

WOODS AND WORDS – 100 BOOKS a public art project

Devised and facilitated by Kathy Marsh
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I wanted to do a community art project, to work with a variety of people. Each person would play a key part in the production of the group's own social sculpture. This would take the form of a site-specific installation. I initially approached Newry Volunteer Bureau. They had previously launched a program called 'Connections' along with the organisations NIPPA, NMHSST and the Senior Citizens Consortium. The scheme embraced the idea of bringing generations together through the medium of storytelling. I proposed that we could creatively engage senior citizens and children in the collaborative production of their own books. These would be a combination of text and images, a fusion of narrative reality and visual fantasy. Senior citizens provided stories, moments and

incidents from their lives. The children brought the text to life by employing a variety of art forms.



In the first workshop with the children, they were given disposable cameras. I wanted to base the sculpture in a local nature park, to do a site-specific work. Like adventurers and explorers, they roamed around the park taking photographs from a multitude of angles.



In the following workshop, the children and senior citizens met up. They began to share stories and arrange the artwork around them. While the two groups worked together extracts of text were read aloud by a local poet, this provided a stimulating atmosphere. Over the following months I continued to gather stories and conduct further workshops with community groups and children in the Newry and Mourne area.

The books are all about human existence. Anonymous yet personal, they are funny, sad, insightful, ironic, uplifting- all works of art in themselves. Although every book is unique, they are not separate entities. They are part of and belong to a larger group entity. Enacting, writing about or drawing a memory makes it part of a new and shared event in the present. It then becomes a memory belonging to the group as well as to the individual. Fragments converge to make a whole.

The 'Connections' program was about bringing people together. We wanted the books to be shared and enjoyed by the public, for the stories and imagery to resonate and be passed on. By installing the books in the park, a place populated by people, it further emphasised the social aspect of the artwork. People came together as a consequence of it.



The books were hung on tree branches, we transformed the park into an outdoor library. A place of wonder. Normally you would walk through the park, admire the view, sit on a bench etc. In doing a site specific/outdoor artwork, you are changing the nature of the space you are in. Taking 'normal' reality, twisting and tearing it slightly. From the Glen stream up to the park cafe, trees along the pathway are laced with books. Going on this interactive journey- reading, flicking through pages, browsing with strangers, carrying on and stopping, being part of the installation- you are negotiating the human balance between art and life.





The artwork was ephemeral. The biodegradable books were intended to fade and disappear over time. They were at the mercy of environmental and human elements. A social sculpture reflects all elements of society- positive, negative, creative, destructive, playful, anarchic. As well as reflecting the positive, as anticipated the installation reflected the negative elements of society. All of the books were prematurely ripped from the trees.

'Woods and Words' demonstrates a crossover between art and social science. The 'magical' library which was installed in the park was free from social control. There were no librarians, no bureaucracy, no security. As a social experiment it offers a community portrait. It succeeds in showing the breakdown of the self-organization of a community that created, used and then abused it's own unique outdoor library. Subsequently, the community managed to retrieve around 50 books that had been scattered in the park. Their actions extended the life of the artwork, the final stage of the social sculpture took the pure form of an single sculptural piece in the town centre.



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