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Sheelagh Broderick on

CORK IGNITE



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MAKING CORK IGNITE

FOR THIS SPECIAL ISSUE OF CREATE
NEWS WE INVITED DR SHEELAGH
BRODERICK TO WRITE A CRITICAL
REFLECTION ON CORK IGNITE BY
SIMON MCKEOWN

Cork Ignite by artist Simon Mckeown was a spectacular event following two years of preparation that illuminated arts and disability practice. Unabashedly revelling in its own conceits and delights, it also simultaneously contributed to an inclusive public space.

Cork Ignite was a 30-minute performance of technical precision led by Mckeown as part of Culture Night Cork on 18 September 2015. It comprised an outdoor digital projection with manifestly ambitious artistic and technical objectives, screened across the River Lee along the entire façade of Cork College of Commerce.¹ For the 10,000 + people who converged on Union Quay, Cork Ignite was a spectacular visual feast, which focused in part on the history and landscape of Cork, intertwined with imagery, to evoke perceptions of disability. The outdoor spectacle was a hugely detailed and complex visual manipulation of the College of Commerce. As the soundtrack pulsed, the audience watched the building; rotate, then shake, and then its side panels tumble forward sinking into a cloud of dust; then phoenix- like it grew flowers and ivy from the ashes before collapsing again. This site was selected because it provided Mckeown with a challenging platform for play through the symmetry of its windows over 3 floors. Imagery was projected with such precision that the contours of the facade were animated with fidelity. Virtual window blinds could be individually opened and closed in window frames to reveal figures apparently occupying the space within. Computer games such as Pong were played across the surface of the façade and many of the fabulously coloured buildings of Cork made appearances linked to Mckeown's favourite 1970s disability vehicle.

This essay will go behind the spectacle using artist Krzysztof Wodiczko's concepts of Inner Public and Outer Public as coordinates within which to locate the work². For Wodiczko, the Inner Public comes first being composed within the project. The Outer Public comes at the end, at the time of project realisation and through the discourses that follow its presentation..

Wodiczko states;

In most discussion about my work the focus is on the spectators rather than on the participants who are key contributors to my projects. This is due to the fact that my projects are treated as spectacles or public events – something that is developed solely for the perception and reception of the so-called “public” (Wodiczko 2015, p 28)

The Inner Public is constituted discursively in all stages of a project’s development through research, realisation and post-production. As the project proceeded the Inner Public grew to be constituted by a network of commissioners led by National Sculpture Factory, and Create, with project manager Kath Gorman, participants from Suisha Inclusive Arts and SoundOUT and diverse technical, managerial and creative personnel, who advocated, fund-raised, organised, coded, tested and mediated on behalf of the project³.

The transversality of connections made certainly extends beyond the groups named. It would be difficult to identify the very many other contributors but it is significant to note the way in which connections were made in order to address the projects own needs and desires, through the support of collectivity.

During the spring of 2014 Mckeown spent a week with participants from disability groups to create a collaborative work based around stop-frame animation, shadow puppetry, art-work and video⁴. The material developed during these workshops became a resource to the animation project and was clearly evident in the final mix.

Similarly musical themes were developed in workshops using assistive technologies and incorporated into the final animation.

These workshops were not led by Mckeown, but instead were led by guest musician Cian Walsh with facilitation support from Grainne McHale and Graham McCarthy of SoundOUT and Eoin Nash of Suisha Inclusive Arts at COPE Foundation.

These interventions seem brief but cannot be underestimated. The experience was one of intense challenge and creativity. The intensity was felt right from the start when a call was put out for participants and

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an interview selection process put in place. Video documentation of both these interviews and post workshop feedback make for instructive viewing. Participants not only contributed to workshop creative activities but also opened up their own creative ambitions. One individual declared that he could now follow his dream to be an artist. Another, who has communication difficulties, made this influence evident through his artwork⁵. Inner Public testimony acknowledges Mckeown’s expertise in a process of creative development entailing several sites

“...working with a diverse group, many of whom may not have worked in such a way before; the artistic quality and attention to detail regarding the sophisticated use of imagery and cultural references of the final commission; [and] the high production values of the night itself” (Simon McKeown)

Mckeown then developed animations from his base in the UK interspersed with site visits. The mechanism of the Inner Public made it possible for him to enact the collaborative aspects of the project. This entails a shift from a generalised ‘ideal’ of participatory

practice in favour of what is termed molecular collaboration. These are uniquely manifested through a particular set of relations, particular participants, and particular spaces whose parameters are fixed by the choice of setting. Such a practice is commensurate with an ethic that acknowledges the mutual dependency of participants, reconceptualising dependence as connectivity distinct from the modernist concept of the autonomous and bounded subject. When Mckeown unexpectedly had to take time out from the project for health reasons, that mutual dependency was exposed and compensating strategies were put in place to ensure the project was not jeopardised. Indeed, the extended timeframe was used opportunistically to develop locally originated musical themes in workshops using assistive technologies and develop relationships with University College Cork (UCC) Campus Radio and Cork School of Music⁶. Needless to say the project deferral also brought additional project costs and further support was awarded from within existing Ignite resources.

The Outer Public was constructed from the Inner Public with each commissioning organization investing considerable efforts to profile the commission at a local, national and international level. Culture Night was an ideal platform billing Cork Ignite as a flagship event, the invitation to Cork Ignite emphasized it was family friendly, suitable for all ages, accessible, a dynamic event that welcomed all citizens of the city and beyond. Afterwards one Twitter comment announced *"This was brilliant! 3 generations of our family thoroughly enjoyed it."* Later Twitter comments saw the work being embedded into the institutional memory of the city as the Cork College of Commerce Twitter feed, in ironic Cork humour, observed *"Well at least the building didn't fall down"*.

