

## I. Epistemic Injustice and the Policing of the Artworld.

Why have a studio in the middle of a community centre in Rialto? What could such a space possibly offer given the pressing everyday needs of many of the people who enter St Andrew's? Such a venture might seem anomalous to those unaccustomed to having studios within working environments. Is it decorative? A diversion? An indulgence? Irrelevant? Or perhaps a quaint and patronising Victorian attempt at edification of the masses? The conjunction and association of those two words 'art' and 'community' unfortunately risks sanctioning the persistence of a tacit hierarchy between 'proper' art and that other kind of art that seeks to promote the common good or to emancipate, which thus serves another agenda. This is in part because the word 'community' is coded so that it doesn't really mean the golf club communities of Enniskerry or the banking communities housed in the IFSC. Community implies those 'others' who differ from the hegemonic norm of the white, middle-class, Catholic, heterosexual, Irish male.

At play here, arguably, is the persistence of a set of unspoken criteria that implicitly value different kinds of work and practice by virtue of their originators rather than their quality or insights. Projects that involve certain kinds of collaboration and co-authorship are more likely to be positioned as social work rather than art. Some projects and artworks are seen to constitute legitimate and serious practice in the art world, whilst other practices are 'othered'. Like other fields of practice that include elements with emancipatory or transformative intent, even that art that views itself as political or politicised risks instrumentalising or silencing those it purports to present or represent if it does not reflect upon the image that it gives to itself, not only of what art is, but of who makes art and why. Can it avoid doing so? What counts as 'proper' art in the eyes of the primary gatekeepers of the institutional field, and why?



These are admittedly polemical questions. Yet, despite the proliferation of socially engaged and participatory art practices, and the eternal discourse about the question ‘what is art?’, a curiously recalcitrant and resistant policing of boundaries and a drawing of lines that verges on the dogmatic too often occurs when those designated ‘from the community’ are involved in making art. This is a matter of concern not only for art and artists, but also for our understanding of citizenship, our conceptions of a shared humanity, and our commitment to the polis and the public domain.

And so I wonder who can be heard and seen, whose lives are visible, whose are rendered invisible or caricatured, in particular at those moments when I notice such hierarchies coming subtly into play, almost a priori. Who is by default excluded from the world of exchange of ideas and the making of work? Who is allowed to explore through practices of material thinking those diverse aesthetic forms of manifestation of ideas, analysis, imagination, and critique that humankind have engaged in over millenia? What prejudices and assumptions will persist in images and ideas if the world of art is a limited, familiar and small one, without living conversation and without the capacity for what Tim Ingold calls ‘living attentionally with others’ (2014: 389)? I reflect on the critiques of philosophy’s race blindness offered by Charles W. Mills, including philosophy’s unwillingness to engage in practices of internal critique, its selectivity in telling of its legacies and histories, and its indifference to the way in which the same kinds of bodies populate philosophy departments and dominate the field with their questions. I think of the concept of epistemic injustice, developed by Miranda Fricker, which shows how the voices of some are silenced and invalidated just by virtue of who they are, but the words of others are given credence and credibility, overwhelmingly along the lines of race, class and gender. She writes of the testimonial injustice that wrongs someone in their capacity as a giver of knowledge in particular when this is persistent and systematic, and of the hermeneutical injustice whereby someone is wronged in their capacity as a subject of social understanding because they participate unequally in practices through which social meaning is generated (2007: 6). I think of Paulo Freire’s refusal to take up a Leninist vanguardist position that would purport to speak for others, and of his insistence on dialogue. I think of the ways in which claims to neutrality and the tendency toward abstraction in theory can blind us to the ways in which all our thinking is situated and different questions and ideas are provoked by different lives and experiences - it was no accident that some of the men who were my philosophy students in prison were fascinated by time and by power.



It sometimes seems as though projects and structures that seek mutuality, exchange and reciprocity are seen as, perhaps, worthy but not significant in an art-sense. A more rigorously pluralistic approach to the arts would welcome the ambiguity and uncertainty involved in the practice of making work in different settings with different people, and would seek to institute new kinds of relations of affect, thought and sensibility, whilst avoiding clichés and rote responses or standard briefs and questions. If art is often about showing and disclosing what was already there rather than creating the new, surely there is something to be said for unsettling its own norms in practice. This would also mean that the ‘art world’ and the bodies that fund artists should reflect upon the embedded and tacit presuppositions that shape the reception to the ‘who’ of the artist, in particular in terms of the embodied encounters with work in different contexts.

