

Collaboration and Communication during the Covid Era

“...like a dragonfly always skimming across the surface of the water, never delving into the murky depths below.” *P.M.Moss*.

This was how my late mother described my late daughter's attitude to life's events. In this instance it refers to a coping mechanism of dealing with the realities of the pandemic and barrage of media coverage currently being experienced.

Introduction **Elaborate**

Quote?

My creative practice explores communication amongst local residents in the form of interactive public art to encourage mental wellbeing. Passersby are invited to write their 'wishes' for the coming year and attach to a tree situated in a communal area.

About the practice. Why?

STATISTIC ON MENTAL WELLBEING NOW DURING PANDEMIC

The emphasis on written text as a way of providing a welcome tactile element is key to the work as a break away from the cold hard visuals of digital communication, which has escalated during the pandemic.

Dictionary definitions of key words.

Original exploration in the encouragement of wellbeing looked at multi-sensory engagement where the viewer participates to fully engage with the work. The power of lifting mood by colour was investigated in the first instance and later the influence of light, especially natural light with the changing of seasons. Looking beyond one's immediate environment artist James Turrell provides an awe-inspiring experience with *'The Roden Crater'* where the 'viewer' feels total connectivity with natural light.

The large corridor that one walks along towards the light gives the impression of being inside a telescope.

Using the power of the phenomena, camera-less photography was used in initial experimentation along with cyanotype processes; natural light,. Emphasis on using available flora from my garden and within my immediate locality was undertaken. This in conjunction with the unpredictable use of natural light added a particular fascination and echoed the theme of nature. This would have been lost in the controlled environment of a darkroom.

Using available materials and amenities were also an important factor as a way of being resourceful. Unsure of the outcomes of using photographic paper, which was over 25 years old, and the converted dark room under my stairs added a novel element to the experimentation. My garden shed became a great exposure unit also.

Designs from the photograms were made into designs for test fabric swatches on extremely lightweight materials for ephemeral effect, which was a key objective.

Cyanotype designs on silk worked well capturing miniscule details as in a seed from a Dandelion Clock. **IMAGE**

As the pandemic took a further grip and resulted in no access to the university personally, a decision was made to change direction. Living in isolation and missing the connection with the outside world a need for connectivity arose. Self help and reparation through constructing textiles arose. The technique of 'stabbing' rovings of wool and creating sculptures of whimsical creatures was two fold, the action of using a sharp barbed needle released anger of the restrictive situation that Covid produced. Secondly the construction of a tactile novel as a 'gift' provided therapeutic elements. **QUOTE BY MELANIE KLEIN**

Klein a child psychoanalyst, studied her own children where she discovered an association with good and bad objects introduced in early infancy. This association whether positive or negative **prevailed**? through to adulthood.

Having had a very enjoyable childhood myself has greatly influenced the outcomes of work I have produced, resulting in a naive quality about them.

‘Gifting’ these whimsical creatures has become a way of communication with people that can no longer be physically embraced. It is a way of reaching out with empathy to specific vulnerable people providing a comforting distraction from the reality of life during the pandemic.

What worked & what didn't?

Success was achieved using sunlight for the photograms and most of the cyanotypes by laying the materials directly onto the paper to create detailed silhouettes. Glass was laid directly on top to assist the contact, especially with exposing outdoors. The foliage was chosen predominately for its intricate construction, which resulted in the preferred detailed outcome.

The mixed media colour studies taken from small areas of the photograms provided interesting results and were used in further pattern design for fabric swatches.

Painting the cyanotype liquid mixture onto varying strengths of fabrics created different results. The texture of an open fabric added extra interest and detail when the image was scanned into the computer.

Some success with creating negatives on acetate from an historical family album was achieved at home with limited equipment. These were used as an experiment when the process of combining cyanotype and photographic paper was used. The liquid was painted onto the photographic paper prior to exposure and created an

unusual effect. This was not pursued due to various circumstances mainly limitations with an ill equipped 'under the stairs darkroom!' **IMAGE**

Experimentation with cyanotype on beach pebbles had varying degrees of success, probably due to the composition of the stone used. The interior of eggshells also was a bit 'hit and miss.'

Inspired by using moonlight to expose drew a blank as it was paramount to use natural light and the strength from this alone was not successful. Artist Susan Derges uses artificial light to assist with exposure.

