

Transforming artefacts of loss *The gift once given*

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Included in Reverie + Nemeton publication 2013

How do we respond when asked to give a gift? How do we choose what gift to give? What value do we place upon that gift? What do we expect will happen to the gift? Do we have a relationship with the gift, once given? Does the receiver have an obligation to the giver?

Reverie : Locating Absence invited responses to gifts that bore a relationship to the notion of loss. The enquiry asked for a tangible example of an intangible concept. The tangible example was an object. The objects that were gifted were as diverse as the givers, personal objects that were visual, audio, olfactory, and kinaesthetic. The sensory nature of the objects reflected physical, mental, emotional and spiritual responses. Building on a selection of these gifts, new publics were asked to respond by giving their own personal time, thought and, hopefully, a gift.

Who owns these objects once they are given? If the response to them is subjective, does this determine a new ownership? If the subject is representative of loss, is the response also intangible as well as tangible? If so, how do we mark this response?

*'There are two meanings of the word "subject": subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to.'*¹

Who wields power in the marking of intangible or ethereal concepts? Is it the artist, the art therapist, the participants? This is core to the enquiry. How is the experience of all parties marked and represented?

The knowledge generated from Reverie : Locating Absence goes some way towards answering these questions, particularly in enquiring about object and subject. The gift economy has been considered deeply during the process, and each action has been introduced with a description of the context and open invitations that allow for participants to make their own choices.

Participants voluntarily left the notion of a safe space (a characteristic integral to the practice of art therapy) and entered into the un-safe space of contributing to a public artwork. Entering the un-safe space allowed for experimentation and risk, affording opportunity for new ways for the participants to experience both the tangible and intangible elements of this enquiry.²

*'The discursive criteria of socially engaged art are, at present, drawn from a tacit analogy between anti-capitalism and the Christian "good soul". In this schema self-sacrifice is triumphant: the artist should renounce authorial presence in favour of allowing the participants to speak through him or her. This self-sacrifice is accompanied by the idea that art should extract itself from the "useless" domain of the aesthetic and be fused with social praxis.'*³

Nemeton was an arts intervention inside St. Mary's Collegiate Church, Youghal, Co. Cork. Selected gift responses were located throughout the environs of the church. Nemeton showed the transformation of the object rather than the person. Transforming the artefacts of loss within this space to become reverential meant that they were interpreted in many ways. This interpretation informed decisions to move or remove the artefacts from where they had been placed.

The site of St. Marys has a dual purpose, firstly, as a consecrated space where Christian services are conducted and, secondly, as an arts centre space managed by the town council.

Nemeton became the “subject” of those that believe they owned the right to move or remove these reverential artefacts within the space. Both Christian and secular representatives of St. Marys responded to them in that way. Some of the rationale for the re/moving of the artefacts followed the description of power when the subject is ‘tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge’, how the artefact was interpreted was based on an individual’s own experience. The other rationale also leads to the use of power by Nemeton being subject to someone else by control and dependence.

This is a strong outcome for Nemeton. The artefacts were interpreted with such meaning and self interest with the potential for a powerful impact that, for both Christian and secular representatives of St. Marys, they believed they had the right to censor them.

The “useful” domain of the aesthetic had substantial power within Nemeton, and now the narrative of a relationship with place has created a new outcome adding to the discursive criteria of socially engaged art.

¹ Foucault, M. *Power*, Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 London: Penguin (1994) 331

² The presence of a trained art therapist within this process provides support for those potentially affected by the un-safe space

³ Bishop, C. ‘The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents’ *Artforum* 2006 pp 179-185

Katherine Atkinson holds an MA in Public Culture Studies from Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology, a Diploma in Theatre and Drama Studies from NUI, Maynooth, a Diploma in Teaching (Arts) SACAE, a Certificate of Music TAFE. In 2013 Katherine exhibited with *Edges & Margins II*, performed at the Highlanes Gallery, Drogheda and in 'Thirteen' by Anu Productions. She performed at the launch of *The Trades Club Revival* publication by Seamus Nolan in the Model, Sligo (2012), performed in 'Tear Down The Walls' by Project Brand New, directed by artist Geraldine Pilgrim as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival (2011). Katherine also performed in 'Sending Letters to the Sea' a collaborative music project by Mark Garry, a Public Art Commission, FCC (2009). Katherine is a member of Visual Arts Ireland and manages Professional Development with Create, the national development agency for collaborative arts.