



Launch of 'From Context to Exhibition', 2010, image by Susan Walsh



Launch of 'From Context to Exhibition' at NCAD Gallery, Dublin, 2010



'From Context to Exhibition' at The LAB, Dublin, 2012, image by Sally-Anne Kelly

From Context to Exhibition

MICHELLE BROWNE TALKS ABOUT THE LEARNING DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME RUN BY CREATE, THE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AGENCY FOR COLLABORATIVE ARTS.

THE Learning Development Programme offers third year Fine Art student artists an opportunity to engage with collaborative arts and socially-engaged practice across and between disciplines spanning visual arts, design, sculpture, performance and multimedia as part of a supported experience to co-create work with communities of place and / or interest. The programme was initiated by NCAD in 2001 and since then interest and partnering relationships have grown among educational institutions, community groups and the wider arts sector. Create, the national development agency for collaborative arts, manage and produce the programme, and have partnered, for over 10 years, with the Fine Art Department of NCAD, IADT, Tisch School of the Arts New York University, DIT, The LAB gallery, NCAD gallery, IMMA, This Is Not A Shop, The Arts Council and Dublin City Council.

Several of Ireland's leading and emerging artists are alumni of the programme and contribute to the artist-led training for students. They include Jesse Jones, Seamus Nolan, Jennie Moran, Michelle Browne and This Is Collective. Guest tutors have included Dylan Tighe, Louise Lowe, THEATREclub and Anne Maree Barry. Since 2009, Create have also invited international guest tutors including Peggy Shaw, Stacy Makishi, Nic Greene and Bruno Humberto. The programme currently runs over a nine week period and culminates in a celebratory art event 'From Context to Exhibition' in a key Dublin city gallery.

Students receive an intensive arts-led orientation and training before embarking on a six-week short-term creative project with a community they have identified. Lynnette Moran, Research and Development Producer at Create, programmes this training. Students are guided through an introduction to the critical framework in which this practice sits, encouraging an engagement with theoretical and conceptual concerns for collaborative practice and posing several questions: What is collaboration? What are the possible modes of engagement with a community? How is a community defined? How will collaborative practice inform the development of the student artist's contemporary arts practice?

Over the course of the last decade there has been much debate around the nature of engagement, with notable texts such as Miwon Kwon's *One Place After Another*, Grant Kester's *Conversation Pieces*, Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*, and Claire Bishop's *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics* – all part of extensive reading introduced through the training, offering a starting point for the initial critical interrogation of engagement and collaboration.

Relational aesthetics are defined by Bourriaud as "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space". Bourriaud adds that "it seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows".¹ Students are invited to consider this text in relation to Claire Bishop for example. For Bishop, "The quality of the relationships in relational aesthetics are never examined or called into question". She asks, "If relational art produces human

relations then the next logical question to ask is what type of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?"² For Bishop, practices that employ an antagonist mode of engagement, such as those of Santiago Sierra and Thomas Hirschhorn, offer a more nuanced view of "relations with our neighbours" than those proposed by Bourriaud, as conflict and division are fundamental to the way we co-exist in society. In the case of Sierra and Hirschhorn, the community that they engage with is fundamental to the work and the types of relations that are brought into being. The 'who' of this collaborative equation is therefore brought into question. It is noted by Miwon Kwon that,

"...many collaborative projects reveal the extent to which 'coherent' communities are more susceptible to appropriation by artists and art institutions precisely because of the singular definition of their collective identities [and] of the easy correspondence between their identity and particular social issues."³

In acknowledgement of this valid observation, the course has transformed over the last 10 years, moving away from the placement of students with so-called 'coherent' communities, to allow for a more nuanced approach. Student artists on the course generate, form or identify their own 'community' to work with. This has created further crucial challenges and opportunities for the students, leading them to question assumptions within their practice, as well as considering the social and cultural context for their work: offering them the chance to really consider who they are working with and why.

