

MARKING 'ANAMNESIS'

Witnessing the public discussion of Marie Brett's 'Amulet Project'

By Rebecca Moran

As a writer and director who often works in a collaborative context, I was intrigued by the request from the Waterford Healing Arts Trust (WHAT) to be a 'witness writer' for a public discussion on 'Anamnesis', an exhibition of new works by West Cork based artist Marie Brett in The Index Gallery at the Waterford Central Library on the 24th April 2013. 'Anamnesis' was itself the result of 'The Amulet Project', a collaboration between the artist and bereaved parents. Documenting a collaborative process can present challenges, especially in respecting and protecting the participants' privacy, and a 'witness writer' seemed an inspired and unique solution for an event such as this. Eager to contribute to this method of documentation from an unbiased perspective, I gladly accepted the task.

Prior to witnessing the public discussion, I had the privilege of interacting with the exhibition. 'Anamnesis' engaged the public at a raw point – at an exposed and vulnerable place for the participants, and I was struck by a sense of familiarity with the anonymous voices as they came in and out of heart-wrenching moments and memories. While compelled to stay seated and listen, I felt uncomfortable simultaneously viewing the tender images carefully preserved and protected in frames, almost in a state of suspension. I found it easier to listen first and then silently take in the photographs. As I quietly contemplated the words and images, I was reminded of the feminist mantra 'the personal is political'. While there was nothing explicitly in the images or the recordings to warrant the connection in my mind, the extreme intimacy of the exhibition was incredibly personal and evoked a sense of powerlessness in the enshrined grief.

As I moved on to the public discussion, questions filled my mind. I wondered how the artist navigated the journey of the collaborative process through to the artistic product whilst working in such a sensitive sphere of experience. What was the artistic intent: aesthetics, topical awareness, revelation? Curious about the artwork, I pondered the pin pricks edging the images, were they symbolic? How were the recordings edited: for brevity or emotional impact or aural effect? I noted and considered the evocative familiarity of the participant's voices and how certain words and phrases replayed in my mind. I could also not help reflecting on the mothers themselves and the differences in the telling of their stories.

Chaired by WHAT Art Director Mary Grehan, the discussion commenced with a general introduction to the artwork and to the panellists, including the artist Marie Brett, Nancy Falvey of the Ballyphehane/Togher Arts and Crafts Initiative (BTACI), and participant 'Mary'. Projected slides from all phases of the 'Amulet Project' through the final exhibition as 'Anamnesis' provided an informative backdrop to the discussion and served as a perhaps coincidental, but quite effective, punctuation at certain moments.

Approximately 25 people filled the audience, comprised predominantly of women invested in the artistic process. Without speculating on the reasons, it seemed notable that only a few members of the public-at-large and even fewer men were in attendance. In addition, the quiet, hard to reach location far from the exhibition itself made me wonder if a more public space for the discussion might have been more inviting to the general public? Undoubtedly, the composition of the

audience significantly influenced the direction and outcomes of the discussion, which Mary Grehan effectively guided as it developed into three broad themes: process and collaboration, artistic choices and impact, and 'absence'.

Each panellist provided a background to the project. Nancy Falvey, in describing the BTACI's history and involvement with the artist during the research phase of *'The Amulet Project'*, summarised how the women of this inspired group expanded their compassionate creativity from crocheting baby hats for the local maternity hospital (CUMH) into hand-crafting beautiful rosary beads. Eventually, with encouragement and support from midwives, the group reverently began making layettes as amulets for families grieving the unexpected loss of a precious newborn in hospital.

The artist, Marie Brett, described previous work with the BTACI in conjunction with a visit to a museum of "special items in tiny cupboards" and an approach from Cork University Maternity Hospital (CUMH) as the inspiration for the *'Amulet Project'* research. When moving on from the research, the project evolved to focus on the bereaved parents' own poignant amulets. As the discussion progressed, it was stated that the project 'ended up marking death', yet it emerged that the amulets served as many functions as there were participants: some marking loss, some marking the letting go of grief, and some much more viscerally marking a lost child's existence. I could not help but listen in my mind to the voice of one of the exhibition's recordings "always there even when put away". This idea of the amulet as a marker became a dominant through line to the discussion, and the word used most often was 'marking', the 'marking' of: life, loss, gratitude, grief, consolation, and release.