## II. The Difference that Makes a Difference

So what is the difference that makes a difference in having a studio in a community centre in Rialto? Studio 468 is a curious specimen in the micro-art worlds of Dublin and Ireland. This is, at least in part, because it was not imposed from without but emerged from and through local initiative so the studio was thoroughly embedded within the context of the centre from the outset. It thus holds a particular relationship to the space and community that brought it into being as well as to the legacy of arts initiatives that preceded its existence and which created the conditions that allow it to be brought into being. In the poem that ends John’s Bissett’s essay on Studio 468, he writes ‘Genealogy/ History/ Sensibility’ (Bissett: 2010, pp. 24-33). Those three words help to orient enquiry into the space in terms of collective and individual experiences and the sustenance and development of knowledges over time. The fact it is a studio rather than a gallery means that it can operate in a quasi-public way, half exposed but also protected from the wider glare of the public gaze, like a semi-porous skin, unless the decision is made that a project warrants being further developed. It operates as a site that might possibly engender ideas and relationships. Its existence makes a difference but what difference it will make is undetermined and unpredictable. It may change an artist’s individual practice. It may invite a new form of collective practice or engagement. Something might arise that sparks a different poetic or political sensibility in someone. It might shift one’s perception or nourish one’s sensory imagination. A project or encounter might shake someone into seeing his or her blindspots, creating a moment of awakening, including those artists who might be



secretly, even unconsciously, hoping to emancipate others, to awaken them, to provide the form that might finally give voice to the downtrodden and oppressed: those worthy and suffocating aspirations that haunt that other conjuncture of art and politics.

Even though during each week of their residency, the artists are asked to engage with one of the projects in St Andrew's, there is no prescription of a methodology or approach, no demand for specified outcomes, and no requirement to collaborate on a shared project. Work that emerges does so in its own way, with its own peculiar and uneven logic, sometimes after a hiatus of years as experiences settle and become integrated. Encounters through and with the studio might inflect everyday practice in the centre. This is important and ought not to be underestimated when considering aesthetic or critical outcomes. Outcomes can also take the form of the long-standing collaboration that was the What's the Story? Collective that developed from Fiona Whelan's residency, or Seoidin O'Sullivan's reimagining of the locale through a community garden. In both cases, none of those involved could have predicted what would happen before the residency began.

In some ways the studio provides a site for situated thinking, for the inflection and re-orientation of ideas and practices that comes from simply being in a different place or space, from experiencing temporality without the pressure of output, or from having unfamiliar conversations. Being given the space and time to try things out, to take risks, and to fail may involve a more messy and complex process than some might like, but it also allows for new and unexpected lines of inquiry to emerge, without making any guarantees in that regard. This is instructive, in particular when funding models are so often contingent upon describing outcomes or mechanisms for engagement prior to the adventure of research and exploration.

The fact that it is a studio makes it hard to situate in broader discourses about public art, socially engaged practice, gallery outreach or community development because the Studio is part of the community that is the St Andrews' community, as well as part of the local community. This is why reflecting upon it through an institutional lens is helpful. Jean Oury, the psychiatrist and mentor to philosopher and activist Félix Guattari, describes the importance of care in institutions and the ways in which institutions cultivate and produce subjectivities. He doesn't think that we can think about



relationships in pedagogy and psychotherapy without paying attention to the institution, but so many institutions feel homogenous and monotonous. Schools feel the same.. Hospitals likewise.. Prisons overwhelmingly so.. They segregate people and do not allow for encounters with otherness. Their logic is imposed from on high. Institutions have been given a bad rap in recent times in the rush to occupy alternative spaces, but institutions through their endurance over time can also sustain a relationship to the public domain and to collective memory, resisting rigidity and a dead conservatism.

The resource centre, including Studio 468, is an odd, experimental institution, in the good sense. It resists ossification by injecting moments of unpredictability, such as when artists come on residency, in order to keep a sense of its own becoming and the becoming of all those human beings moving through and occupying the space. By staging minor encounters, it creates the possibility without guarantee, of shifting and awakening subjectivities and generating new forms of collective living.

If one is to undergo a transformation in one's experience and one's way of seeing the world, then there must be heterogeneity or difference, and this involves on-going processes of experimentation. Such work is indirect, poetic, and subtle, and its logic is abductive – through experience someone makes a judgement at a particular moment about how to intervene, which idea to seize or what question to ask, or how to pursue a line of enquiry. It requires continuous work on the atmosphere of the place, which means attending to what Oury calls 'the Invisible', or the quality or flavour of a space, cultivating it as one would turn the soil, keeping it open, alive and receptive to those unforeseeable moments of vitality and emergence at which 'the world opens' for someone, as Henry Maldiney says. This is sustained by exchange, sharing, dialogue, encounters and communication. Sometimes Oury speaks of the sous-jacent – the 'underneath' or 'underlying' - again drawing attention to those dimensions of institutions that have real effects but which are not visible or tangible. It means being aware of the hinterland or arrière pays that shapes each of us and our institutions, including the tacit prejudices that frame experiences. The ethic of such spaces is one of respect and care for the other in their singularity and irreplaceability.



