

Transition 2019: Poems – Objects – Exhibition.

Tuesday 19th February to Saturday 23rd February 2019

I discovered that there is an innate disparity between writing a proposal with a germ of an idea, and actually undertaking said idea. One is the bare bone of a thought, the other is discovering the discrepancies between imagined outcomes and reality.

The expected dialogue around space, designing it, curating it, filling it, creating in it, writing about it, and occupying it, did not quite happen as I had intended. Nor did the making happen as proposed, but both became something else. My initial ambition to make 3d Word-Objects about exhibitions spaces and objects proved too complex to achieve in the time, space and with unknown numbers of participants.

Many things happened over my five days in the Upper Gallery space of Newlyn Art Gallery. Overall I felt the week went well. It had a shaky start, as it was difficult to gauge exact moment it officially started. And the huge room devoid of anything but a couple of tables, some chairs, and a scroll of blank paper was rather daunting. But it did start, and each day grew from the previous one.

Every day had a different pace, rhythm and emphasis in relation to the subject focus, and there was always a new co-host. In advance of the week I prepared daily timetables, lists of words and possible questions that were pertinent to the day's sub-title. And although each day took on a shape and form of its own these notes stood me in good stead for the slow moments and meant there was something to fall back on when energy levels were flagging.

Naomi Frears' repeated prompt for me to do the general introduction each day was good. It helped everyone find a way into the project, understand where idea had come from and where it was meandering to, whilst keeping in mind the overall premise Poems-Objects-Exhibition.

Everyone involved reacted to shifts in directions, little cul-de-sacs and unexpected events like the Alzheimer group's appearance, reminiscing about special spaces in their childhood homes, and the group of musicians who turned up and improvised in direct response to drawings and objects they found in the space.

Some interesting conversations were had. And things were made, even if they weren't polished, but what was really lovely was how much everyone enjoyed just making. Being given permission to create something that was more about process and thinking out loud than the end result. A natural fluidity developed, with people working both collaboratively and independently.

Everyone, those that came for a day, for consecutive days or wandered in for only a while, added to the mass of happenings within the space. The week was a strange mixture of relaxed and unstructured, and relaxed and structured. There were some fantastic moments and I enjoyed the experience.

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On Reflection:

Good moments: starting each new activity by selecting word from the lists I had prepared, forming negative shapes in clay, pouring the plaster and waiting for the revile, watching Tom Ebdon throw wool over the bracing beams to form a web which instantly transformed our occupancy of the gallery, Naomi Frears and Lucas Wilson creating their giant weave, writing poems, watching the paper peep show grow, and the unexpected occupation of the space by sound.

In retrospect: maybe the level of conversation and collaborative making that I had envisaged was not a good fit with the realities of the space, the time available and the need to be welcoming to the public. However I found what did happen extremely interesting and rewarding.

I was reticent and nervous about how to choreograph the disparate elements of the week; talking, making, writing and occupying. I surprised myself in what I achieved and organised. I feared it would stall and become unstuck. What I really found amazing and very gratifying was how much everyone enjoyed playing.

By Saturday everyone seemed at home within the space and with Poems – Objects – Exhibition. And then it was time to clear it all away. I still can't quite believe I did it and am overwhelmed by positive response I got.

I learnt a lot, not least that I should be braver, trust that my ideas have validation and that collaborative making is fun. A residency is a journey into unknown, it is simultaneously scary and thrilling and really worth doing.

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Taking it forward:

All along I was aware of the irony that a dyslexic was proposing a week of investigation around space with an emphasis on words, their placement, meaning and interpretation.

Ella did a fantastic job of co-hosting of the Friday and getting us all to write spontaneous poems. I surprised myself with what I wrote and how liberating it can be to jot down a few well-selected words rather than agonize over a longer piece of writing. Isolated words, their placement, punctuation and parentheses are a visual language. They are object islands on the page. I plan to take some of this lesson forward and enjoy words as newfound friends.

On the first day Vicky Smith introduced us to notation and annotation. She talked about stylized marks on architectural drawings, shorthand, musical scores and notations for dance movements. These reduced word forms, squiggles, dots, dashes, are condensed means of conveying a message. This is currently influencing a conversation I'm having with a filmmaker, Keith Allott, about collaborating on a piece of work. The idea is to track the movement of printers in Leicester Print Workshop. The final piece will be a multilayered print of choreography marks with an aerial film of different printers movement projected over the top.

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Transition: What I like about Transition is it that it gives artists time and space to explore an idea without a defined outcome. The expectation is only to do, and the success of the week is pre-measured in belief that something interesting will happen. This is really liberating, as usually one needs to predict outcomes, audience participation and meaning before a residency even starts.

Many ideas are deadened by this process. Assessing the end result before initiation pre-restricts possibilities and makes no allowance for the joyously un-predictable.

The support, encouragement and engagement that I got from everyone before the week made it seem the idea had legs and I could do it. Ideas around display, context, poetic interventions, space, plans, annotations and message seem both relevant and to resonate with many I spoke with in my preparation. Blair Todd was patient and reassuring throughout the project, from offering the space in the Upper Gallery to being a co-host on the Thursday.

One thing I discovered was that giving people the chance to play is immensely rewarding. There seems to be a hunger for doing, talking and reacting to a situation, to being in the moment rather than being driven by end results, performance expectations and the need to know why. Rather, just do and see.

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Soraya Smithson April 2019