Two participants were involved in the discussion (one in the audience 'Bernice' and the other 'Mary' on the panel). Mary felt drawn to project, driven by a need to let go of her amulet, frozen breast-milk, in a 'respectful and meaningful way'. For Mary, her involvement fulfilled a very personal desire for this last tangible link to her child, her amulet, not to be just disposed of, but to be honoured in an almost ceremonial and sacred way. Unique to Mary's participation, the artist photographed not the amulet itself (i.e., frozen breast-milk) but the melting, the act of release. An audience member interpreted this as the creation of a new amulet, the artwork itself, celebrating the child's life.

Bernice described her involvement also in terms of 'letting go', as well as 'honouring' a connection to her experience of loss. The public exhibition of Bernice's amulet (a condolence letter from a midwife) allowed her to pay tribute to the person whose unexpected words of kindness comforted her in her darkest hours of grief. Bernice astutely summed up the varied motivations for each participant's involvement and acknowledged that there was a clear understanding amongst all that the artist had her own and separate aims.

Expanding on this, Marie Brett explained her approach to the sensitivities of the subject matter and the vulnerabilities of the participants when negotiating a mutually respectful artist/participant relationship. She explained the honesty required to enable not only participation but the use of the participant's precious, personal items and painful experiences whilst also ensuring the necessary artistic freedom to develop a work of art. She clarified the need for all collaborators to recognise that the project would lead to an exhibition where difficult decisions might be required in the best interests of the artwork. In addition, participants had to comprehend and accept how the personal objects and stories might eventually be used and displayed. The final critical aspect outlined was the need to transparently define ownership, with the objects being owned by the participants and the artwork (i.e., images, vocal recordings) owned by the artist. The participants stressed how important these elements were in facilitating their involvement. The positive effect of this candid

relationship was evidenced by the quality and nature of the outcomes and the obvious mutual admiration between the collaborators throughout the public discussion.

Nancy Falvey, an enthusiastic and eloquent advocate for the value of artistic collaboration, elucidated the benefits of participation for the BTACI in both healing and community contexts. Engaging in this project with Marie Brett added an intimate and personal layer to the group's crafting. Nancy also recounted the significant impact beyond the physical creative work, especially in stimulating open discussion around sensitive issues such as grief and loss within the group. The audience echoed Nancy's belief that artistic engagement can be therapeutic and that the benefits of participation include raising awareness, health advantages, and simply that it "feels good". Nancy's contribution to the discussion provided a persuasive argument for the support of artistic collaboration and, as she so succinctly described, "the use of arts in influencing change".

Another very interesting theme was raised by the artist – what isn't in the artwork, the calculated absences. Marie Brett discussed the "silent voices", the unheard presences in the pieces. In particular, she discussed several of the amulets as having been gifts to the parents, and how those who bestowed these gifts are integral to the existence and emotional impact of the amulets. The gifted origins of Bernice's amulet highlighted another absence in the piece – midwives. Midwives had considerable influence on the artwork as a whole, with the artist describing much of the initial research as centred on the hospital setting and explorations of how ordinary midwifery tools or medical objects might evolve into bereaved parents' amulets. Intriguingly, midwives in the audience expressed discomfort viewing some of the projected images from the research phase due to the negative association these objects (i.e., breast pumps, vials of blood, pinards) have in the context of infant loss. I observed that these objects represented a very different kind of amulet in these circumstances, the clinical amulets of midwives. An audience member aptly described midwives as 'soldiers', exposing a reversal in a midwife's anticipated birthing role, assisting in a death instead of a life, and fulfilling anxious and uncomfortable responsibilities with an altered sense of obligation to parents. The unease of midwives in this inverted function was explored alongside the influence of the training and sensitivities of individual midwives on the experience of neo-natal loss. Yet the extreme solace Bernice felt in her letter brought the weight of the unseen and unheard presences within the artwork into focus. Poignantly, the unsaid in the 'absence' discussion was the unspeakable absence of the lost children.

