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FINDING A VOICE: AN EXAMINATION OF COMMUNITY ART

by

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INTRODUCTION

"In times such as these, few artists can remain wrapped up in studio problems" (David, 1947, p. 65).

A little more than fifty years ago Stuart Davis argued before the American artists congress that painters and sculptors should abandon the institutions of high culture and more directly engage their immediate surroundings.

No institution seriously concerned with providing access to the emancipating power of culture could live with the definition of artist as producer and non-artist as a consumer which has governed museum practice since the early 19th century. We are all participants in a cultural process.

This thesis is about artists, galleries, and museums engaging themselves with their immediate communities and beyond.

My first chapter outlines the emergence of community art and describes some of the key features which brought it about, how and why it emerged and where it stands today.

Chapter two and three describe two very different community art projects ('Unspoken Truths' and 'Críos') which I choose as examples for my thesis.

'Unspoken Truths' was initiated in 1991 by artist Ailbhe Murphy and involved an unusual collaboration of the Irish museum and modern art, artist and two community development projects, the family resource centre, St Michael's Estate, Inchicore and the Lourdes Youth and community service, Sean McDermot St., north inner city, Dublin. Their private intense exploration's resulted in a major public exhibition at IMMA, in 1992, which challenged many people's expectations of the outcomes of art that is created in a community context.

The second project entitled 'Críos' involved a group of young people with learning difficulties from Dunmore House in Glenageary Dublin and a group of occupational therapy students from Trinity College Dublin. These two groups worked with the Austrian artists, Christine and Irene Hohenbüchler in conjunction with the Douglas Hyde Art Gallery at Trinity College Dublin.

Críos resulted in an exhibition of drawings and weavings in the Douglas Hyde in March 1996.

In my final chapter I look closely at the two institutions involved with these projects, the IMMA and the Douglas Hyde Gallery. I examine their policies, approach and attitude to the specific projects and to community art in general.

For this chapter I interviewed John Hutchenson, director of the Douglas Hyde, Helen O'Donoghue curator of the education and community department at IMMA. Gerard Keane, training co-ordinator for Dunmore House, Siobhan MacCobb from the school of occupational therapy at TCD, Ann-Marie Brennan and Marian Keogh, two of the participants from Unspoken Truths were also interviewed.

There are major changes taking place in today's art world for both professional artists and people from the non-art world. Galleries and museums are slowly opening their doors and minds to embrace a wider audience.

In this thesis I question a prevalent policy which sees the arts as activities which people look at, or listen to only as members of an audience, playing no part in its creation. Art is for the many rather than the few, for sharing and participating enriched always by interchange between cultures.

In a 1982 report 'the arts in schools' the Calouste Gulbenkian foundation argued that "creativity is not a special faculty with which some children are endowed and others are not, but it is a form of intelligence and as such can be developed and trained like any other mode of thinking" (Bowles, 1992, p. 7).

The mistakes and conflicts in community art are necessary because its only beginning and is addressing decades of neglect. Experience precedes knowledge and there has been

no knowledge and there has been no experience. The community art argument is very much an open one rather than a closed one.

"What is needed is a wider definition of the arts and an urgent need for a significant place for arts in the community in national strategy" (Community Development Foundation, 1992, p.8).

CHAPTER ONE

"THE EMERGENCE OF COMMUNITY ART"

Community arts emerged as part of the democratic movements of the 1960's. They challenged the conventional exclusive relationship between the arts and the social elite and the conventional definition of what constitutes the arts. People involved in community arts believed,

> "Arts practice should be open to everyone because the arts improve the quality of life, can extend the creativity of all in many directions and thus can empower people with greater confidence in their own lives and as members of their communities" (Community Development Foundation, 1992, p. 1).

While the arts in general were becoming more popular, some artists, cultural workers and political activists were forging the links between the arts and social and political and cultural movements. Community art emerged in different ways in different countries but a number of common factors can be identified.

First there was the movement by groups of artists out of the art institutions of the major cities. They brought art out of the city galleries and theatres into the streets, organising open air music festivals mural painting and art workshops. They wanted to "... create new and liberating forms of expression of direct social relevance to people and in some cases encourage the participation of 'ordinary' people in the creative process" (Bowles, 1992, p. 3).

Secondly the sixties saw an increase in the political and cultural activities of social movements such as the women's movement and the working class. These, movements particularly the women's movement believed that creative expression was an essential tool in the wider struggle towards a radical transformation of society. Their activities pushed the conventional boundaries of cultural definitions and creative expression.

Thirdly, improved resources as a result of economic growth and a change in political will led to a more liberal attitude by the state towards marginalised groups and innovative projects. Lastly, technological advances in communications, which on the one hand created an instant centralised world, had also a diametrically opposite effect. The new communications technology for example, video and radio became increasingly compact, portable and cheap. Thus individuals and small groups could make use of technology as a means of creating their own images and communicating their own ideas.

In the Republic of Ireland, community arts emerged at the end of the 1970's. The Republic's community art movement was influenced by four main factors.

Firstly increases in urban unemployment together with the development of the new sprawling working class suburbs and the destruction and therefore decay of vast inner city areas created large areas of alienated populations experiencing high levels of social, economic and cultural deprivation. The self-help initiatives in these areas were amongst others supported by socially aware artists, cultural workers and political activists. They

used collective creative methods reflecting those used in Britain and the North of Ireland. Two of the best know examples took place in the early 1980's in Dublin's north inner city, the "inner city looking on" festival and "city workshop". Other early community art projects included moving theatre which under the direction of Annie Kilmartin worked with communities in the local authority housing estates in Dublin. The working class Dublin suburb of Ballymun spawned a number of creative and media projects such as Ballymun arts workshops, Base 10 and the community newsletter Ballymun news.

Secondly, world-wide themes such as adult and development education and the women's movement were, by the late 1970's and early 1980's influencing the voluntary sectors approach to tackling poverty, social incapability and alienation. Exploring one's own creativity through experimental workshops in an attempt to improve both mental and physical health and well being and to improve people's control over their own lives was part of that trend.

In the voluntary sector, arts groups such as the Grapevine Arts Centre which first opened its doors in Dublin in 1974, Sligo Community Arts Group, Waterford Arts for All, Theatre Omnibus in Limerick and Wexford Barefoot Dance Company were motivated by their belief in the value of the arts activities as tools of personal development and the importance of providing opportunities for creative activity to as wide a social group as possible.

Third, by the mid 1970's the Arts council was already responding to and putting in place policies of increased access to the arts. This encouraged greater regional and local access to the arts through increased funding for regional arts centres, theatres and theatre groups and an increase in funding for touring theatre. Community arts was first included as a specific expenditure in the Arts council's budget in 1980.

Fourthly, despite improving access to arts events, the argument was gathering support that the state and its institutions were failing to provide opportunities for people to discover their creative potential through participating in the arts. In its 1982 report the 'The Arts in Schools', the Calouste Gulbenkian foundation reflected a growing body of opinion when it argued "that art is a language, and creativity an intelligence common to all human beings, without which people are excluded from taking a full part in society. It concluded that arts activities should play a much more important role in education" (Bowles, 1992, p. 7).

It was because of this that the Arts council introduced its Artists-In-Schools programme. Also the emergence of agencies such as Combat Poverty and FAS meant that a new context and funding opportunities emerged for community art activities.

Today, community arts practice is an important aspect of much youth, community and personal development work in Ireland. Arts activities such as mural painting, drama, creative writing and photography, are increasingly being used by different groups to

examine and express their identities and concerns, to collaborate their history and achievements and to encourage personal creativity. Most communities in Ireland experience community arts in some way, for example through local arts festivals or personal creative work. According to CAFE's (community arts for everyone) community arts database, there are well over 500 community arts workers in Ireland and hundreds of community arts projects take place every year.

