

Launch of E.gress in West Cork Arts Centre

by witness writer Julie Murphy

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On a balmy late July evening a group of about 25 people gathered in the West Cork Arts Centre for the official launch of E.gress - a collaborative audio-visual arts project centred on people with dementia - preceded by open discussion. For the first half hour or so people mingled over coffee and found points of connection. Artists from the West Cork Arts Centre who work in community hospitals came as did other arts centre personnel. The Cork County Council Arts officer was present and healthcare professionals from within the HSE and the ASI were also there. I met with a woman participating in the Sherkin Island Arts course who wants to do her dissertation on the theme of dementia and we found common ground in a passion, (that felt palpable somehow throughout the room as it is in the artwork), for approaching the confounding disorienting human reality of dementia from the standpoint of presence (rather than analysis).

As conversations flowed in this fluid intermingling space the work itself all the while played on in a tiny dark closed off space – almost hidden – further down the corridor and off a small courtyard. People entered this space in ones and twos to experience E.gress. Their response, like the placing of the work itself on the day, remained for the most part hidden. The architecture of the event created a sense of occlusion both of the work itself and the affect that it had. To me this was unexpected – I had envisaged a more open viewing space – and yet it also seemed in some way fitting – a work hidden in a dark space evoking a dimension of human experience that is unfathomable, opaque and hard to reach. The viewing space of the work was an aspect of the event that I think opens up interesting questions for further showings of E.gress. Where is this work best placed? – how important is immediate follow on conversation to the reception of the work and the distilling of its impact? Does it need to be differently placed for different audiences?

A formal discursive space was organised for 5.30pm, opened by Ann O'Connor, (Arts Council Advisor on Arts & Health), who chaired the session at short notice in place of Justine Foster (Community Education and Outreach Officer, West Cork Arts Centre) who was involved in the steering group of E.gress and due to unforeseen circumstances was unable to chair on the day. Ann engaged the audience by succinctly setting the project in context and giving an overview of how it evolved. She introduced the four speakers – all key collaborators on the project – and then opened up the discussion by inviting Jon Hinchliffe to express the significance of the project for him in his role as regional manager of the Alzheimer's Society of Ireland. Jon whose work on a daily basis is to provide comfort and safety to people with dementia and to their families, spoke of the fading of memory as a journey of change but not one of decline. He testified to the very real experience of "ambiguous loss" that family members experience constantly and he applauded E.gress for bearing "disquieting" witness to the experience of dementia. Implicit in Jon's response was the sense that grief and loss and sadness are major themes within E.gress but there are counterpoints at work too - composed of presence, humanity and dignity- modulating the depletion of loss with the ongoing *élan vital* of change.

According dignity through person centred care is the avowed mantra of Jo Calnan, day centre nurse manager of Bandon Alzheimer's day centre, who with tenacious passion stressed that

for her the key feature of E.gress as both art work and process is and was its commitment to placing the person with dementia at the very centre of the work. Connecting with the “subjective reality of the person behind the disease” was central to this project and Jo felt that in this way the work honoured people with dementia, one of whom she quoted poignantly as saying, “We are still here in emotion and spirit if only you could find us”.

Music for Kevin O Shanahan, the musician who co-directed E.gress, provides a medium through which to find the person with dementia. He spoke of how music opens up a channel of communication that is deeper and runs beneath language and cognitive connection. Underground territory is invoked here with sound and music having the power to mine through to deep ineffable layers of connection between people. It struck me listening to Kevin that ordinary every day linguistic communication doesn’t make this possible -perhaps not for anyone - but particularly not for people with dementia, many of who find themselves struggling without a compass in the sea of spoken language. Presence and absence together are more solvent in the waters of music than of language and E.gress (an artwork whose soundtrack is so integral to the work) echoes the sounds of this coming and going – a sonic reverberation of being here and not being here.

