

Flags of Intention: Mapping Future Traces

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Walking around Merrion Square Park during the St. Patrick's Day Festival this year, my eye was drawn to a flutter of golden flags in one corner. Upon closer inspection, I discovered that the flags, each one attached to a slim free-standing branch of wood, were part of an art installation called Flags of Intention. Put together by artists Marie Brett and Nic Piper, and co-sponsored by the Crafts Council of Ireland, the aim of the piece was to give visitors/participants small card tags and let them write their hopes/wishes/dreams on those tags and then pin them to the trees or, as noted by the artists, to plant those wishes into an intentional garden where they might blossom and grow. The artists have carried out similar installations over the past years at other festival sites including Glastonbury and the Electric Picnic.

The wishes themselves were a fabulous variety of desires, longings and hopes yet also said something about the respondents themselves and indeed the time/place into which they were expressed. While younger writers seemed to have a great passion for dogs and family holidays, the sense of other more fractured lives also emerged from both child and adult 'wishers'. A range of responses and images are listed below;

I want 10,000 cats and dogs and my Dad
I want peace at home
I want a more nice and polite family
I wish my brother would stop killing me
We wish Jenette gets better very quickly
Sick people to be well and all thieves to go away
I want to go on a cow

Some of these spoke of very real and immediate needs and indeed for some sort of certainty and closure related to a range of life events while others were more aspirational for a longer-term future. Yet all felt as if they came from the heart and were a set of affective markers, unashamedly expressed within a public space and setting. Other visitors read and were touched, amused or felt moved to comment on what others had written and indeed the demand was so great that the tags ran out. Luckily Pip very sensibly suggested that people might share their wishes by writing on the blank rear sides of existing tags.

Yet this need to express one's hopes and needs taps into a long and indeed literal well-spring of cultural expression. Marie indeed noted that the idea came in part from an observation of the kinds of notes and objects left at holy wells and other pilgrimage sites. Here the traditional votive offering, taken from the term *ex-voto* and specifically associated with a granted wish or an answered prayer, has over time, developed into a

much wider set of intentional expressions. This shift from a gratitude for favours received to a range of new meanings around protection, success, desire and other hoped-for positive outcomes, shows the extent to which the votive has shifted focus from the past to the future.

More broadly one can see in this delightful ephemeral artwork a strong connection to geographical research on therapeutic landscapes. The site in the corner of the park becomes, for a few days or hours, 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. For others it is just a bit of fun, though that too can be a therapeutic act, as indeed laughter and enjoyment almost always is. The wishes expressed would also vary in time and space so that a range of expressed wishes from a music festival setting would have a very different demographic from a public park on a holiday weekend. Yet perhaps it is the very nature of the expression, simultaneously throw-away and deeply-drawn, that also gives the performance its strength.

Other geographers, and one thinks here of Karen Till's network of artists working under the broad theme of Mapping Spectral Traces, are also interested in such spaces of hope and intention. Rebecca Krinke's work on 'Sites of Joy and Pain' is a classic and intriguing example of this kind of work and she too chooses gold as the colour of choice to represent joy. This wider interest in exploring with public audiences a range of contemporary spectral traces can be seen not just as a reflection of/from the past, but as a forward anticipatory reflection into future traces and trajectories. One final comment is that the term intent, itself a term of affirmation, has sometimes been defined as; 'the focus of the mind, the sense of purpose that leads to action'. If even a fraction of these intentions are realized and enacted, then their initial expression will have been worthwhile.