Funders and community art projects in Ireland included the Arts council, local authorities, grant-giving trusts and foundations such as N.I.V.I. and the American Ireland funds and, particularly in the Republic, state training and employment authorities. The Republics Combat Poverty Agency has recently included community arts projects within its programme with a view to identifying models of community arts practice which may help in the alleviation of poverty.

Despite the spread of community arts activity and the number of grant giving bodies, grant aid to individual projects and organisations remains small. For example, although the Arts council has demonstrated its commitment to community arts through its involvement in arts community education and its appointment of the recent development committee for community arts, the councils financial review of 1991 shows that only £219,00, 2% of its total expenditure, went to community arts and festivals. Only six community arts organisations received grants; these ranged from £200 to £25,000 of the seventeen festival grant aided 51% of the total community arts and festival expenditure,

thirteen received £2,00 or less. The remaining 41% of the community arts and festival expenditure went to the Arts council, Artist in the Community Scheme (Bowles, 1992, p. 9).

FAS, the Republic's state training and employment authority, makes a major financial contribution to the community arts. But the training courses are rarely longer than six months and the employment schemes provide small wages for only one year. Although sponsorship from business and industry is becoming increasingly important within the arts in general, it is hard to attract into community arts because of the locally based and low profile nature of the work.

In the western world community arts emerged in the 1960's to counter what was seen as the elitism of the arts. Despite having a common ideological root community arts emerged in different forms in different countries depending on social, economic and political conditions. In Ireland, community arts became an identifiable practice in the 1970's. On one hand people were demanding more access to the arts. On the other, unemployment, poverty and alienation among, for example, the young women and the working class, were increasing rapidly. Arts activities were seen as tools with which people could take a greater control over their lives by exploring and expressing social issues of relevance to individuals and communities. In addition, poverty and alienation were increasingly using developmental education techniques, which involved creative methods.

Community arts is now an integral aspect of many personal youth, and community development programmes. Despite the large number of workers and projects, community arts relies in the main on small amounts of grant aid. However, agencies and organisations in both the voluntary and statutory sectors have recently put in place initiatives that can support the integrated development of community arts in Ireland.

CHAPTER TWO

UNSPOKEN TRUTHS

> "We feel so good about being part of a project so special and so valuable. Unspoken Truths started out as a book, books are made from trees, We are the roots, we just have to make sure we water them well and wait until the branches do the rest" (Betty McDonnell, 1993, p. 3).

"Unspoken Truths" was a long-term collaborative art project which began in 1991. This collaboration brought together thirty-two women from Dublin, their community development projects: the Lourdes Youth and Community Service Project and the Family Resource Centre in St Michael's Estate, Inchicore, Artist Ailbhe Murphy and the education and community department of the I.M.M.A. It set out to create a new model of art practice based on the principles of Community Development and Arts education:

> "from the start it was very important that we did not just talk about community developments, but put the principles into action. I believe as a team we did this which resulted in the success of a collective outcome. We based our model on the community development model of a project having a beginning, middle and end" (Rita Fagan, 1992, p. 64).

What was unique about "Unspoken Truths" was the framework created to facilitate meaningful collaboration between all involved. To do this the women came together to explore their experiences and creative potential both individually and collectively.

> "over those cups of tea we got to known each other well, and trust developed. I had decided to write about a safe topic, something I was interested in. I was definitely not going to write about myself, that would be asking for trouble! But over the weeks trust grew and my fear diminished" (Elena Barnes, 1992, p. 64).

At the core of unspoken truths are the women's experiences, their original stories written by each woman to correspond with their final piece of artwork.

> "I think this question of having ones story told, the right to tell ones story, is the single greatest cultural question in the world" (Michael D. Higgins, 1993, p. 7).

> "Twirling, twirling sea of fog, arms, legs, spinning, spinning never catching up. Endless fog of despair, anger, fear, shame, sinking, black hole, nothing there plunging deeper deeper" (Marion Keogh, 1993, p. 26).

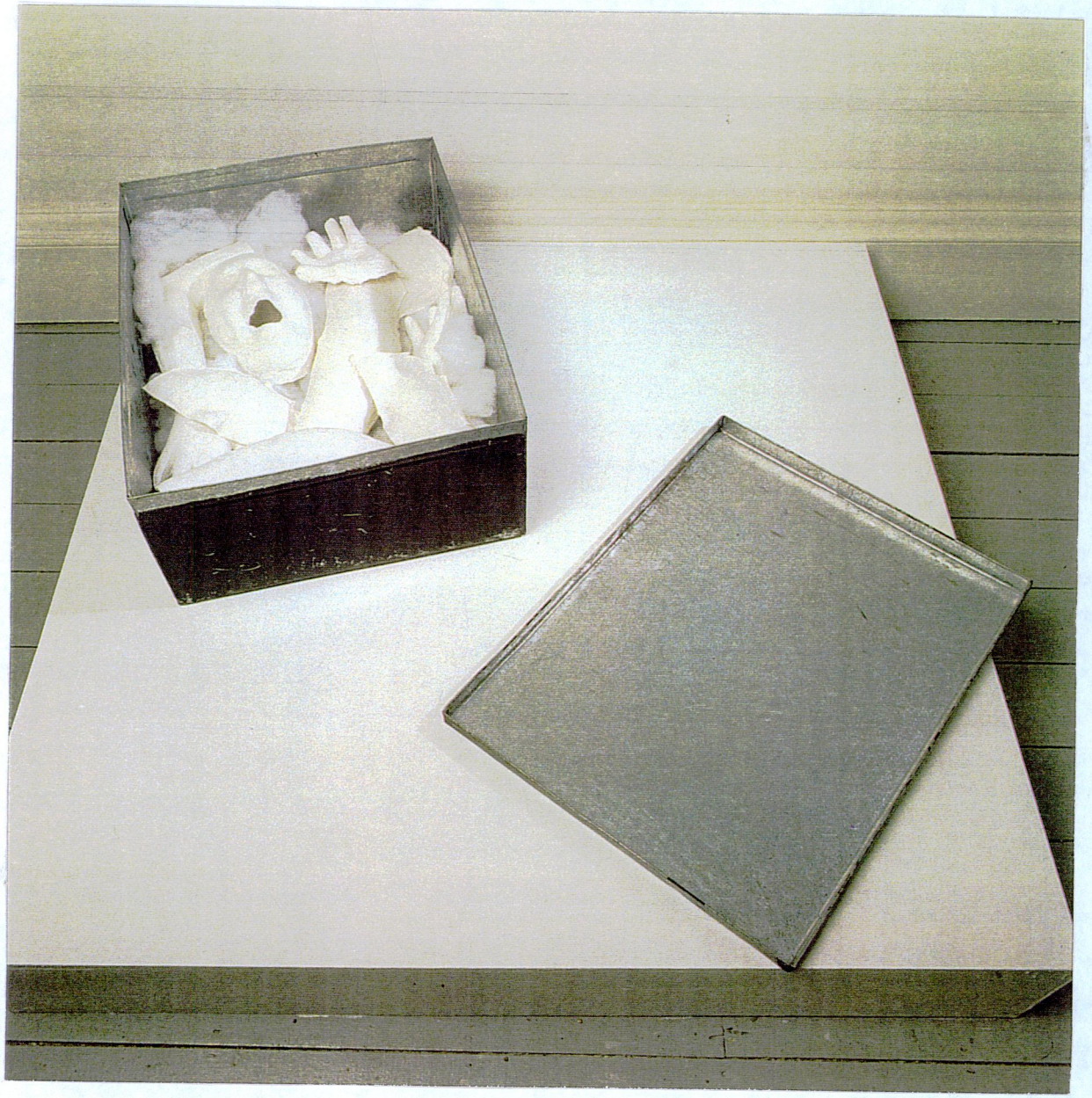
"Half a whole person" (see Figure 1) is a piece of artwork from the Unspoken Truths projects by Marian Keogh. The piece is based on her experience of depression. The artist suffered severe bouts of depression following the death of both her parents. She went from one psychiatric institution to another seeking a solution to the dreadful despair she felt.