An attempt to capture the pattern from the movement of water over a submerged piece of photographic paper also was not successful and was not investigated further.

The change of direction due to non-access into the perspective workshops resulted in concentrating on using available materials and resources at home. This consisted of the construction of textile 'gifts' for communication and connection, which have been logged and mapped. Secondly, being involved in a local community garden.

The 'gifts' have been warmly received and continue to bring comfort to the recipients. Secondly, being involved in a local community garden which consists of collaboration among residents providing the aspect of wellbeing within the local vicinity. It continues to flourish with signs of Spring, now the bulbs are starting to poke through. A recent addition by myself included a small tree in a pot, "A Tree of Hope" where labels were provided. Participants were encouraged to write their wishes for 2021 on them and attach them to the tree. This was done with an intention of collecting them and creating either a photographic montage or stitched textile collage which could be used in the final exhibition.

What are your feelings about the work?

The work involved in the initial exploration, research and experimentation during the Explorative Praxis was extensive. This was enhanced by the factor of unknown outcomes with the camera-less photography, all being dependent on the strength of natural light at the particular time of exposure. It was interesting to do a continual monthly experiment throughout the year with the same materials where there was a noticeable difference in colour during the summer months; golden brown tones as opposed to the grey tones in the winter. A way to capture the variety of colours with painting sections by way of the colour studies worked particularly well. The outcomes provided added interest, which, was further extended by digital manipulation for test fabric swatches. These provided exactly the ephemeral quality desired. Capturing the fluid movement of both these and the cyanotype exposed silks by film worked particularly well. Short videos worked well but longer intentions didn't due to technical problems, which meant they didn't upload successfully. The YouTube footage and Instagram posts provided means of documentation while connecting with an audience. Whilst process progression was documented well in my sketchbook (which I feel is such an important element) it was totally lost when translated to digital files. Leafing through my sketchbook adds such a tactile element. It was also difficult to be subjective of what to include. Intentions of doing a 'flick through' video of the sketchbook resulted in failure due to length of the video.

The book making was successful and an enjoyable way to log the processes with future intentions to further.

Explain chosen practice.

The photogram work inspiration came from the workshops and was influenced by the serendipity of the outcomes. Akin to printmaking methods of capturing intricate detail added additional intrigue. This echoed the theory of time and space. **THEORIST & QUOTE**

Having researched the power of natural light on wellbeing when an absence can cause 'Seasonal Affective Disorder' it was key to promote the power of this element in my work. Without light it would be impossible to see colour. **AND>>>>?**

It was important to me to emphasise the ephemeral qualities in the finished pieces. This was achieved by using the processes of camera-less photography and cyanotype exposure by natural light. The unpredictability of using the sunlight available at any particular moment added to the fascination of the experiments. The outcome was made by chance and was not controlled, having no particular time frame for exposure. The strength of the sunlight resulted in a darker background tones.

This echoed the idea of chance in which as humans we owe our existence, notably the existence of time and space. **SERENDIPITY**

Having always enjoyed printmaking especially stencil mono-printing where the detail in natural foliage could be replicated, gave inspiration for the camera-less experiments. Being ever resourceful, foliage from my garden and local area were used. The chosen flora emphasized its intricate detail, which added to the ephemeral quality of the outcomes.

This choice of practice changed due to further restrictions by the Covid pandemic restrictions. Still following the path of promoting wellbeing, making tactile whimsical felted animals ensued.

Frustration with life during the pandemic, the art of felting with wool rovings appeared cathartic. Being quite meditative by the process, there was also relief from the action of using the felting needle. A sense of wellbeing was achieved by the action of 'stabbing' into the felt to define the shape. **QUOTE from CLAIRE PAJAKOWSKA**

Textile Thinking

Having empathy for family and friends who needed support at this time, it was decided to create felted 'gifts' to help alleviate their anxieties.