Visual artist Marie Brett who co-directed the work with Kevin, spoke of “ambiguous loss” as the anchor theme on which E.gress hinges and a significant impetus in all of her work. It denotes the ambivalence of being here and not here and the simultaneity of presence and loss. For Marie the guiding thread of E.gress is the creative articulation of this ambiguity and of what it means to be in the presence of one who is and isn’t with you. She talked of approaching dementia as someone else’s experience, an experience that is hidden and Marie’s quest in her work is to find a way of revealing that experience while at the same time safeguarding it. This is a tenuous balancing act – attempting to tread a tightrope of dignified honest creative witness without falling into the opposing but equally compromising quagmires of over exposure and excessive caution. For Marie too the process of E.gress took place on shifting sands of power – a tentative, uneasy and deeply interesting movement where power continuously shifted within the space created between participant and artist. Tension, unease and finding just the right holding points were intrinsic catalysts in this project, suffusing and enhancing its creative power.

The value of collaborative partnership in laying the essential foundation on which this project could thrive was strongly stressed by all speakers and testament was given to the anecdotal, unquantifiable but very real health benefits of E.gress to the people who were involved in it. Unfortunately the ticking clock disrupted the flow of ideas just as the wider group were starting to engage and a gap remains where audience response should have flowed in to the proceedings. I felt that this was a lost opportunity. A number of people present had by then viewed the work and it would have greatly enriched the day if their responses and questions had blended in to create a real dialogue between audience and panel. In fact the formal discussion part of the event veered more towards presentation than dialogue and while the audience seemed very engaged with the reflections of the panel it would undoubtedly have been a much more dynamic and interesting space if audience participation had shaped the flow of discussion.

However, although audience involvement was short, a very incisive note was struck just before the closing gong by one audience member who raised the thorny but critical question of consent – how is it possible to justify presenting someone in a work when that person lacks full capacity to consent to their own participation? The resounding response of the four speakers was that there are no easy answers to this question – the issue of consent has assiduously been avoided in Ireland and the reality is that there is no legal standing for one person consenting for another. In E.gress a risk was taken in good faith and in the spirit of

both respecting the dignity of the people involved and honouring the responsibility to speak from a place of honesty. The question hung in the air with a sense of disquiet which was perhaps a fitting close to discussion on a work that in its essence is disquieting in its beauty, its integrity, its artistry and its impact.

Following on from the discussion the gathering moved out to the courtyard area where the poet Thomas Mc Carthy standing at a snow white plinth in the tiny courtyard was introduced by Ann Davoren, Director of the WCAC. In resonating impassioned words this poet beckoned almost two centuries of Irish muses from their resting place to gather in attendance at the launch of E.gress. He talked of memory and the great rivers of lost memory that flowed deep into the underground during the Irish famine. The memories of millions of Irish people were swept away in the deluge of a profound social and cultural trauma that reverberates throughout “haunted landscapes” to this day. But all was not lost and family lore and artistic production became the conduits for mining what could be preserved, with storytelling and the arts forming the shafts that carried “imprisoned archives” of lost memory” to the surface of living memory – restoring to people’s lives and to our cultural heritage what he so eloquently termed “an anthology of lost lives”.

With distinct poetic vision Thomas Mc Carthy wove strands of connection between the lost memories of the great Irish famine and the fragmentation of memory that comes with dementia. He saw in E.gress the same pathos – the ache of loss and the dissolution of living memory. And he also bore witness to the redemptive power and “incredible artistic and cultural responsibility” of the muses (photography, music and writing in the case of E.gress) in preserving and witnessing and holding immemorially the moments of people’s presence in their fading.

He paid tribute to the quality of artistry at work in this project and its deeply moving impact and his resonant words and tone brought the surrounding gathering to a place of silent honouring of the depth of this artwork. In that poetically infused space a sense of what Yeats described as ‘a terrible beauty’ being born surfaced for me as being perhaps apt words too for the experience of E.gress

Thomas Mc Carthy’s dense beautifully composed poetic rendering of the import of E.gress brought to a close the official launch of the work which then continued to play on for another 8 days in a darkened small room in West Cork Arts Centre. I am left wondering who did this work reach in over the course of those days?, what affect did it have?, where has its meaning travelled in that time? E.gress opens up a lot of questions – about dementia, about artistic engagement with dementia and about what kinds of spaces are best for the reception of and engagement with this particular artwork.

Julie Murphy

Julie Murphy works as a community worker in Cork South Community Work department (HSE South). She has collaborated in a support and development capacity on a number of arts and health projects funded through the Cork Arts + Health programme. She has a particular interest in the cultivation of spaces for thinking creatively and critically and for exploring how to develop practices of freedom. Her perspective is strongly influenced by a background and keen interest in academic philosophy.