Grant Kester in *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* asks,

"Is it possible to develop cross-cultural dialogue without sacrificing the unique identities of individual speakers? And what does it mean for the artist to surrender the security of self-expression for the risk of inter-subjective engagement?"⁴

As proposed by Kester, this is the most fundamental challenge for the student artists embarking on the programme. They must engage with alternative methods of art-making from that of a purely studio-based practice (which forms the basis of their art university education), while grappling with the many voices comprising the community of their choosing. Tom Holert, in his recent essay for *Artforum*, quotes Mira Schor, the feminist artist, highlighting how "the particular activation of the individual immersed in a collective with a shared goal entails 'a peculiar relief in going outside the self'".⁵ It is this 'going outside of the self' that the Learning Development Programme is promoting. The programme guides the student artists in ways of looking at their own practice and exploring how this can relate to the people around them and to their everyday context. The participants are therefore encouraged to look around themselves, to see who is next to them in the line for the bus, at the bank, at a rock concert, and consider the *entre nous*, that which is between them.⁶ The *entre nous* does not just present us with the presence of an 'other' to cause us to consider our position in the world; it offers the locus for an engagement where both have equal weighting in the experience.

Holert writes of filmmaker Trinh T Minh-ha, who rethinks collaboration as something that "happens not when something common is shared between the collaborators, but when something that belongs to neither of them comes to pass between them".⁷

This is an apt way to look at the mode of engagement by the student artists. They are encouraged to draw from what develops from the engagement with their community, considering their role as the artist within the chosen context and actively challenging their own pre-conceived notions and assumptions, they are engaging with a community to discover something new, to move away from conventions of thinking and mobilise themselves and their collaborators to a new way of being together in the world.

Therefore, the community can act as an inspiration, an activator or a collaborator in a form of art-making that is currently at the vanguard of contemporary art practice. Over the years, the student artists have developed projects with a variety of communities and works that draw out new relations with and among these groups, examples include St Patrick's Cathedral bell ringers, the number 51 bus route users, a guerrilla knitting group, dog walkers, shop owners and more recently Trinity Debating Society.

The students are further challenged with translating their process into output for the gallery, through 'From Context to Exhibition'. There is much focus on identity and representation in collaborative practice discourse, as noted in Kester, Bishop, Kwon and more recently in Holert's *Artforum* article. The Learning Development Programme draws away from this somewhat tired debate and encourages the student artists to consider the presentation of work in a gallery as a challenge. Rather than trying to represent the community they have worked with, the student artists are encouraged to distil their engagement and find ways to present the conceptual, social and / or political processes and outcomes of their experience. 'From Context to Exhibition' offers an invaluable opportunity for the artist students to consider their audience, their mode of address and the translation of their experience in a meaningful and challenging way.

The Learning Development Programme creates a space for the artist students to engage with an area of art making that is at the fore in contemporary art practice today. Kester, in his recent book, *The One and The Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, sees the proliferation of collaborative practice as 'a paradigm shift within the field of art'. He writes,

"As the history of modernism had repeatedly demonstrated the greatest potential for transforming and re-energising artistic practices is often realised precisely at those points where its established identity is most seriously at risk."⁸

Collaborative practice is expanding and redefining what and how arts practice is conceived. The fundamental tenets of the practice are to draw on a variety of voices to open up the notion of the single author, while exploring the artist's relationship to contemporary society. It encourages student artists to consider their practice in relation to different facets of society. Create and their partnering universities and arts organisations see this fissure in the accepted conception of what arts practice is and are empowering their student artists with skills and awareness within contemporary art. Collaborative practice in its many forms continues to offer an exciting space in which to develop ideas, to engage with different walks of life and to draw the audience into the work in new and exciting ways. The Learning Development Programme is a key element in the education of student artists in an expanding field of arts practice.

Michelle Browne is an artist and curator based in Dublin. She is a regular guest lecturer on Create's Learning Development Programme and has written for the VAN, Circa and Create News.

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Notes

1. Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les presses du réel, Dijon, 2002 (first published 1998)
2. Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics' in *October*, fall 2004, no 110, (this article was written prior to the release of Claire Bishop's new book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, which I am sure will stir the debate on further)
3. Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass, 2004
4. Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and communication in Modern Art*, University of California Press, 2005
5. Tom Holert 'Joint Ventures: The State of Collaboration', *Artforum*, February 2011 <http://artforum.com/inprint/issue=201102&id=27403>
6. For an in depth discussion on this see Maurice Merleau Ponty *The Phenomenology of Perception*, London, Routledge, 1962 (first published 1945)
7. Tom Holert 'Joint Ventures: The State of Collaboration' in *Artforum*, February 2011 <http://artforum.com/inprint/issue=201102&id=27403>
8. Grant Kester, *The One and The Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2011