

Symbolic Sensitivities - One Artist's Collaborative Consideration of the Unsaid

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Undeniably, we find ourselves living and existing within a time of national and international flux and readjustment – economically, politically, socially and philosophically. This period has possible reverberations for us personally also, as we work within the shadow of ever-present uncertainty. The tremors of social change are felt by many, both individually and collectively.

Built into this predicament, however, lies a unique opportunity to review some of our pre-existing social values, our cultural customs and to honestly discuss and reconsider their usefulness to the times in which we find ourselves. This concept, and its inherent challenges, was explored by President Michael D Higgins as part of his Inauguration Speech in November 2011 when he spoke about this complex situation as an 'opportunity to reflect on where we have come from and on how we might see ourselves into the future.' He explored the timeframe of his Presidency as one which coexists with the remembrance of key historical moments in recent Irish history. He stated that a 'decade of commemorations lies ahead' and encouraged us to explore both 'the ethics and politics of memory' and to remain open to the options of either reconciling or accepting different versions of memory, if required.'

Connected to this, it is worth considering our customs around bereavement and loss and our social skills to honestly deal with the unimaginable, particularly in how we show support for and empathize those affected by pregnancy and infant loss. For some bereaved parents their personal experience can regrettably bring about social situations where other people's discomfort, the uneasy feeling of not knowing what to say or do, can be quite difficult to endure.

Over a number of years artist Marie Brett has developed 'Amulet', a contemporary art project that aims to creatively and sensitively explore the subject of pregnancy and infant loss with bereaved parents and their families. As collaborators on the project, healthcare professionals act as pivotal partners for and with the artist. Through their diverse roles, for example, as bereavement midwives, councilors, nurses and community workers, they broker potential relationships between bereaved parents and the artist, with the essential proviso that it is the parent who decides to be part of the art project or not.

For the Amulet project, the artist's intention to develop an open process for the research, development and production of contemporary art along with the diversity of project partners – parents along with healthcare professionals – forms a 'triangle of relation'. The project has deliberately focused on the concept of the Amulet, a customary keepsake or, more specific to this project, a symbol and signifier of loss. The Amulet is explored as an object used to embody the hidden and to give voice to the unsaid.

As the Amulet project progresses from a longstanding research phase to an opportunity to present the work in an exhibition format, an admittedly complex transition, a number of questions arise. Marie herself describes the overall project as one that exists on the 'pivot of risk and trust' and she is both honest and inquisitive about the projects progression. She sees this as an opportunity to question how the artwork, one step removed from the dialogue which informs it, stands up on its own merit. How does the artwork creatively and respectfully embody absence and loss? How does the artwork represent the artist's intention and process along with the hidden layers of carefully negotiated relationships? How can we, both artistically and socially, attempt to reveal the intimate narratives of loss and to sensitively share a very private experience within the public realm? How does the art project acknowledge its own inbuilt tensions?

For one perspective on the role of the object in contemporary art, we can call on curator Bill Arning who comments that, 'The art object today is best understood not as wondrous, but rather as a catalyst for a set of stimulating relationships that make up the art experience.' While the artworks presented as part of the Amulet project do act as distinct and discreet signifiers of loss, they also have the potential to embody the symbolic link between the bereaved parents, the artist and healthcare professionals. They exist in remembrance to those whom have passed, and the latent presence of absence for those left behind. They also act as a tribute to the set of relationships that have accompanied their coming into existence within a collaborative arts project.

In a text titled 'Experimenting with Risk' Faisal Abdu'Allah explores the artist's role and clear intentions within a socially engaged collaborative arts project and states that the artist acts as an ambassador of risk. He adds that artists '...work collaboratively with communities/collectives because they don't want simplistic answers – but are looking to uncover more questions. The fear of incompleteness is the adrenaline that keeps them buoyant. The mantra that whispers in the ear of the creative that to 'first succeed one has to fail'. Therefore, we can acknowledge that the tensions inherent in collaborative and participatory arts are not only fundamental but act as reminders of the unresolved nature of both the dialogical process which informs them and also, correspondingly, of life itself.

In her recently published book which examines the historical and theoretical overview of socially engaged participatory art, writer Claire Bishop ends with the statement that, 'Participatory art is not a privileged political medium, nor a ready-made solution to a society of the spectacle, but is as uncertain and precarious as democracy itself; neither are legitimized in advance but need continually to be performed and tested in every specific context'. This observation, which comes after much exploration of the political and social context in which collaborative and participatory arts projects develop, again points to the incomplete nature of projects, with echoes of the social uncertainty that we are, unfortunately, overly familiar with.

Ultimately the bravery of the bereaved parents and their families to be part of the project is also symbolized in the artworks which are presented within Amulet as an arts and health project. Their courage to engage with the artists process, to extend their trust, at a time of undoubted vulnerability, demonstrates their aspiration to think anew about their experience of pregnancy and infant loss, within a safely and supported structure.

If we are to be prompted by our President's proposal to use times of doubt and uncertainty to look at ourselves anew, both personally and socially, and to re-imagine ourselves into the future, then, perhaps the forthcoming period of commemoration will also prompt us to review other, more compassionate ways that we can draw on to support and empathize with those who experience pregnancy and infant loss. For us the relative courage to rethink ways in which we can respectfully

engage with the topic, whether through a sincere conversation or through a skillful collaborative arts project, is a small task compared to the everyday endurance of life for bereaved parents.

Through their courageous conversations the collaborators within the Amulet project invite others into a much-needed dialogue on how we as a society engage with pregnancy and infant loss and the presentation of this sensitive exchange in the public realm has the potential to effect social change. By sharing their stories, in a supported and sensitive way in collaboration with artist Marie Brett, Amulet as a project has the potential to make visible the unsaid and to operate as a tangible model of new social values in action.

[As a society, our experience and engagement with loss and death, even if particularly complex and painful, also presents an opportunity to feel very much alive.]

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