

Launch of E.gress in Crawford Art Gallery

by witness writer Julie Murphy

24.10.2013

The effervescent hum of conversation provided light airy contrast to the sombre elegance of the portrait room in which the audience gathered for the launch of E.gress in the Crawford Art Gallery on October 24th 2013.

The atmosphere in the room was convivial and expectant; those familiar with the work wondering what kind of response would come from this particular audience, those new to the work curious about what they were about to encounter. All in all about fifty people gathered including family members of people with dementia, health care professionals, artists and arts administrators and a few not aligned to any grouping but who came out of interest.

Anne Boddaert from the Crawford welcomed everyone and gave a brief introduction to the work and then the lights dimmed, a hush descended and the opening haunting strains and images of E.gress filled the room.

I sat at the back and once again found myself almost heaving with strain and captivation at what I was witnessing; the starkness, strange beauty and eeriness of the work. Unfortunately the sound wasn't the best and voices in the opening frames in particular were muffled. This was regrettable but a signal too that E.gress must have the proper aesthetic conditions in which to be viewed – without this the quality of the work and the receptive experience are both diminished. (The gallery space on the third floor of the Crawford in which E.gress was housed for 4 weeks was the perfect space but could not have accommodated the audience numbers that attended the launch.)

As the credits rolled the room was suspended in a silence that bore loud testimony to something portent having happened over the previous twelve minutes

The lights came on and Ann O Connor, Arts & Health advisor with the arts council invited Sean O Sullivan, a writer from Dublin to open up a response to the work. Sean was one of the contributors to the E.gress catalogue and opened his talk by invoking the frame of reference used in his written piece titled 'Distance', where he expressed the personal pain and difficulty of witnessing (both in the work and in his own life) the profound and manifold loss that comes with dementia. The act of writing in the face of his own experience of his grandfather's journey into dementia was almost one of resistance against a powerful emotional sense that in the encounter with dementia "there is nothing to say". It struck me afterwards that this push to express what is almost too hard to express has a deep Beckettian resonance - that ongoing tug of war between the forces of decline and those of life that leave us feeling " I can't go on I will go on". In this light E.gress becomes part of an almost primal existential desire to speak the unspeakable.

Sean recognised in the Work its modesty, " no grand gestures..... just recollections, scenes and conversations" that emotionally implicate so many people. He spoke slowly, reflectively and thoughtfully about the aesthetic sophistication of E.gress and in particular the interplay and counter-posing of visuals and sound that was so integral to the work. He saw the soundtrack as a cherishing

balm kneaded into what would otherwise have been too damning and stark an experience visually to absorb. He made passing but discomfiting reference to the politeness which becomes the almost *de rigueur* mode of responding to people with dementia and wondered whether there might be something deeply unethical about this – the presumption that the person cannot be responded to as a real adult anymore. This question seemed to prise a chink into closed off deeply uncomfortable territory for us all. And he paid tribute to the ‘letting be’ in the work of people with dementia. They appeared on screen, they spoke as they were. The work bore non-interpretive witness to each person occupying their own space at that moment in the world and Sean could see that this is rare enough and “particularly important when you sense that you have been shut out of experiencing what you are going through”. He saw in this letting be the “most rigorous and aesthetically right way to document this experience”.

Sean’s talk left a lot of pause for thought and Ann sensitively brought the audience from this reflective and emotionally affecting space back to the panel that had assembled for the event. Including Sean, the members were Jon Hinchliffe and Jo Calnan from the Alzheimer’s Society of Ireland, Mark Tyrell, lecturer in the department of nursing in UCC, Marie Brett and Kevin O Shanahan, artists and creators of E.gress

Mark’s style of response was lively and gregarious, setting a contrasting tempo to the slow modulated tone of Sean’s reflections. Mark spoke about first viewing E.gress alone on a slow, dark, winter’s night and struggling to find hope in what he was experiencing. As a normally optimistic person he found this unsettling. Viewing the work again however, he found more than hopelessness; there was profound truth in the opening image and song “going out the door backwards captured it all” and the film for him shows the unvarnished essence of dementia – “forgetting people’s names, not recognising oneself in the mirror”. Mark found it hard to watch the scene of the woman talking to herself in the mirror as another. What struck him most in this was that although the woman didn’t recognise herself in the mirror she did recognise that the face she was looking at was upset. This recognition points to a capacity in human beings which is one of the last to be lost - the ability to read facial expression. In drawing our attention to this Mark impressed on us a salutary reminder that emotional capacity and sensitivity is not lost in dementia.

As an academic in the biological sciences Mark spoke about the analytic and diagnostic understandings that science brings to dementia, now recognising about 130 forms. However, he pondered on why it is that two people with an identical clinical diagnosis may have quite varying degrees of functioning? Critical to this he believes is the importance of environment, of recognising people, according them dignity and creating space for their voice to be directly heard - including importantly in the field of academic research. Mark in different style and invoking different contexts re-iterated a fundamental theme elaborated by Sean and by the Work, namely that “ there is a lot of negativity and failure associated with the condition [of dementia] and anything that accords dignity and recognition to the person’s adulthood is really important”

At this point Ann suggested that the audience might like to bring its voice to the discussion and input from the floor was welcomed. This opened the way to a discussion that was searching, varied in perspective, stimulating and open ended. This robust wide ranging flow of ideas charted several themes including all of the following:

Maintaining Artistic Focus

Selection of Final Material for the Work

Representation and Identifying People,

Collaborative Working with many partners

Artistic Collaboration and Process of working with people,

Power in the collaborative relationship

Finding doorways to engage with participants

The legacy of the work and impact on family members

Impact of the work on care staff

The significance of critics and editor

Ownership of the Work and distribution

(For a detailed account of the discussion between audience and panel see appendix 1)

After over an hour of energetic discussion Ann brought the proceedings of the day to a close by summarising the key themes that emerged and inviting the panel to each contribute a closing thought. Mark said he was left with questions to ponder, in his role as an educator, on the need for a re-balancing between scientific and artistic approaches to understanding dementia. Jo re-iterated that for her the key value of E.gress was that it accorded dignity and self esteem to the person at the centre of the experience. Bringing dementia into the mainstream is a central concern of Jon's and he affirmed E.gress as an important contribution to this movement. Sean left us all with the discomfiting insight that the distress we feel in viewing E.gress stems from the fact that what we see in the film is in fact a reflection of ourselves. Marie concluded with the realisation that it is important in collaborative work not to hold on too tight – to let things flow. And Kevin sounded the final note with a tribute to the centrality of trust in bringing E.gress to fruition.

These finishing reflections brought a sense not so much of closure but rather of multiple openings through which the discourse of E.gress can continue to flow. And this I think was a fitting way to conclude the launch of 'E.gress' – an open ended closure to a Work and a word that signify 'opening out'!

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.