Having always been drawn to nature personally (possibly due to being brought up on a farm with endless fields to explore) using nature's elements has been an important feature of my work. Much research into the benefits of nature and its properties to enhance wellbeing were also investigated. This phenomenon has been paramount during Covid-19 for wellbeing and is such a topical subject with much emphasis from many experts. In Japan, *Shinrin-Yoku* or 'forest bathing' is practiced which consists of a leisurely walk in a forest area for a couple of hours. Experiments have been carried out by medic and author Dr Qing Li into the benefits of this practice for mental well being and it has been proven to alleviate stress levels, reduce blood pressure and provides a boost to the immune system. According to Li, the air in the forest contains phytoncides; natural oils in trees to help with their own defence system. This scent is recognized as the scent of pine trees is more prominent in evergreens than deciduous trees. Li encourages his participants to use all of their senses to embrace their surroundings;

..to walk 'aimlessly and slowly' and 'let nature enter through your ears, eyes, nose, mouth, hands and feet. This includes listening out for birds and the sounds of tree foliage moving in the breeze; looking at the different shades of green and the light; smelling the fragrance of the forest; tasting the 'freshness' as you take in deep breaths'; touching a tree. p118 *Shinrin-Yoku: The Healing of Art of Forest Bathing*.

The scent of one particular phytoncide, called D-limonene has been recognized to be,

'more effective than antidepressants for lifting mood and ensuring emotional wellbeing in patients with mental disorders.' P 132 *International Handbook of Forest Therapy*.

Not only in Japan are there designated 'forest bathing' sites, which fulfill the criteria suggested by Li, but now there are sites in Northern Europe too. These benefits were witnessed myself nearer to home, when my son and I spent Christmas in a forest, where the stress of any current difficulties totally evaporated. Since then, a need to take daily walks to a local woodland area have been essential.



Christmas 2020

In Ireland in 2014, a programme called 'Woodlands For Health' was prescribed for patients with mental health issues which, included forest activities. There was a marked improvement on their mental wellbeing. There was a 75% lift in participant's mood, 66% said their sleep had improved, and suicide thoughts decreased by 82%.

There are many groups now that have been set up in conjunction with NHS services that offer 'green space' activities which have helped with patients wellbeing both mentally and physically. Political journalist Isabel Hardman who herself had a nervous breakdown has studied this in depth. In her book, '*The Natural Health Service*' she talks about the benefit of these activities and although she states that they won't entirely replace medication they can reduce prescription costs. This was especially the case for patients from deprived backgrounds that would object to a 'therapy style' room setting. The results from a money: as much as £13,000 per patient". p97

It is true that humans are intrinsically drawn to nature because this has formed the evolution of man.

Using natural sunlight to expose the camera-less imagery was a way of encompassing nature's elements demonstrating its ever-changing conditions. The work of James Turrell both in the *Roden Crater* and *Skyspace Pavillion* create a space where the viewer engages fully with the sky (and beyond). The clarity of this

celestial vision excludes the more familiar skyline backdrop or cityscape and scale. This results in the viewer getting totally transfixed and creates a connection with the greater universe, which is normally disregarded.

The transition from camera-less photography to felting whimsical gifts was a reaction to creating empathy during the pandemic. The vulnerability of several acquaintances was realized and the 'gifts' were made to show that they were cared about and not forgotten. Not only was it a token of showing appreciation to the recipient for their work but was also a practice that provided some self-therapy with the meditative process. The decision to make whimsical childlike pieces was in response to holding onto happy childhood memories in order to alleviate the harsh reality of Covid.

Melanie Klein

Marcel Mauss explores the exchange of gifts in his book, *'The Gift'* with reference from the time of the Romans to current custom. The tribes of North America used a system called 'potlatch' in which the gifts were offered by the wealthy for consumption usually at festivals. It was a form of stating wealth and hierarchy but with reciprocal intention which, often leads to hostility and rivalry as Mauss states, *"It is essentially usurious and sumptuary. It is a struggle between nobles to establish a hierarchy amongst themselves from which their clan will benefit at a later date."*

An example of reciprocation would be in the form of a gift to a tribal chief after the birth of his son thus delivering the gratitude and recognition expected. The custom of 'potlatch' is the most common in the world.

In certain religions sacrifices are made to honour the dead. This gift helps to believe the giver will be protected from evil.

In modern day it could be said that paying into National Insurance is a 'gift' that is reciprocated by receiving a state pension.

The principles of the 'potlatch' were a precursor for the social and economic society of today.