Questions were also raised, answered, and discussed about artistic choices such as: the use of photographs rather than the objects, creating one versus many pieces from the amulets, the function of the grey surrounding the images, the editing of the interviews, and the lure of the images in engaging with the recordings. This last question seemed to spark the most discussion, with participants, artist, and audience members commenting on what Mary Grehan described as the 'voluntary' nature of the artwork. The conscious choice the spectator makes to sit, listen, and stay listening to the recordings was praised as a powerful aspect of the artwork. I would have liked this point to have been further explored. What were the intentions of the artist: to entice the viewer into becoming not just a responder to the artwork but a participant in the artistic process; to illicit an emotional response; or to create a deep connection between the art, the participants, and the viewer?

As the public talk on Marie Brett's *'Anamnesis'* came to a close, I filtered through the questions and curiosities with which I entered as a neutral witness. The discussion explored interesting aspects of the research, the process, and the development of a powerful exhibition of distinctive artwork, yet unanswered questions remained. While I felt elements of the background and history of the exhibition were better explored in the gorgeous catalogue, the discussion best captured: the mutual respect of the collaborative process, the impactful 'absences' such as the fascinating hidden

contributions of the midwives, and the effervescent enthusiasm of the participants for artistic collaboration. Perhaps there is scope for further dialogue and discussion, with the audience expressing interest in what happens next - for the: project, artwork, artist, participants, and broader themes. In particular, the audience acknowledged the auspicious timing of this project in the context of an ever widening public discourse about the power of art in healing.

On reflection, in my immediate contemplations of the artwork, steeped in a mindful refrain of the sometimes excruciatingly personal words of the participants, I drifted to thoughts of the 'personal is political'. The subsequent public discussion only ever lightly touched on the broader impact of a work of art that reveals uncomfortable and historically silenced experiences. Interestingly, while the artist frequently discussed collaboration in terms of engaging with gender-inclusive 'bereaved parents', the voices, the panellists, and most of the audience of the public talk were distinctly women. Sensitive issues relating to areas of life traditionally seen as within a woman's realm are rarely openly discussed or embraced. One audience member emphasised the power in doing so, and certainly there did seem to be an underlying thread to the discussion of the restorative and empowering nature of having these issues exposed in a public artwork. Departing the public talk on Marie Brett's '*Anamnesis*', I considered the deeper discussions yet to be had about restoring and creating power through dialogue in the discussion of women's experiences through art.

Rebecca Moran is a writer and director who is passionate about collaborating with individuals, communities, and organisations that don't usually have access to meaningful engagement with the arts. She has a B.F.A. in Theatre from the University of Illinois and has studied for her M.A. in English at DePaul University, Chicago. After moving to Ireland in 2001, Rebecca worked in arts management whilst also developing her freelance arts practice. As the Outreach Officer for Barnstorm Theatre Company she facilitated, directed, and co-wrote theatre projects and plays such as '*A Woman's Sphere*', the culmination of a year-long project with 12 community groups, comprised of over 100 women, which explored the multi-faceted roles of women in today's society. Subsequently, Rebecca also served as the Director of Children's Programmes for Red Kettle Theatre Company and the Artistic Director of the South Tipperary Arts Centre. Rebecca's poem 'Tonight We Are Together' was published in the anthology *A Wing and a Prayer* by the Waterford Healing Arts Trust (2004) and her work has been supported by an Arts Council Bursary Award (2008), two Arts Council/CREATE Artist in the Community Awards (2009 & 2010), and a Sound & Vision II Scheme grant from the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (2011). Her collaboration with Ceart Patientwise on the *Chronic Illness Radio Play Project* is highlighted in a case study on artsandhealth.ie and culminated with the radio play '*A Time for Hope and Desperation*', which was nominated in 2011 for a Crystal Clear Health Literacy Award and was shortlisted for a PPI Award in the Best Radio Drama category.