The setting and house rules of the psychiatric hospital press home to the patient that he/she has suffered some kind of social collapse; that they have failed in some fundamental way and that here in this environment he/she is of a little worth, incapable of behaving like a fully developed human being. Marian was told... "what to eat, when to sleep, when to wake up and got a pat on the head for swallowing my daily doses of pills" (Marion Keogh, 1993, p. 26).

Through the intervention of her brother and sister Marian was transferred to another institution. Here they looked after her physical exhaustion but perhaps a little too well.

Figure 1

'Half a Whole Person', Marian Keogh, Mixed Media, 1992



"They put me out completely with more pills. It was weeks or perhaps months before I emerged again" (Marion Keogh, 1993, p. 26).

When Marian could not eat, a tube was inserted up her nostrils. When she had the energy to refuse medication she was put into a cell lying on a mattress on the floor looking at the light bulb that was surrounded by a wire mesh. "Slowly, slowly I was sinking into a big black hole and there was nothing to cushion my fall" (Marion Keogh, 1993, p. 26).

This painful ordeal lasted for five years of Marian's life. She eventually regained the courage to enter the real world, realising all the medication that was prescribed for her was no use as it was not dealing with her problem. This was a hard decision to make. "As the day of my release approached I became very anxious. Having had no preparation for life outside, could I cope?" (Marion Keogh, 1993, p. 26). Marian did cope and with the support of her family she began to recognise her strengths which enabled her to regain control.

The artists piece based on this experience is a series of plaster moulds of herself, her face, hands, arms and legs are fragmented and randomly arranged in a stark aluminium box. This box is then placed on a large rectangular white space on the floor. When one looks closely you can imagine an echo from this "half a whole person" crying out for help as they fall back into a vast sea of despair. Marian now has the wisdom to look back

on this whole experience and realise it was this that has made her the person she is today. "Going back to this half a whole person, I don't regret it because its the person in the box that made the person who came out of the box" (Marion Keogh, 1993, p. 26).

"Cage a bird that is free and it will struggle." (see Figure 2). When Rita Fagan was 13½ years old she wanted a vanity case. They were all the fashion then but her family could not afford such luxuries. Rita was strong willed and resourceful so she crossed the road from the flats where she lived to get a job in the factory. That day was the day she crossed from childhood to adulthood.

Her artpiece depicts the factory floor of a sewing factory. A singer sewing machine stands surrounded by a wire cage. Draped over the machine is a coat of images depicting the coat of conditions which links women from all over the world who have to work in sweatshop conditions in developing countries. Women who.... "live in abject poverty, selling their skills for a pittance to the capitalist system. Women with no choice" (Rita Fagan, 1993, p. 32).

The artist makes the observation that "the capitalist system is so sophisticated that its web makes us all exploiters in that system." Rita goes on to relate this to Ireland's unavoidable contribution to this 'web' (Rita Fagan, 1993, p. 32).

to (Rita's) whole experience and realise it was this that has made me the person she is today. Coming back to this half a whole person, I didn't regard it because it's the person in the box that made the person who came out of the box" (Mary-n Keogh 1993, p.20).

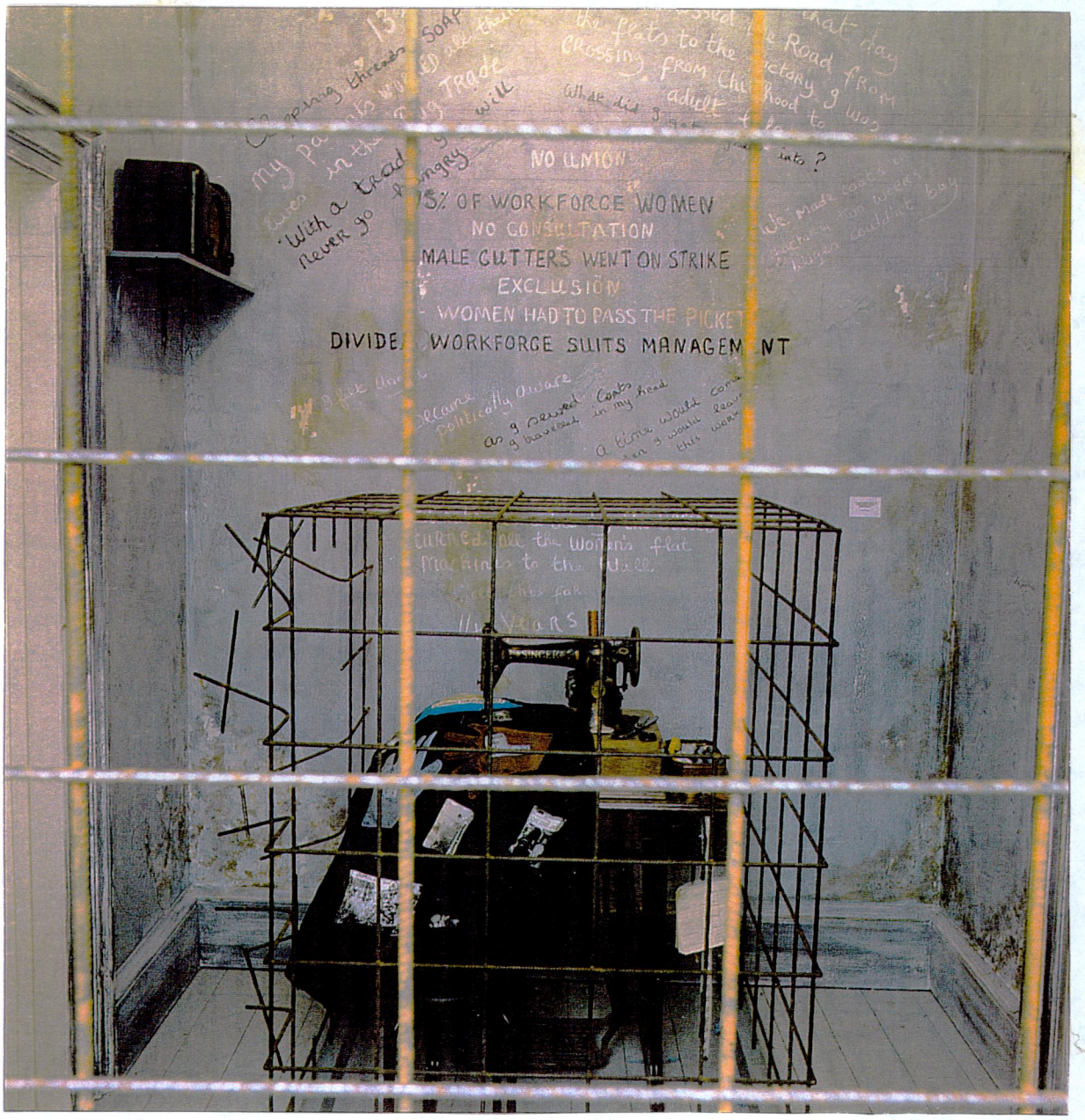
"Cage a bird that is free and it will struggle" (see Figure 2). When Rita Fagan was 12 years old she wanted a vanity case. They were all the fashion then but her family could not afford such luxuries. Rita was strong willed and resourceful so she crossed the road from the flats where she lived to get a job in the factory. That day was the day she crossed from childhood to adulthood.

