them this entailed an essential element of risk. It meant entering into a loose unmapped space of relationship with people with dementia without a determining expectation or assured guarantee of what would happen. It seems to me that in many ways this practice is akin to initiating a dance with an unfamiliar partner whose rhythm and step one does not know at the outset. The ensuing dance is one that takes shape in the process of both people tuning into each other and discovering (perhaps through awkward steps at first) a shared pattern of movement across the floor.

In their encounter with people with dementia Marie and Kevin began with opening a space for the person to 'present' themselves (in multiple senses of that word). In practice this meant going with the flow of the person on the day. The process of relationship wasn't subject to managed forms of communication such as diagnostic questions, or cognitive tests or leading social chat. The approach was rather one of introducing visual objects (photographs) and musical sounds and risking the space to see what would happen****. The response of the person became the first step and from there a dance of connection evolved between the artist and the participant.

There are two layers to E.gress. There is the process of the work as it unfolded in the encounter between the artists and the people with dementia and there is the production of the art work. In the space of the process the artists took on the role of dance partners. In the space of producing the artwork they took on the role of stage directors. The artwork

involves designing an artistic frame in and through which to re-present the experience of engagement between artist and person with dementia. The relationship took place in the moment and like any moment in time cannot be repeated. However what the artwork does is evoke the impression of that relationship - creating an echo chamber in which the experience can reverberate. It is very noteworthy to me that the direct voice of those with dementia speaks in this space. In the practice of analytical writing and objectifying art it is this singular voice that gets lost – the people written about and gazed upon are silenced. The E.gress film gives space to the voices and faces of people with dementia- it cultivates a place of power through which they can move others and through this movement altered meanings and understandings of dementia can emerge/egress.

E.gress does not present a model that can be replicated. Rather it is an event that has the power to move, influence and bring about a reconfiguration of perspective in those who experience it. There is too inspiration to be drawn from the artistic practice in healthcare settings and the process of enquiry of this project: the alternating 'lead-and- follow' dance step dynamic between artist and participant; the refusal to either take over the other or efface oneself; the designing –(but not authorising the meaning) - of the work; and - through productive collaboration with families, care staff and funders - the cultivation and safeguarding of a space where the dance of engagement can happen. E.gress demonstrates how this space can be set up and maintained but there are no guidebooks for what happens when the dancers encounter each other on the stage or for when the audience encounters the work... that is the always singular, in the moment space of risk, integrity, artistic freedom and personal response.

* For a helpful overview of studies of dementia across a range of fields see Innes, A (2009) *Dementia: A Social Science Perspective*, London, Sage Publications

** See de Certeau, Michel (trans Tom Conley) (1997) *The Capture of Speech and other Political Writings*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press and also de Certeau, Michel (trans Brian Massumi) (1986) *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, Manchester, Manchester University Press. Also Highmore, Ben (2006), *Michel De Certeau*, London, Continuum

*** See Berger, John (1972) *Ways of Seeing* London, Penguin

****This encounter could not have happened without the collaboration of families and care staff. The trust and relationship building groundwork that happened in a previous arts & health project **Converging Lives** involving the same artists and ASI care professionals- laid down the foundation of relationships on which the space of encounter within E.gress became possible

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