

Experimenting with Risk

Faisal Abdu'Allah

Faisal Abdu'Allah, *Private Views*, ed Judith Palmer (*Serpents Tail*)

My practice is a visual auto-biography played out in text, image and space, each one a true testament to my uncompromising and critical analysis of the collective I live in. My work in the community is the perfect catalyst to summarise my work ethic and principles. We are informed about the gallery space but never comprehend it as being an extension of the artist studio, a haven that purifies emotions through the evocation of fear, stimulation of thought and interaction. Questions of class, ownership and rites of passage are consistently volleyed around this creative playground.

It's a Sunday afternoon and I finally get a chance to respond to emails sent to me at some point during the week. I scroll down and delete generic mail shots for insurance and leave the ones personally addressed to me and also inscribed 'project' in the subject space. I open with excitement and trepidation..

'Dear Faisal' they go through the institutional drivel which my eye quickly scans at great speed only reserving time for details relating to the space that has been afforded to showcase the proposition and also the limitations that could affect the thinking of the artist. Budgets are no longer a major factor, as time has sensibly taught me you cannot buy Champagne with lemonade money! My other issue is the context of the approach in their polite offer. They outline their structure and then tucked away in the proposition two words appear 'Community' and 'Diversity'. I pause and reflect and in that privileged moment when you thought the world was not enough it slowly implodes and every ounce of one's creative ambition and desire sits limp and dishevelled on the hard shoulder of life's highway.

In my world imagination is the gift bestowed upon all by nature. Artists have historically shaped social consciousness from the sculpted Benin bronze heads, architectural interventions from Gordon Matta-Clark to the collaborative monumental photographs of Spencer Tunick - artists that rupture the tradition of visual culture and practice. What is the rationale behind these modernist shifts from canvas to complex ?.

Artists whose professional practice relies on the engagement with a community and collective by default nurture three elements within the participants that they collaborate with.

Looking, Thinking and Responding

In *Four Essays: Artist in the Community Scheme* published by Create in partnership with the Arts Council these three elements are critiqued and explored. In Declan Gorman's opening comments in relation to working with Macra Na Feirme he writes of the community '...that was highly motivated and well organised... this allowed for a mutual artistic experimentation and delegation far beyond what might have been possible..' His essay demonstrates that no collaboration commences 'ready to cook' but requires time and an engagement, charted by his own seamless transition from the writer in residence to the production director.

Dance artist Ríonach Ní Néill's work explores 'thinking' as she asks the questions 'where does dance come from? who can dance?' enabling her 'equals' to think about their role as artists and how they can disassemble current dance codes. More importantly she mentions assisting them to '... draw mental and physical maps of their locale, tracing their daily journeys and hangouts..'

For visual artist Rhona Byrne 'responding' is at the core of her intervention. Her architectural background enabling the ideas of spatial politics to be at the heart of the discourse and encouraging some unique discoveries as she collaborates with 'Ballymun pigeon club, a successful community organisation, which had been breeding and racing homing pigeons since 1974'. The idea of attaching notes to the homing pigeons feet was not only concise, but also simple and effective in reaching and touching the community.



Photo credit: Rhona Byrne, *Home*

Susan Gogan in working with women from the Domestic Workers Support Group of the Migrant Rights Centre, focuses on the act of 'looking' as an active device that frames, contextualises and shapes meaning. As Susan Gogan writes in *Opening Doors* her practice was about empowering participation and imparting responsibility and ownership.

Historically 'community' in an educational collaborative visual arts context has meant individuals of diverse, peripheral or excluded contexts, which in England have tended to be 'non white'. However for me, as a practicing artist the term 'community' less ably describes my interest since it is defined by numbers, and I prefer to use the term 'collective' which is defined by thought.

In the *Four Essays* some of the key ethical issues discussed centre around ideas of migration, space and assumed identities, some of which were proposed by the artist and some by the host.

The processes of portraiture, performance and improvisation are some of the varied and imaginative approaches utilised by the artists as vehicles of expression.



Photo credit: *Between Earth Sky and Home*, Ríonach Ní Néill. Video Still - Joe Lee.



Photo credit: Members of Migrant Rights Centre Ireland's Domestic Workers Support Group.

Those seen and not heard collectives are clearly afforded space, time and a canvas to express their inner most thoughts.

The hand print of the 'host' is unshakeable, it is the signature of the work. This is a practice that raises key questions about who is giving and who is participating in the cultural exchange.

It is self evident that the values and criteria are clearly constructed by the host collective, since it is they who create the conditions. But what is the invitation to the artist - are they invited to massage their own egos?, to be the fly in the ointment? against the host! or just an ice breaker?

For me in this collaborative arts practice the artist is the individual (loved and loathed) that absorbs all the risk, as a plethora of things can go wrong in the process.

All the artists featured in *Four Essays* are ambassadors of risk. They 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 adrenalin that keeps them buoyant. The mantra that whispers in the ear of the creative that to 'first succeed one has to fail'.

Four Essays: Artist in the Community Scheme (published by Create and the Arts Council, 2009). To read the publication online visit: www.create-ireland.ie.

Publication copies are available for communities and arts organisations - email info@create-ireland.ie to place an order.

For information about artist Faisal Abdu'Allah visit: <http://faisalabduallah.com/>