Her artpiece depicts the factory floor of a sewing factory. A single sewing machine stands surrounded by a wire cage. Draped over the machine is a coat of images depicting the cost of conditions which links women from all over the world who have to work in sweatshop conditions in developing countries. Women who "live in abject poverty, selling their skills for a pittance to the capitalist system. Women with no choice" (Rita Fagan 1993, p.12).

The artist makes the observation that "the capitalist system is so sophisticated that its web makes us all exploiters in that system". Rita goes on to relate this to Ireland's unavoidable contribution to this 'web' (Rita Fagan 1993, p.12).

Figure 2

'Cage a Bird that is Free and it will Struggle', Rita Fagan, Installation, 1992



"The poor in Ireland who have no choice can only afford cheap goods from cheap stores, are without knowing it exploiting their sisters through their purchasing power" (Rita Fagan, 1993, p. 32).

The artist placed the cage around the machine to represent two opposites. One is the feeling of being trapped, caged in, not having the power to realise her full potential, the feeling of imprisonment. The other is of awakening, of learning, of growing strong.

> "of believing in my own ability, of having the courage to take a stand, to fight back, to break through the bars. The fundamental message of my piece is that liberation is possible, and that we must all be united in the struggle to wipe out oppression" (Rita Fagan, 1993, p. 32).

These two pieces "Half a whole person" and "Cage a bird that is free and it will struggle" are indeed very powerful both visually and conceptually. The stories behind each woman's work have the ability to communicate to a wide cross-section of the public. The value of these stories could be the catalysts for a range of discussions and sharing of experiences. These pieces and the project overall raised many social and political issues.

The unspoken truths project set out to explore, in a private context, the potential of a collaboration between thirty-two women, their community developments projects, an artist and the IMMA. The aim and objectives of the project were as follows:

1. To reach a broader understanding of arts through a constructive exploration of the nature of contemporary art practice and to raise the question, who or what normally qualifies to be included in this process.

2. To develop a good model of practice which would address a wide audience within the fields of community developments and arts practice.

3. To explore the potential which can be realised through collaboration between arts institutions and community groups. (Unspoken Truths, 1993, p. 45)

From the outset a co-ordinating team was put in place with responsibility for organising the project and ensuring it met its aims and objectives. This team was made up of representatives of the community development projects, the artist and Helen O'Donoghue, the education and community curator of the IMMA.

Together they drew up a proposal to the Arts council under the Artist in the community scheme, which was accepted. It was important that the starting point for the project was linked to the exhibition programme at IMMA, to begin a process of understanding the role of the museum, not only as an exhibition venue but as a resource for the group throughout the project.

The women met on a weekly basis with Ailbhe Murphy in their respective community projects coming together as a larger group once a month at IMMA. These meetings took the form of discussion and exchange of stories and ideas. The emphasis was on sharing experiences and identifying issues as possible themes for the artwork. It was not long before the two groups of women developed a working relationship with each other which became the framework for them to work upon.

> "When I first started working on Unspoken Truths I didn't know what to expect but after starting to reminisce about old days we came up with an idea to do a project on our culture. It didn't seem possible to me at the time because I'd always thought art was paint and brushes and only for artists" (Bernie Halpin, 1993, p. 55).

As the project evolved the women began to identify the themes which would emerge in their works. They began a series of workshops with artists such as Kathy Prendergast, Dublin poet Paula Meehan, Actress Jean Costello and others. Through these workshops the group explored the different concerns and themes of these artists which helped them (the women) articulate their personal and social histories as they were emerging.

The workshops alternated between the community projects and IMMA. The workshops in the community projects provided an opportunity for the women to visit and become more familiar with each others projects and environments.

The workshops held in IMMA, brought the project beyond the centres into a wider art perspective. They also developed an understanding of the role of the museum as a rich

resource for the women to work from throughout the project. It quickly changed the groups perception of the museum solely as an exhibition venue or as a place of no relevance to them or their lives.

"I thought the workshops with the other artists were great. I couldn't think of what to write down because I was thinking of it as my own story all the time. After meeting Paula Meehan I began to write it in the third person which really helped" (Mai Norton, 1993, p. 56) (see Figure 3).

One of the key features of the methods of the project was the support structure for the women and the artist Ailbhe Murphy. This structure developed through on-going dialogue between the women, the community project co-ordinators the artist and the education and community curator of IMMA.

This support structure was crucial to the development of the project ensuring its progress and forwarding its aims and objectives. Through ongoing evaluation and planning the project successfully integrated principals "of community development and arts education" (Unspoken Truths, 1993, p. 61).

"I came to understand so much about appropriate ways to engage with both community development projects, their participants and IMMA" (Ailbhe Murphy, 1993, p. 45).

resource for the women to work from throughout the project. It quickly changed the average perception of the museum solely as an exhibition venue or as a place of no relevance to them or their lives.

"I thought the workshops with the other artists were great. I couldn't think of what to write down because I was thinking of it as my own story all the time. After meeting Paula Nevins I began to write down the most painful which really helped" (Mai Nomon, 1997, p.23 (see Figure 3)).

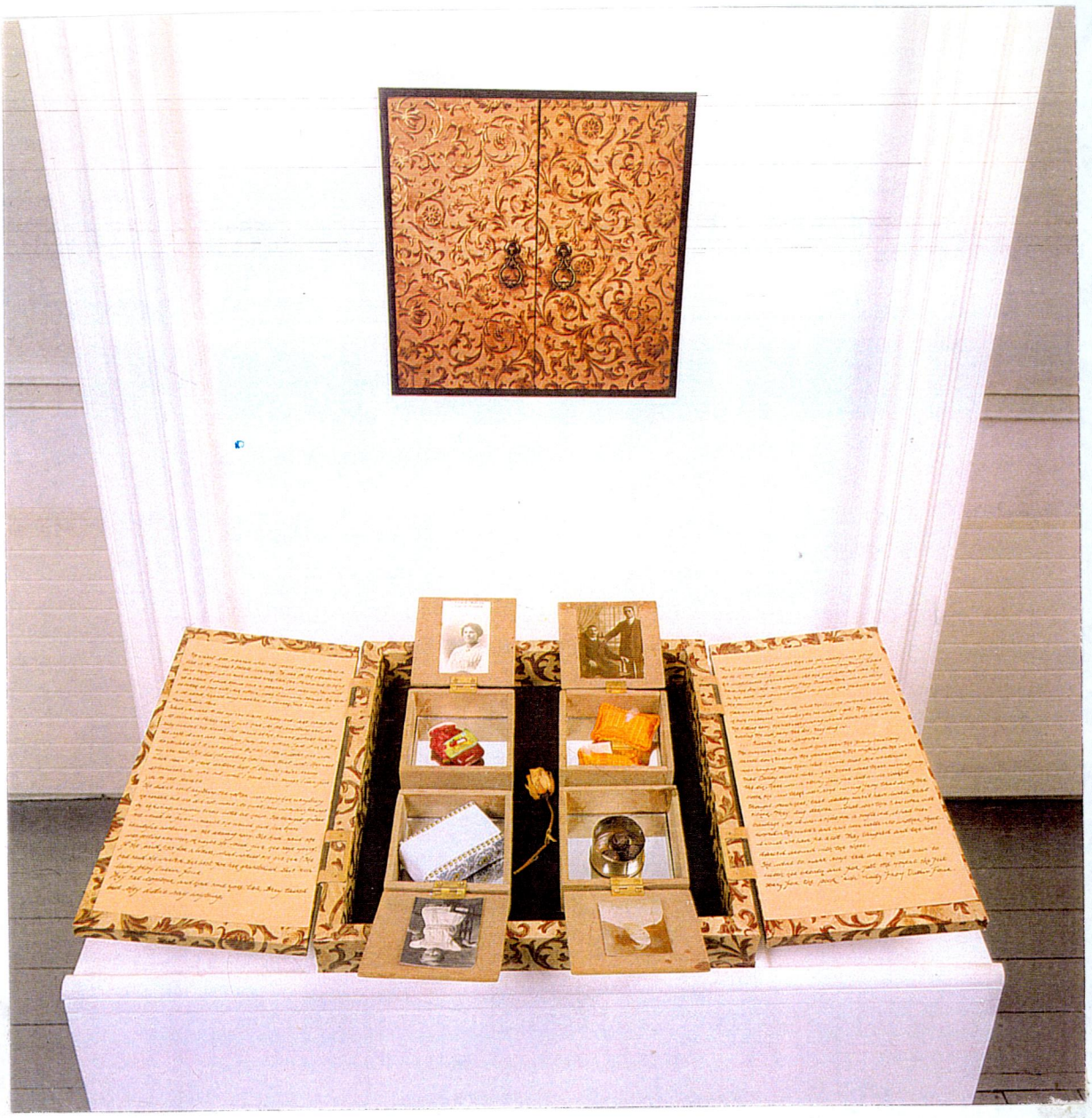
One of the key features of the methods of this project was the support structure for the women and the artist Aliibe Murphy. This structure developed through on-going dialogue between the women, the community project co-ordinators, the artist and the education and community curator of IMMA.