In some ways, then Studio 468 is part of the meshwork of projects and spaces that through their interactions bring aliveness and qualitative distinctiveness to the St Andrew's Centre. The very fact of its existence makes a difference, just as the existence of a constellation of projects and activities within the Centre make a difference. Housing different ideas, priorities, purposes and concerns in the same space allows for different forms of contact and encounter, when we are open to this. It is a space for thinking, experimentation, and sensibility, the kind of aesthesis and pathos that offer the potential of allowing those involved to be affected by one another, to undergo experiences and to find ways of integrating them into one's life, and to try out different forms of manifestation of thinking. Perhaps that is the strange beauty of it, the oddness of the different responses to the space and to the gestures that emerged, some individually authored and others through collaborative authorship and agency. I do not know that the Studio should or could ever be thought of as a standalone venture as it was never supposed to be seen that way. This is not only because the artists are asked to engage with one of the projects during their stay in the studio, but it is also because the wider community of St Andrew's asks for, encourages and welcomes the studio, and the orientation of the Centre is to work for social justice in its richest sense, beginning with those in the local community. Such a state of affairs is unusual. Such spaces of encounter are needed.

### III. What Good Is This Studio If It Does Not Give Birth to the World of the Future?

In a conversation with Bruno Latour, Michel Serres once asked 'what good is philosophy if it does not give birth to the world of the future?' (1995, p. 79). The origins of the studio stemmed from a transformative vision that sought to develop collective and collaborative ways of working with others, thinking with others and talking with others. There is something in all of this that is about giving birth to the world of the future, a world that might be a little less unjust, that might listen better to all its citizens, that might allow for the cultivation of sensibilities and imaginations beyond commodification and fatalism. Whilst that sense of aliveness may always be there for the stranger-artist coming into this new space, it might become stale for those working in projects if they are confronted with similar ad hoc checklists of questions of newcomers. If, as John Bissett seems to intimate, genealogy, history and sensibility somehow fall together, then creating a different kind of temporal vision for the studio might support a more coherent set of practices in terms of the studio practice and the institution more broadly. This could make explicit and share embedded



knowledges, building on the sedimented histories of engagement over the years, rather than returning to ground zero with each new residency. By positioning the community, both that of the centre and beyond, as the teacher, this could subvert some of the assumptions in the art world about the emancipatory power of art. Those existing principles and values underpinning the studio can be kept – openness, taking risks, allowing for failure, inviting dialogue, embedding practice in an organisation, welcoming different kinds of practice – but the practices, knowledges, ideas and skills would also be kept alive and communicated over time. It could mean creating a space for those involved in projects relating to Studio 468 to continue to speak with one another, and to tell their stories.

If, as I suggest above, only some communities are called ‘communities’, and if the use of the word community too often serves as a marker, or even a dogwhistle, that indicates the subordinate partner in a hierarchy of difference, then it might be worth confronting the implications of that policing of boundaries, including those of the art world, through a sustained critical investigation and interrogation of one concept over time. This could be a concept like “power” or “equality” or “justice”, but any concept chosen as a focal point would require sufficient openness and ambiguity so that one is not sent off a well-trodden path of ready clichés and responses. The conclusions of adventures of ideas and conversations cannot be anticipated. A sustained interrogation of one of these concepts could allow for aesthetic, performative, philosophical, scientific, economic, ethical, political and personal explorations without prescribing which element takes priority at any given time. In that way, that conjunction of art and community could be properly politicised and problematized, becoming a matter of concern for all citizens including artists. This could serve as a bulwark against those tendencies to depoliticise the art and community encounter which displace analysis of the question of justice or power, instead seeking to develop interventions to encourage social inclusion in a ‘community setting’. Perhaps over time a body of knowledge could even be created and a field inflected, just as Charles Mills argues could happen in philosophy if different people were allowed into the conversation.

The model for practice in Studio 468 is one of exchange of ideas that aims at transformative practice, be it an intervention, a performance, the creation of a statement, or making a sculptural piece or a drawing. An open model for practice that builds a critical mass over time could begin to undo the



epistemic injustice that silences some in our society and excludes them from the credibility economy whilst over-valourising the words of others just because of their perceived status. It could support the emergence and generation of new kinds of social meanings that may have previously been structurally excluded because of unequal access to power. It can keep that sense of looseness and openness that has allowed for encounters to sometimes lead to collaborative practice, sometimes to critical conversations, and sometimes to shift individual practice, be it of that singular human being who is the artist in residency or of those singular human beings who work, talk and move through or alongside the space of this centre in this ecology of practices and the entanglement of bodies, building and beings that is Rialto.

Sometimes things will fall apart. Sometimes it will take years for something to take hold. At other times a collective energy will be generated that allows for something beyond critique to be born, and that itself gives birth to the world of the future. Studio 468 holds open that space of and for experimentation that extends the collective imagination beyond the immediacies of the everyday.

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