

Reverie : Locating Absence

Marie Brett + John McHarg

Included in Reverie + Nemeton publication 2013

Reverie : Locating Absence + Nemeton was a two stage, cross-discipline enquiry, led by artist Marie Brett and art therapist John McHarg. The enquiry spanned a two year period, and a key aim was to enter the cross-roads of their mutual interest in relation to the notion of loss, and to explore the bearing of this enquiry on their respective practices of artist and art therapist. The live action research was experimental, and pushed the bounds of Marie and John's existing collaboration.

Reverie : Locating Absence

Reverie : Locating Absence was a project led by Marie Brett and John McHarg and produced in partnership with Crawford College of Art during 2011. The live enquiry took the form of an arts intervention, and invited participation through means of gift economy.

Visiting lecturers, students and the public at large were invited to experience the work and contribute to the enquiry by gifting a response of some form, back to the research space. It was clear that it was a work-in-progress, and responses could be used, in some form, in a future artwork.

Physically, what visitors saw, was a large assortment of objects located in clusters throughout four small rooms. For example: two silver tea-spoons lay adjacent to a dusty archive photo of a 'Grand-Aunt', a china tea-cup held steaming tea, a cigarette lay half smoked in a metal ash-tray, handwritten picture postcards and a tiny letter wrapped in thread lay near to loose postage stamps from far away places. There were records, books, boxes, glass jars, a poem and lots more, and two distinct smells accompanied the objects, one a domestic sweet scent, the other a clinical and harsh odour.

John and Marie had selected objects that had, for them, a *resonance* of loss, although they held the term lightly. Visitors were invited to interact with the objects and take time to locate their own personal association, in reverie. It was hoped, but not demanded, that visitors would *gift* a response of some form, back to the research space, although the type of response wasn't pre-determined.

People made many re-visits to the four small rooms, and interestingly, people gave each other lots of space, and in the main, waited until a room was empty before entering themselves. One room was full of wooden boxes, and many people left personal responses inside these containers. Responses of all types were gifted: photographs, jewellery, hand-written notes, a vintage paper sweetie bag, some with accompanying names, the majority not. In another room, hundreds of small glass test tubes were placed in rows, and again many responses were carefully left inside the long slender tubes, including tightly scrolled, hand-written notes and a pair of tiny figures made from plasticine.

Reverie : Locating Absence – as a work, questioned notions of power, obligation and authorship; primary concerns for collaborative and participatory arts practice. In parallel to this, as the work took place during the Crawford Art College's art therapy summer school, Marie and John took the opportunity to challenge the established art therapy paradigm of clinical outcome being the primary goal of encounter. Instead, thought this enquiry, the *art* in art therapy was prioritized. Art therapy is a private action, it is personal and serves the individual within a health and care agenda. The output, or 'art', can be secondary. Perhaps with this in mind, it is interesting to question, is it appropriate to exhibit work that has been produced during a therapy session, is this be a betrayal of the process and the intent? Clearly John and Marie's enquiry was not located within a therapy session, but it was aligned to a study of art therapy and there was a potential for assumed associated of *safe space*, a characteristic integral to the practice of art therapy. Such a notion of safe space was challenged, and in turn, the status quo disrupted. Participants, as part of John and Marie's enquiry, voluntarily left the notion of a safe space (*for clinical prioritized encounter*), and entered into the *un-safe space* of contributing to a public artwork.

As a response to *Reverie*, Marie Brett and John McHarg produced a new work titled 'Nemeton.' The work took the form of an arts intervention inside a public building which had various sacred and reflective spaces.

Marie and John gratefully acknowledge the support given to this work by Cork Institute of Technology, department of Biomedical Sciences and Crawford College of Art and Design, department of Art Therapy, with a special mention to Ed Kuczaj, head of Art Therapy and Continuing Visual Education.

N e m e t o n

Was produced in response to *Reverie*, and took the form of an arts intervention inside St Mary's Collegiate Church, in Youghal, County Cork.

The site of St Mary's was selected because as an environ it spans two distinct uses, that of a consecrated space where religious services are conducted, and also that of an arts centre space with a creative events programme, managed by the town council. Thus the environ coalesces two distinct participatory elements. John and Marie thought this was an interesting parallel to their inter-sector collaboration, and their interest in areas of over-lap within their practice. Additionally, the building is a national monument of Ireland, and houses its own large collection of artefacts, which are located throughout the church space, and are highly accessible for visitors to interact with. Marie and John saw St Mary's as a *safe* space for quiet investigation and reflection, and negotiated the opportunity to use this integrated environ as one to locate selected gift responses made during *Reverie*. Their aim was to position these small objects and writings as reverential artefacts, in amongst the fabric of the building.

In niches, on ledges and tables, in pews and beside prayer books, several small reverential artefacts were located anonymously. The items were positioned as ambiguous offerings for reflection.

The small items located in St Mary's evoked a huge and varied response. The work provoked lots of discussion and debate from several quarters and it became clear, that the notion of *safe* and *reverential space* had been hugely interrupted and challenged. John and Marie realized that questions of what is safe space? who owns it? how is it maintained? and why? were intrinsically linked to the responses made, as were issues of ethics, ownership, power and control.

Nemeton – as a work was *claimed* and *re-configured* several times while at St Mary's. This was done by a variety of people: clergy, town council employees, church volunteers; all with the clear intention to safeguard the *sanctity* of the church. This happened because interestingly, key people had engaged with the work (*reverential artefacts*), and particular objects had evoked assumptive meanings for them, which they found to be worrying and/or in-appropriate to be associated with a sacred space; that of death, suicide and loss of a child. Some artefacts were removed, others were re-positioned and eventually all the pieces were gathered together and placed on a food trolley with a large sign explaining what *Nemeton* was. This act sterilized and deflated the work, making it 'safe' and passive. When John and Marie heard what was happening inside St Mary's, they joined the conversation, and in turn re-claimed the artwork, with intent to safeguard the *Reverie* participant's gift responses, and the *artwork* in itself.