This support structure was crucial to the development of the project ensuring its progress and throughout its aims and objectives. "Through ongoing evaluation and planning the project was successfully integrated principals of community development and adult education" (Hanaghan Fields, 1997, p.60).

"I came to understand so much about appropriate ways to engage with both community development projects, their participants and IMMA" (Aliibe Murphy, 1997, p.45).

Figure 3

'The Gift' Mai Norton, Mixed Media, 1992



This ongoing contact gave Ailbhe the opportunity to learn about the complex nature of collaboration.

"I had recently left art college where this area of work was not addressed and so having access to their experience was really important" (Ailbhe Murphy, 1993, p. 45).

But it was through working directly with the women that Ailbhe learned to fully appreciate the richness of this alternative model. The women were committed to creating an environment where everyone's ideas and perspectives were given equal consideration. This process which allowed each powerful work to emerge demanded a consistently high degree of honesty and analysis. Having to meet these requirements was for Ailbhe "one of the most valuable experiences of Unspoken Truths (Ailbhe Murphy, 1993, p. 45).

As part of the evaluation process the community development projects listed some of their key features which I believe contributed greatly to the success of 'Unspoken Truths'.

1. A belief in the participants' abilities.
2. A commitment to passing on knowledge and skills.
3. A desire to develop the creative work within projects and a greater understanding of the principals informing arts education and practice.
4. A history of development work with women.

5. A clear understanding of the aims and objectives of the 'Unspoken Truths' project and how they were communicated to the women.
6. Support for the groups and the artist and a link between the artist and the women.
7. Ensuring a process of consultation and ongoing evaluation with the groups and the project in general.
8. Encouraging a level of analysis within the project about the development of the work and the wider social issues which the work was reflecting.
9. Exploring the nature of the working relationship with IMMA with a view to developing a meaningful long-term relationship.
10. Ensuring the evaluation of the project and model of practice. (Unspoken Truths, 1993, p. 62).

This is well thought out long-term thinking in its broadest sense. Many aspects are taken into consideration which contributed to the success of the project. It took time to come up with all that is written into these key features. Much collaboration and consultation went into drawing up these acute points. They are good reference points for community groups taking on projects of a similar nature in the future. There was a lot of groundwork covered and focal points put in place before ever starting the practical work involved in the project. This "groundwork" is something that I believe is not covered in many community art projects, but is of utmost importance. This part of any project whether it be art-based or not is the foundation of that project which can then and only

then be built upon and become a true realisation of a group's commitment, power and energy.

The artist Ailbhe Murphy who contributed so much to drawing out the women's stories and making them believe in their validity and importance had been "concerned with the exploration of physical change in inner city environments" (Ailbhe Murphy, 1993, p. 45). Not only was the artist concerned with this "physical change" but she felt she could not closely examine this change without including the people within this environment. This resulted in Ailbhe working with the women from these areas, getting to know them and how they felt about the destruction of the environment in which they grew up in and felt such a part of.

"The issue of the relationship between changes in the physical environment and the community was also being articulated by the groups I had met and through the activities of the community projects I was working with" (Ailbhe Murphy, 1993, p. 45).

Ailbhe was also interested in the idea of working "collaboratively" within a community. She felt her work and ideas had reached a point where she would benefit from this. Around this time Ailbhe attended a meeting at the IMMA where she discovered the museum's commitment and desire to encourage active participation from the surrounding communities and beyond. The museum encouraged artists to contribute to the development and exploration of these ideas. Ailbhe was one of those artists.

"The contacts within the community projects, the women and IMMA trigged the idea for Unspoken Truths. I welcomed the ongoing dialogue about the nature of arts practice that engaging with this wider group would present" (Ailbhe Murphy, 1993, p. 45).

Ailbhe wanted to create an environment where the women could explore different art mediums in order for them to express particular experiences. Both the artist and the women's relationship developed in tandem with their exploration of ideas and experiences. With this relationship grew a closeness to each other and a unique support structure amongst the women developed. The project established an internal dialogue which opened up channels of communication between all involved.

"I feel that these conversations were the most crucial aspect of the project" (Ailbhe Murphy, 1993, p. 45).

CHAPTER THREE
CRÍOS

October 1996 marked the beginning of an innovative project designed to integrate people with learning difficulties into mainstream second level education. Entitled "Interact" the project involved ten students aged between twenty and thirty who have learning difficulties and twenty, first year occupational therapy students at Trinity College, all working together with an emphasis on mutual learning.

The students with learning difficulties originated from St. John of Gods training centre at Dunmore House in Glenageary Dublin which provides training and employment opportunities for people with learning difficulties. Gerard Keane who is involved in training and work services at Dunmore House devised and is project co-ordinator of Interact.

"there has been alot of work done with learning difficulty at primary level, the challenge now is at second and even third level" (Foley, March 1996).

The students of this project were studying for the NCVA (National Council of Vocational Awards) foundation certificate which meant people with learning difficulties were being given the opportunity to get a mainstream certificate for the first time. The project was also designed so the OT students could work side by side with the Dunmore

House students. The NCVA course was built on a modular system. There were three compulsory modules:

1. Communications
2. Mathematics
3. Personal and social development

and six elective modules including computers, childcare and work orientation. The OT students took part in three of the modules, personal effectiveness, communications and art, craft and design.

As part of the art/craft/design module the OT students and the students from Dunmore house became involved in an art project at the Douglas Hyde Gallery Trinity college. It is this community art project that I will be discussing and analysing in this chapter of my thesis.

The community art project at the Douglas Hyde was entitled 'Críos'. Two well known Austrian artists, Christine and Irene Hohenbüchler worked with the group. Críos ran from March 15th to April 20th. In line with the ethos of interact the exhibition was supposed to, represent participation, interaction and interdependence among people with different abilities.

Siobhan McCobb is a lecturer at the School of Occupational Therapy at Trinity College Dublin.

> "With the arts, crafts and design module everyone works on a particular theme, for example we had mask making and everybody made their own masks. And in doing so explored the issue of self identity" (Foley, March 1996).