It was not an intention of the gift giving of the felted animals to be reciprocated with something of greater value. The only condition expected was acknowledgement by way of a smile. The gift was purely to make the recipient feel better. The fact that some do not like receiving gifts had not been considered even though when on deeper reflection it was acknowledged that, there can be a stigma attached to accepting charity. **Mention** Potlatch a distributor to goods so a precursor to economics. Quote from p 46

NOTES.... Processes chosen run in tune with seasons eg strong sunlight for exposure of camera-less photography. The 'Tree of Hope' being outdoors in winter had its problems with labels being damaged or blown away. More positive responses with better weather.

Connection-contextualize it in relation to other artists/theorists (possibly mention theory) **Foundling Museum** -mention

The key elements of my practice were that the pieces showed a haptic quality relating to a caring and empathetic approach to the recipient. The story telling that accompanied the whimsical objects helped to create childhood memories that were aimed at providing a positive uplifting response in the gift to aid wellbeing. It was hoped that for a brief spell that the reality of the pandemic could be 'over ridden' by

the naivety and innocence of the gift. As my late mother would say of my teenage daughter (who appeared not seem to worry too much about life) that she was, *“Like a dragonfly skimming across the top of the pond. Never delving into the murky depths below.”*

This coping mechanism (by way of a kind of denial to the reality of Covid) was exactly the intended outcome.

The surreal creations made by textile artist, Mr Finch from recycled materials, which, show a fantasy world is exactly the theme I wanted to produce in my practice. In an exhibition called *‘The Wish Post’*, in Yorkshire Sculpture Park in 2018, his life size creations of woodland animals created such magical extravaganza. The creatures are dressed to appear human and their clothes consist of an array of fabulous vintage and new fabric. He believes that at night they come alive. *“Most of my pieces use recycled materials, not only as an ethical statement, but I believe they add more authenticity and charm...a story sewn in, woven in.”*

Castleandgardens.co.uk



This fantastical world provided the connection with innocent childhood visuals. Psychologist and author Melanie Klein's studied the relationship between mother and child with the identifying of pleasant or unpleasant objects. A mother's breast full of milk would be create a favourable connection and memory as opposed to one where the mother's breast couldn't provide sustenance, therefore subsequent associations would be negative. It was hoped that haptic elements in my objects created happy association. Klein also looked at the association of reparation in the textile itself as a way of healing the soul too. The repetitive action of the stitching provided a means of meditation. This was the main reason for my practice to change to handling textiles at this time of uncertainty in order to provide some comfort.

“All artists are alike. They dream of doing something that’s more social, more collaborative, and more real than art.” – Dan Graham (cited?)

The isolation from the pandemic has been extremely hard for many people including myself. **STATISTIC?** Not being able to hug friends and family has proved difficult.

In a way of communicating without physical contact and the aspirations of a New Year with thoughts a new beginning, the Tree of Hope was borne. In a local communal area, people were encouraged to write their wishes for 2021 on labels provided and attach to the tree. Claire Bishop talks about this in , ‘The Social Turn :Collaboration & its discontents. She relates to an increase of collaboration with ‘real’ people as opposed to engaging artists to participate. She argues that although this type of collaboration loses its commercial value somewhat and can be labeled ‘performance art’ it still provides great visual stimulation.

Such art has many different names such as community-based art but the outcome is derived from many conscious minds and not limited to that of the artist. Although the visual aesthetic is very important it is the ‘social’ bond between the collaborators that is restored in which Bishop feels is lost in society today. She writes, “Now the emphasis is on restoring the social bond, providing a space for creativity and communication otherwise lacking in contemporary society” **REF**

The Tree of Hope experiment was chosen as a way of communicating with local residents. This was not only between myself, (the artist) and the participants who exposed their own thoughts, but also provided visual communication for any passers by. The size of the tree was small enough to enable children to participate as well. This is the same principle that Bishop refers to when she relates the findings of Swedish curator, Maria Lind, “...the group is not interested in showing or exhibiting

art but in 'using art as a means for creating and recreating 'new' relations between people'.

Since the Tree of Hope was positioned in early January it has been received well, providing some comfort and interactive communication. Since the start of the pandemic due to the restricted travel movement, I have met many new acquaintances within this proactive area, which normally I would not have been subjected to previously. This has been a bonus.

All the participants involved have become the 'artists' giving them equal ranking as opposed to viewing an artist's work in a normal gallery situation.

