

Places are made better by people

Julie Spollen
Community Artist

LIVING JUST OVER an hour from Dublin, on the east to west thoroughfare, I should be interacting with contemporary art practices for learning and social engagement much more than I currently do. Thank heavens for broadband, when it works. Locally in Offaly there are lots of arts and cultural activities but they currently have no formal site or resources to progress and blossom. My belief is that these supports should come in the form of a creative hub that can raise the profile of the arts in the area and generate new opportunities. Since 2007, I have campaigned alongside many others for a purpose-built community arts centre in central Offaly that will enhance local arts and contemporary culture, whilst promoting Offaly as an accessible area nationally. The approved plans of a disused large store on High Street were given the green light last May during local elections and presently the Council are evaluating the tendering process. In light of this recent advocacy, the aim now is to ensure that the vision and logistics of the centre and its spaces will be optimised for all members of our community.

As an artist, I work in community and care settings. This 'socially-alert' practice is durational and focuses specifically on artistic interactions with older participants. I practice collaborative critical thinking in art and design contexts, aiming to enhance social health for participants and the wider community. It instigates and nurtures partnerships with an evolving collective of professionals and institutions to advocate for the role of place in cultural engagements and environments. I know that sustainable communities need opportunities for social connection, equity and inclusion. A spatial identity, with an ambition for living generously together, motivates me. Community spaces in the public realm need to be adaptive for usage and fundamental freedoms. I really enjoy being with people and ensuring they explore the tangible benefits of the arts and how the design of an area may impact and enhance their lives with the activities they are involved in. I believe you should never un-

dervalue your work as an artist in the community. You should invest in people.

Mentored by Dr Owen Douglas (an Urban & Rural Planner at University College Dublin), my recent project 'Activate' aimed to inform Offaly County Council and the Local Executive about community spaces and feed into a county development plan via a community wellbeing survey. The project aimed to highlight the necessity of tactical place-making and the potential of an artist's role during the public consultation and design process. 'Activate' investigated accessible and inclusive public spaces, public seating and the voice of the community, with regard to feedback on the new arts centre. The project was unpacked through a series of art workshops, get together sessions and conversations. Seating in the public realm came up frequently during these discussions. Public seating affords a place for people to stop and meet one another and – to put it simply – sit and 'smell the roses'. The outcomes and artistic responses were surveys, a display of notes and references from my research, large collaborative collages, individual paintings, testimonials and benches that were formally and strategically exhibited in the Atrium at the Áras an Chontae, as part of my solo show 'Activate a conscious place for living' (18 October to 18 November 2019).

This year I also collaborated with Rowena Keaveny in the co-authorship of a Creative Charter for older people. A first draft of this document is on display in Offaly County Council as part of the exhibit and on the Anam Beo Facebook page (facebook.com/anambeo). It is a privilege to work with an evolving collective of partnerships and professionals who also advocate the role of place in artistic engagements. It has been a rollercoaster to secure a fundamental community space for engagement and there is much to look forward to, regarding contemporary arts and local culture. Artists are great enablers. The community arts centre build will start in 2020.

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Julie Spollen, 'Activate a conscious place for living', installation view, The Atrium, Áras an Chontae; courtesy of the artist

Fort Culture

Brendan Fox
Curator and Visual Artist



Brendan Fox, *In Lieu of a Blindfolded Mountain, Games for Artists and Non-Artists*, 2019; photograph by Dejan Karin

I MOVED TO Dublin eleven years ago after leaving London, but I grew up in Tullamore town, in a busy house with ten people and I was obsessed with finding a quiet place to draw or make. There was what I can only describe as a 'fort culture' back then. You might build a fort in a clearing in a hedgerow, or hang out in a cave near the quarry, and that became the place to escape to – to write or draw or smoke cigarettes with your friends. For me, these were integral liminal spaces to occupy creatively, places to think, to revolt, away from societal and familial expectations.

My curatorial projects have always been informed by the politics of place and the development of discursive hybrid platforms. I graduated from NCAD in 2012 and started Foundation Arts Festival in Tullamore the following year, with the support of Offaly Arts Office. At that time there were dozens of empty retail units in the town. We invited 30 artists to come to Tullamore to create or install work there. I remember walking down the main street and feeling like I was on the NCAD campus – there were artists everywhere. Over three years the festival grew and in 2015 I designed and curated a project, in collaboration with IMMA, called 'Quantum Leap' that saw ten works from the IMMA collection make up part of the exhibition, alongside the work of a further 50 Irish and international artists. It was important that the exhibition allowed recent graduates and established artists to occupy the same terrain. For me, this lends energy to the discourse around emerging contemporary arts practice and exhibition-making. It is an evolving territory that no particular party may claim ownership of. Sinead O'Reilly, who was Offaly Arts Officer at the time, was endlessly supportive of the project. The main gallery space that housed 'Quantum Leap' was kindly donated to the project free of charge.

We worked on the huge three-story building day and night for three years, around the time of Foundation Arts Festival. Local electricians, carpenters and volunteers would come in after work and help us, sometimes past midnight. The project was hugely sociable and inclusive. We worked with local schools, and many chari-

ty-based organisations and groups, giving them a platform to interact with artists, the exhibition and the local community. I began to see the exhibitions as a nucleus for broader discussions around the role of the arts and arts practice in the area. That particular building has now been purchased and financed through a €2 million grant from the ACCESS II scheme, administered by the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, and will open as a permanent art centre in 2022.

I have subsequently worked with a number of artists and groups. Last year I was invited to curate the MFA NCAD exhibition, 'Come Back to Me', which took place in Rua Red, Tallaght in 2019. I am always so fascinated by the synergy that emerges when a group of artists are working in close proximity. Through painting, video and sculptural installation, 'Come Back to Me' was a pre-apocalyptic lament, contemplating place, identity, the imposition of new borders and the impending catastrophe of the Anthropocene. My own arts practice is anchored in video installation and performance. I live in my studio and I am always surrounded by my work. At present, I am pursuing an MA in Art in the Contemporary World at NCAD. My current research project, 'Games of Artists and Non-Artists', takes the shape of a series of curated workshops and collaborations, drawing on Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* that will culminate in an exhibition in May of 2020. I became interested in Boal's mode of working 15 years ago, when I was directing theatre. I have been facilitating workshops with groups and artists using his techniques ever since. This particular project is supported by and will take place at IMMA from January to May 2020. By using an artwork or performance as an impetus for the development of a point of inquiry or narrative these workshops intend to create a platform for collaborating artists and minority groups to grapple with questions of institutional territory and collective interpretations as outcomes.

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