This is an example of some of the art/craft/design workshops which took place between OT students and students from Dunmore house before they became involved in Críos, the emphasis here being on collaboration between the two groups as part of the learning process.

For their own college course the OT students were required to submit a report on how they felt they were progressing within the project. They decided to do this in collaboration with the students from Dunmore House. They met and discussed the issue as a group and included an assessment of their own personal progress. There were many other instances of how the two groups worked on and talked both individually and together.

> "Its best for a teacher to eventually disappear, to be so unneeded that one's students disappear into the content of the material they think they are being taught - but which in actuality they are discovering and creating for themselves" (Richard Lewis, 1994, p. 46).

According to Gerard Keane the underlying principle of the project is 'self directed education'

> "Traditionally the approach is directed education in other words being told to do it this way and now. Due to the organisational needs it tends to be structured so people play a more passive role in their own learning process. With the self directed approach the teacher explores with each individual their learning style and draws from them what they want to learn" (Foley, March 1996).

While still in its infancy the Interact Project co-ordinators were overwhelmed by its success.

"We felt we were taking a risk initially but we have found the project has already gone way beyond where we had expected it to go" (Foley, March 1996).

The Dunmore House students had made amazing learning jumps and the OT students learned the meaning of being responsible for their own learning. The progress was not merely academic - there was a deeper learning achieved, self-esteem, motivation and confidence had all been remarkably changed. In this project the emphasis was not on the end results, the process was what it was about and personal development seen in both the Dunmore House students and the OT students was the proof of this.

It was in this positive, enthusiastic atmosphere that Críos came about. The Douglas Hyde Gallery were keen to become involved in a community-based art project preferably

with a marginalised group. At the same time the OT students and Dunmore House students were meeting regularly for their art workshops.

It only seemed natural for the Gallery to approach the school of occupational therapy at Trinity and put their suggestion forward. The department along with Siobhan McCobb and Gerard Keane from Dunmore House were delighted and full of enthusiasm with the idea.

The Hohenbüchler sisters were no strangers to working with minority groups. In a lot of their previous community based art projects the sisters worked with other minority groups such as prisoners, psychiatric patients and the mentally and physically handicapped.

The Hohenbüchler sisters are twins, born on the 3rd October, 1964. They grew up in the village of Eichgraben outside Vienna. They have another sister, Heidimarie with whom they have worked on previous occasions, for exhibitions at the ICA in London. Normally however, it is just the twins who work together. At first although both sisters were drawn to art, there was no notion that they should work together. Christine started in sculpture, Irene began in painting both "in a very traditional way".

"It was very good for us to study different things because in puberty up until we were nineteen or twenty there was a lot of competition between us. It was very negative" (Clancy, March, 1996).

Despite specialising in different areas, when the twins began exhibiting in 1988, they did so together. These days although the pair only show together, they live relatively separate lives. Christine has a flat in Berlin while Irene still lives near the village in which they grew up.

Though the twins consistently work with groups of institutionalised people, particularly those with learning disabilities but also prisoners and psychiatric patients they also maintain a career on the international gallery circuit, exhibiting at home in Vienna as well as Berlin, London and Amsterdam.

Because they work as a pair seldom making any distinction about who does what, their work becomes a microcosmic example of the tradition on which they draw. Often their work is made in 'natural materials' using traditional skills such as sewing, knitting and weaving. Their work involves crafts in which the author is not traditionally promoted.

"For us there is no distinction between art and craft, people are always trying to say that this is art and this is craft...., people need to make hierarchies" (Clancy, March, 1996).

Their work is often accused of being too close to craft, of not being art. They feel that people think high art is the work of a genius, somehow spiritual and intellectual and that craft is not like that.

The Hohenbüchlers seem to be more interested in a broader idea of culture rather than making distinctions which can create barriers. They attempt to break through the barriers of this art world in which they are involved, which can be very narrow minded. Why then are these artists involved at all?

> "I suppose we do it because it offers a certain freedom; and when we work with these people it offers them a certain freedom also. We would like the kind of thing these people are doing here to be seen as art too, not as some sort of therapeutic activity, these people have the problems we have too" (Clancy, March 1996).

The sisters are of course not alone in the contemporary art world in feeling this way. They say the inspiration for their practice came from a group of artists who work with people with learning disabilities in Austria.

It was here they first meat an organisation of artists which attempts to turn working with people with disabilities into something far more ambitious than art therapy.

'Críos' the project itself lasted for six weeks. For the first three weeks of the project students and artists worked in the gallery. For the second three they left the space so that the work could be exhibited in its own right. Upon visiting the first part I found that the domineering space of the gallery threatened to swallow up the modest works. Students and artists engrossed in their work and in interacting with one another seemed unconcerned with the viewer's examination of the scenario. Delicate hand looms

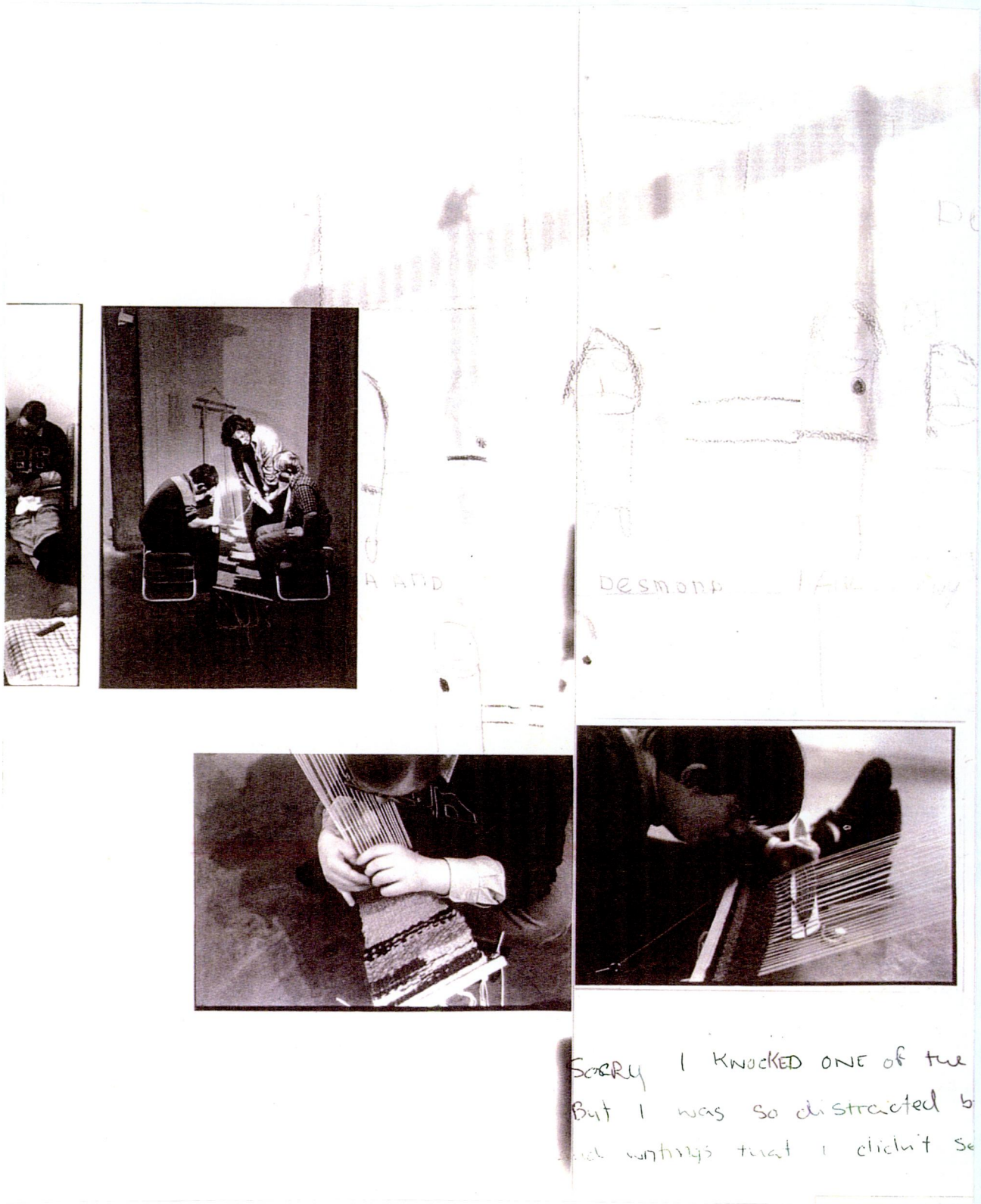
stretched from points in the wall to the floor were variously positioned around the gallery, their height facilitating manageable handweaving. Reaching to about five feet to the vast white walls were drawing of figures, jokes, references to family members, friends, pets, loves and hates. A lot of humour pervaded the drawing being the most revealing and expressive of the work in the show. This mark-making worked to map, feelings, observations and dialogue between the participants. Unfortunately they too were engulfed by the space and required close examination (see Figure 4).