The text or dialogue on the labels is the **medium** ? and encourages 'freedom of speech' in their written form, an intended break away from the normal digital text currently exchanged via social media for example. This style of dialogue shows empathy and compassion with optimism for a brighter future so encourages the viewer to feel uplifted.

Yoko Ono has embraced this concept also. She has trees situated all over the world and has chosen to use real trees that are native to their country (in Venice there are olive trees) There have been well over a million responses which are sent to Iceland where they are buried at the foot of the Peace Tower. TBC

Identify gaps. Where there are limitations. What else could you have done?

Pandemic restrictions to uni and workshops. **elaborate**

Local surveys.

Action plan. What is your action plan for the practice for final exhibition?

The final exhibition aim would be to give back to the local people of Goodwick. This would be in the form of stitched text onto material bunting, using the 'written' wishes taken from the labels already collected. This would be hung from an existing tree along the path near the communal garden area. These stitched messages could be intermingled with pieces of cyanotype silks with exposed text. Subjecting these fabrics to the natural elements would promote their ephemeral qualities.

Due to the uncertainty of having an exhibition in Swansea, staging one in vacant Council offices in Fishguard Town Hall had been considered. These rooms had floor to ceiling windows, an ideal opportunity for a display without imposing on covid restrictive access.

An alternative consideration was planting a tree native to Pembrokeshire in the centre of Fishguard for a 'Wish Tree' to encourage participation from the public.

This would have been in conjunction with the 'Plant Britain' campaign but for this to happen was proving difficult to get the relevant permission and approval. Also this was some distance away from the already proactive communal area in Goodwick and it was felt that it was important to 'give back' to these people.

Anonymity has been key to this current project of 'The Tree of Hope' to provide an element of surprise and excitement.

It is hoped to commandeer a local tree one evening and adorn it with the bunting, which will be a conclusion to the ongoing experiments already carried out.

The documentation of these in the form of large photographs would be available for a digital translation to be displayed in a 'virtual' exhibition.

Where the practice can develop future endeavours. Perhaps include theory.

There has been interest by a local member of the Chamber of Trade who has contacted me about including an interview with me about the 'Tree of Hope' for her promotional blog on North Pembrokeshire. This area has seen a decline in recent years with the closure of shops so the town could do with a 'boost'.

There was an appeal by 'Network Rail' **check** before Christmas to brighten up the railway station could be followed up. A collaborative project with local residents to encourage wellbeing would qualify a grant from the Arts Council so funding shouldn't be a problem.

Approach local Ancient Connections group to encourage activity and collaboration to revitalize Fishguard and Goodwick. This would encourage visitors to help with the economy. Participation in making the area more colourful and desirable would have promote wellbeing. Example is Publicolor Scheme in New York. **TBC**

IMAGE

Having a keen interest in the promotion of wellbeing and maintaining good mental health it is my intention to provide interactive workshops to encourage this. The pandemic has had huge implications in this area and continues to do so. The restrictions have resulted in adopting unusual behavioral trends both physically and mentally and as life returns to some kind of 'normality' it will be necessary to learn how to reconnect again.

Approach public artist Kerry Lemon who has a current art project called, 'Nest'. This was commissioned by Swansea Bay University Health Board NHS for the first

‘mother and baby’ unit in Wales. Inspiration for her integrated work was taken from surrounding Welsh wild flora in the locality. It would be a wonderful opportunity to assist her in her projects with a possible internship.

If you had the chance to redo the practice what would it look like? Perhaps mention theory.

Working collaboratively in a pandemic is unprecedented, but if it had been possible an opportunity to run workshops for therapeutic craft making to enhance wellbeing would have been an option.

And..... TBC

Summary of the practice. Perhaps mention theory.

TBC

Brief Bibliography. THIS IS NOT COMPLETE BY FAR

<http://www.kerrylemon.co.uk/NEST>

Yoko Ono

<http://imaginepeacetower.com/yoko-onos-wish-trees/>

Melanie Klein

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Claire Bishop

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Mr Finch

<http://www.mister-finch.com/portfolio/>

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Marcel Mauss

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The Natural Health Service

What the Great Outdoors can do for your mind.

Isabel Hardman.

Excerpt from “Remembrance of Things Past” by Marcel Proust.

Foundling Museum

<https://foundlingmuseum.org.uk>

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