Disability themes were apparent throughout from the iconography of the opening sequence to the intermittent and sometimes-subliminal references interspersed through episodic animated tableaux using Braille, text and imagery. The live audio description broadcast in the

opening minutes ran thus *"A series of symbols flash ! " @ hash + & wheelchair logo / * ~ € ... we are still here .."*, referring to the 1 in 5 Irish people who self identify as disabled in the last census. But this was more rooted than disability politics. This was a spectacle that played with ideas through images and sounds, always playful, sometimes confounding, it succeeded in captivating the diverse audience of families, students and tourists. The intense attention over 30 minutes directed towards the projections as they appeared on the façade of the College of Commerce or in reflections on the river and on the glass walls of the School of Music opposite demonstrated the success of this work. The Outer Public as a witness stood fearless with the work as an act of art⁷. Disability issues are not separated - they are included in the work.

Such testimony publically witnessed is, according to Wodiczko, an assault on silence about vital matters. In this instance, the vital matter being disability. The Outer Public becomes relay, breaking silence through solidarity. The first minutes of the projection were indecipherable to some with references to disability not widely understood. The Outer Public stood with the work in a state of not knowing. *They 'endorsed and protected the project as a cultural vehicle for the creation of an inclusive public space'*. Another instance of this provisional inclusive space was evident when prior to the projection participants from COPE Foundation dispersed into the crowd to form a cohesive circle of break-dancers throwing their best shapes at each other to pounding rhythms. This infectious enthusiasm set an affective atmosphere for the reception of the work that evening and afterwards.

The concepts of Inner Public and Outer Public call attention to the way in which public art and the broader context of arts and disability accounts for itself, to instances where the social and technical processes of its making are as critical as the final production. Cork Ignite is just such an instance and remains open still for discussion, analysis and debate.



Images:
Claudia O'Keefe and Hazel Dixon



CORK IGNITE

Cork Ignite was the final commission of the Ignite initiative, a platform developed to showcase high-quality work by people with disabilities across Ireland. The Ignite initiative, established in 2012, was managed by a unique partnership involving the Arts Council, Arts & Disability Ireland (ADI), Cork City Council, Galway City and County Councils and Mayo County Council. Three commissions were created in each local authority area with a brief to celebrate arts and disability led by internationally recognised artists with disabilities.

The objectives of Ignite included:

- national and international collaboration between artists with disabilities;
- the making of new ambitious work by artists with disabilities;
- the presentation and marketing of commissioned work at local venues and festivals;
- access to a more diverse range of work for more diverse local audiences.

For Cork Ignite, the partnership included Cork City Council with the Arts Council and Arts and Disability Ireland, led by the National Sculpture Factory and Create in association with SoundOUT and Suisha Inclusive Arts at COPE Foundation.

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ARTIST SIMON MCKEOWN

British artist Simon Mckeown was commissioned to deliver an ambitious outdoor digital projection, for Cork Ignite. Simon Mckeown is an award-winning, internationally exhibiting artist renowned for his interest in the cultural presentation of disability. His work includes *Ghosts* (2014) commissioned for the WW1 Cultural Programme (14 – 18 November), *Motion Disabled: Unlimited (2012)* and *Prometheus Awakes (2010)*, which were both London 2012 Festival events. He foregrounds disability issues through a practice that not only engages with disabled people but also with representations of disability through technologically mediated imagery. With over 25 years' experience, Mckeown is an expert in animation and motion capture, and currently a Reader in Animation and Post Production at Teesside University.

Reference:

Wodiczko, K (2015) The Inner Public, FIELD: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism, Vol 1, pp 27 - 52

Footnotes:

1. The College of Commerce façade is 60 metres in length and 18 metres in height. Built in 1935 by the VEC and designed by architect Henry H Hill.
2. Krzysztof Wodiczko's concept of Inner Public relates to the specific kind of public that emerges and is generated from within the process of social and technical production of his projects. The Outer Public relates to the external audience, who encounter the work in its final or near final form. See Wodiczko, K (2015) The Inner Public, FIELD: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism, Vol 1, pp 27 - 52. Available at <http://field-journal.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/FIELD-01-Wodiczko-InnerPublic.pdf> Field Journal was founded by Grant Kester in 2015 as a response to the proliferation of new artistic practices involving collaboration for transformation of political, social and cultural forms.
3. This complex organisational matrix extended to: Teesside University: School of Computing; Cork Arts and Health Programme, HSE South; Cork Education and Training Board; XL Video, London; the River Lee Hotel: 3FM: UCC Campus Radio; CIT Cork School of Music; the Theatre Development Centre; Focus Surveys. Mckeown worked extensively with his creative team, in the UK in particular Craig McMullen, sound specialist Nigel Crooks and concept artist Kameliya Minkova, as well as Philip Wray and David Archibold to create the final projected work.
4. These visual art workshops took place in the Theatre Development Centre at Triskel Arts Centre with participants whose ages ranged from 18 to over 80 years old and whose disabilities were diverse.
5. This participant drew on themes generated during the workshop for paintings included in an art exhibition *Nwet on any map; true places never are*, curated by Maria Tanner. At the time of writing the rollercoaster piano that careered across the façade is a primary concern for him in his art practice.
6. UCC Campus Radio broadcast a live audio description of the event for the visually impaired or those who could not attend in person, as part of an evening of interviews and music event organisers and DJs from COPE Foundation in Cork. Cork School of Music became the venue for a post production reception and also a resource space for the Inner Public prior to projection screening
7. Overcoming this fear was evident too in the Inner Public as some participants had expressed a view that they had overcome fears through participation in the project.