Críos made visible an area of life which is normally hidden, that is, the work of adults with learning difficulties. It made gestures toward bringing the outside in, making public that which is often relegated to the private sphere. However, the work was contextualised in a way which amplified the gap between the outsiders and the insiders in society. The work went public before it could contemplate itself and decide its focus and direction.

The exhibition worked against that sense of purpose and intent associated with the art statements usually found in the Douglas Hyde and those very definite statements made by the artist involved. What was denied in Críos was the opportunity for the students to

Figure 4

Participants from 'Críos' The Douglas Hyde, 1996



exercise choice about what they would see and how it would be shown there was no collaboration with the participants no inclusion of their opinions as to how their work should be shown. This exclusive attitude is such a contradiction to the Hohenbüchlers statements.

The second part of the show worked better in that it suggested human presence with cushions and stools beside each loom. The body distanced from the work left the art objects to function as artifact.

The story ends up being the story of power, not a representation of the lived reality of people with learning difficulties.

"In Críos the participants became part of the display controlled by the fixing context of the gallery surrendering to objectification in the eyes of reason, the perfect strange remains perfectly strange" (Tynan, 1996, p. 61).

CHAPTER FOUR

THE INVOLVEMENT OF MUSEUM AND GALLERY

Museums and galleries play a vital part in arts in the community. Many galleries in the United Kingdom have revolutionised their community service within the last two decades in response to community pressure. In Dublin out of our four galleries (the Irish Museum of Modern Art, the Douglas Hyde Gallery, the National Gallery, the Hugh Lane Gallery) two of them have community services. The Hugh Lane and the Irish Museum of Modern Art are developing community interests in their collections through workshops, leaving certificate art, college and adult education classes.

There has been a broadening or orientation to the communities they serve and an overall change in policy and finance to accommodate the new approach. Today galleries are generally more active in seeking collaboration, consultation and involvement from within their communities, not just in empowering people to use what is on offer, but to include more discussion and understanding about what is art and how it can be displayed and portrayed.

The Irish Museum of Modern Art has been involving itself with their neighbouring communities and also in working with young artists from these communities. Workshops encourage looking, discussing, questioning, making, criticising, skill sharing and development. This interdependent relationship between so-called active and passive

involvement in art, blurs the distinction between traditional and new activities. The gallery and its resources, access to practising artists and staff skills, secondary sources such as films, books, catalogues and equipment are all part of the participative environment. Working with the community does not mean targeting only disadvantaged groups or other groups according to social status, income bracket and ability, it means integrating groups and interests. It means planning collaboration in ways that address the working environment, finding common links between creative training in the arts and in business.

Barriers need to be broken down not just between communities and the arts but between the arts and the non-arts world.

> "There is the need for respect from the 'established' art world, both artists and galleries alike. The fact that work produced by the community is called 'community art' means that it is art, not perhaps of any commercial value, nor always with the professional finish or perfected materials, but art which is made with pure personal power, with whatever materials are at hand. This art is equal in visual content to that of any other artistic object" (Konig, 1994, p.46).

Galleries, theatres and orchestras have it within their power to provide access, not only to the products of creative endeavour but to the people who create.

Who are these people? Are they all professional graduates? How do they make a living? How does one become an artist? Am I an artist?

Rita Fagan, one of the participants from Unspoken Truths asks similar questions.

> "The museum became a challenge in the positive sense because it challenged the FRC to ask questions and develop its thinking around the arts and who gets to participate, who gets to benefit from such institutions. By what criteria is national culture decided? How do you become an artist? Who gets to be an artist and why? Is art neutral? Does it have a responsibility to the wealthy, does it have a responsibility to the socially excluded, Travellers, women, the unemployed, youth and children, who decides"? (Fagan, 1993, p. 48).

These are difficult questions, questions galleries and museums can help to answer. They provide contact with artists, art students, art teachers and with a wide variety of groups not participating in formal arts education.

Galleries and museums can make people's participation in the arts a real challenge as it allows people to articulate their perspective. For cultural democracy to exist, cultural policy must include the creation of a condition in which the people as a whole participate in the articulation of meaning and values. Art is political, it is not neutral, it has a responsibility.

IMMA has made it a central concern for itself to give its audiences a variety of opportunities for coming close to the process, of making art, both in the physical and conceptual sense. Highlighting how and why an artist works makes possible the feeling of being closer to what is made, and the ability to participate.

The following are some key features of the IMMA regarding community arts projects:

1. The experience gathered by its staff, over many years prior to IMMA's opening, of working in the arts in a broad spectrum of situations and with a wide range of publics.

2. A commitment to developing programmes which access IMMA's resources, skills and assets, which result in raising awareness of and a greater engagement in the visual arts.

3. A support structure for artists working on projects in relation to the museum, which would include artists who wish to work collaboratively.

4. A clear understanding of the aims and objectives of the project and of how to develop the museum's role as interactive with the project.

5. Identifying ways forward for the artwork in the project and encouraging the participants in that process.

6. Encouraging a level of analysis within the project which questioned very carefully the reasons for making and exhibiting the work.

7. A desire to develop a greater understanding of principles which inform the work of the community development projects.

8. Exploring the nature of the working relationship with the community development projects, with a view to developing a meaningful and long-term relationship. (O'Donoghue, 1993, p. 63).

Unspoken Truths creates a forum for IMMA. It reflects a true community work approach involving both a process which is described as including instruction, analysis and discussion, and a product or outcome, which cannot be reduced to the exhibition alone, important though it is. The product is also the individual and collective outcomes for all involved, some of which through their ongoing work in association with the exhibition they have graciously shared with us. "One of the very clear messages that Unspoken Truths speaks for me is that the process and product is about excellence and the struggle for excellence" (Crickley, 1993, p. 80).

There is a clear message regarding the struggle for excellence and understanding. Crickley continues.... "it is far too easy for working class and marginalised and sectoral community groups to be patronised by the arts world, metaphorically patted on the head for managing to produce drama/art, etc..." (Crickley, 1993, p. 80).

People are conned with thinking that they have been accepted whereas what is going on is a new slightly more sophisticated process of marginalisation. Excellence requires more than just a passing fad, more than a verbose acknowledgement of connecting arts and the wider community as flavour of the month. This means "the arts sector learning about community work so that the term community is more than just a tag on which to hang community arts and it means the community sector becoming more familiar with, experiencing and learning about the arts" (Crickly, 1993, p. 80).

Working towards a worthwhile fusion of participants, artists and gallery, requires consistency and long-term commitment and effort which if in place will stretch well beyond the project or its exhibition, as Unspoken Truths demonstrates.

It is this consistency and long-term commitment which was missing from Críos. To the students of Dunmore House this may not have been particularly evident. There is no denying that the students got a lot from being part of the project and since then are regular visitors to the Douglas Hyde. But for a gallery to take on such a project as Críos without adequate resources, preparation or experience, can I think do more damage than good. A gallery should be aware of its limitations. There was damage caused and it is very evident in Gerard Keanes (co-ordinator of training from Dunmore House) and Siobhán MacCobbs (from the school of occuaptional therapy in Trinity College Dublin) evaluation of the project and their attitude towards the "real world art" and community art projects since their participation in Críos.

> "If you were to ask me was I happy; I wasn't; I was very unhappy with the way the project went, if I were to partake again I would trust my own judgement from a much earlier stage. We had presumed there would be regular meetings between all involved; to discuss and tease out a theme; what the participants wanted; what approach should be taken, etc. But the sisters had already decided what the project was going to be about. They had drawings of how they wanted the exhibition to look before the project even started. The Hohenbüchlers had a preset idea about the students from Dunmore House, they talked about inclusivness and group participation but this never happened" (Berkeley, 1996).

Siobhán MacCobb is equally dissatisfied,

> "It was as if the Hohenbüchlers were two angels who came and touched the light of these poor people. There are not poor people, they certainly come from a different social experience, but they are not poor. The sisters didn't understand what we were doing as professionals, which was for the group to become more in tune with themselves as people, to explore issues around learning and the notion of staff-directed learning. The project went in a very different direction as to how we though it would go" (Berkeley, 1996).

John Hutchenson paints a very different picture of the project,

> "The Hohenbüchlers were very interested in weaving both as a craft and as a metaphor for bringing things together, being able to integrate different personalities; different aspects; different elements; so it was a metaphor of unity in which nobody lost their individuality; everything was brought together in a wonderful tapestry of life" (Berkeley, 1996).

It seems to me that the Douglas Hyde's true priorities and gallery policies lie elsewhere. To become involved in a project like Críos simply because it is 'politically correct' is a totally inadequate reason to do so. A gallery cannot and should not put a project in place

and expect positive outcomes without the adequate resources or experience necessary to do so.

The Douglas Hyde sees itself as a gallery which caters for those of us with a particular interest in 'real art' . John Hutchenson seems quite content with this and sees it as the role of others to involve themselves with communities and community art projects.

> "I'm cautious about our involvement in community art for many reasons partly because IMMA in its current incarnation has made community art a centerpiece of its own activities and beyond that places like the City Arts Centre have made it a central part of their platform, while I think it's something we have to take on board, as an aspect of current arts practice, it isn't something that hugely concerns me" (Berkeley, 1996).

If this is the case I do not think galleries like the Douglas Hyde should become involved with community art projects, for the sake of being able to wave the banner of participation. If a gallery, museum, or any institution decides to take on such an endeavour as Críos well and good. But they should be aware and be prepared for the huge task they have set themselves. The question arises whether galleries like these see themselves as "a new type of missionary moving in on working class communities and others in order to save their creative souls" (Duddy, 1994, p. 64).

This is an attitude that I believe could quite easily come about if it has not already been adopted by certain quarters of the art world. Galleries and museums must become aware that these communities that they are 'moving in on' have a culture of their own, a vibrant,

strong culture. People who live in regional or inner city communities are not as isolated, ideologically or structurally, as certain galleries and community arts policy-makers seem to think. In reality however, the sorts of marginalised communities which lend themselves to community art projects are indeed trapped within a complex social structure. To say that they have been marginalised in not to say that they are virtually outside society but that they are a long way from the centres of powerful or profitable decision-making. The people who live in these communities 'know' that art and culture exist. They know how to identify a cultured person just as they know how to identify a wealthy, powerful or privileged person. They know how the cultured, the wealthy and the powerful speak, behave and live and that is not how they themselves speak, behave and live. They have their own way of speaking, behaving, living, dressing, they have their own musical tastes, their own humour. Their own way of life, their own culture. The collective knowing of such self-deprecatory things is part of what it means to be disadvantaged, underprivileged, poor, unemployed, even working class.

The trouble is that people who already feel alienated from the official art world, who already feel intimidated by the prospect of mastering the techniques and materials and concepts of that world, may feel equally intimidated by the cultural activists who wants them to partake in local community art projects. Given the aesthetic ideologies that flourish in the minds of the officially cultured as much as in the minds of the officially uncultured, this sort of local, communal improvisational approach may itself prove frustrating and disappointing rather than enabling and liberating.

"What surely must be avoided are the sort of projects which may turn out to be a source of grief to all those 'ordinary' people who have great expectations of becoming artists in some wholly, unofficial, unconventional and barely recognisable sense of the term" (Duddy, 1994, p. 66).

CONCLUSION

There are many complexities in the relationship between museums and communities. For many communities, alienation and exclusion make such a relationship extremely difficult to develop in the first place. While for others, museums offer enrichment, fulfillment and opportunities to reinforce their views of their own role, status and position. Duncan Cameron, writing in 1971, distinguishes between two different perspectives of the museum, as temple or as forum.

Although there has been considerable evolution in discussions about museums since then, his thinking is useful both in considering the links, or lack of them, between museums and communities and in looking at the way the IMMA relates to local communities.

As temple, according to Cameron "the museum plays a timeless and universal function, the use of a structured sample of reality, not just as a reference but as an objective model against which to compare individual perceptions" (Cameron, 1971, p. 34).

As a forum on the other hand, Cameron says "the museum is a place for confrontation, experimentation and debate" (Cameron, 1971, p. 34).

In this way the museum challenges rather than reinforces and opens up new directions rather than merely restating the status quo. In the 1990's the new popular perception of

the museum is as a forum but forum for whom? For the elite who previously saw it as their temple or for those who are so often the target of its objects d'art. Who gets the chance to discuss?

Unspoken Truths demonstrates some possibilities for the forum, as a place of confrontation, experimentation and debate. The women from St. Michaels estate and the north inner city have demonstrated to use the possibilities for excellence in art when appropriate resources and support are made available. Unfortunately these appropriate resources and supports were not put in place for the duration of Críos.

The work from Unspoken Truths is a major challenge to the entire arts establishment in terms of who gets resourced to produce art and how they get sourced. The IMMA deserves acclaim for creating the conditions for this challenge.

The process of Críos demonstrates a different way of getting people with learning difficulties involved in community art and learning about themselves and others. Críos was a very innovative idea but lacked the resources and commitment to see that idea through to realising its full potential. As an idea it should be approached again not as a superficial attempt to do something radical, but as a genuine belief in the potential of that idea and all involved.

Community art is about analysis of social and economic situations and collective action to bring about social and personal change. Unspoken Truths and Críos brought social and personal change to those involved. Community art is also about justice, participation and the right of people, particularly the marginalised, to make collective decisions regarding their lives.

It is clear that Unspoken Truths worked for all of those involved and indeed the women to this day still feel the benefits. At all stages the work seems to have been interrogated. Allowing progress to be made, it built consciously and unconsciously a reservoir of shared values, both spoken and unspoken. In short, while art was the occasion of their work the true subject matter was the people themselves.

"In an age when art practice seems often out of touch with culture, Unspoken Truths was an exceptional art project, and not 'merely' a successful community art project" (Drury, 1993, p. 84).

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John Hutchenson, Director of the Douglas Hyde Gallery.

Gerard Keane, Training Co-ordinator at Dunmore House.

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