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A volunteer standing on *Populloss 3* in the Depaul tent at Electric Picnic 2010. The work was made by artist Alan Mongey in collaboration with Depaul service users.

PROFILE

Life's no Picnic on the Streets

SEÁN O SULLIVAN PROFILES LIFE'S NO PICNIC ON THE STREETS, A COLLABORATIVE ART PROJECT ORGANISED BY VOLUNTEERS FROM DEPAUL IRELAND, HOSTED AT THE ELECTRIC PICNIC, CO. LAOIS.



Alan Mongey standing on *Populloss 3* made in collaboration with service users in numerous Depaul services, Electric Picnic 2010.



Sinead Curran doing last minute adjustments to her artwork *Hall of Mirrors* in collaboration with service user Peter Kelly, Electric Picnic 2010.

THERE are some precedents of artists working with homeless people and the subject of homelessness, and moreover, exploring the tangle of ethical issues that it entails. For example, in *Le Mots de Paris*, a collaborative art project that took place in Paris in late 2000, Jochen Gerz installed a large glass surface into the paving outside of Notre Dame's famous cathedral. He inscribed it with a series of brief, powerful sentiments quoted from interviews with people who lived on the city's streets, the inscriptions were punctuated by a discrete coin slot at the glass base. Gerz felt that this would encourage contributions to the lives of the city's poorest people from visitors and tourists. The artist and his collaborators sought to challenge the normal public perception of their social roles. Gerz presented the street people as the co-authors of a fluent work of visual art, prominently placed in one of Paris' most visited historical environments. But more importantly, the group as a whole shifted the relationship between the Parisian public and the street people, addressing principally, the perception of value.^[1]

This year The Electric Picnic worked with Dublin-based charity Depaul Ireland, and their group of volunteer artists to produce Life's No Picnic on the Streets, a collaborative arts project aimed at highlighting the difficulties faced by Ireland's homeless. Social status is something of a *raison d'être* for collaborative practice, whether in the simple analysis of finding one's place in the world or the more intricate issues surrounding the reach of the public sphere. For the individual artist, extending personal art practice into a group is a proficient way of refining the process of art production, and for Depaul Ireland, the ultimate benefit of collaborative practice is that it can teach its service users a range of skills that are distinct to the arts.^[2]

Depaul focuses primarily on harm-reduction for those whom other social organisations are unable to work with, including people with problems stemming from addiction, mental illness, incarceration, self-harm and domestic violence. Depaul was active in Great Britain from 1989 onwards, it now functions in Slovakia, Ukraine, the United States and in 2002, it expanded to twelve locations between Dublin and Belfast, providing just over three hundred beds each night.

Depaul is staffed by Event Coordinator Ria Flom, Public Relations Officer Nicola Jordan and CEO Kerry Antony MBE. I spoke with Paraic McQuaid, Depaul's artistic co-ordinator for Life's No Picnic and a lecturer in Cultural Policy at IADT, Dún Laoghaire. He explained the group's approach of harm-reduction, which might entail allowing a

service user to drink, but in a managed setting, where regular eating and social interaction are given high priority.^[4]

This is the third year that the Electric Picnic has hosted Life's No Picnic on the Streets. Throughout its seven-year history, the Laois based arts and music festival has accumulated a strong record of support for artist's initiatives. This year Depaul Ireland transported a truck full of cardboard and wooden palettes to the festival's 'Mindfield' area, and built an exhibition space inside a large marquee. In 2009, the group outfitted their marquee with false walls, a hard floor, and painted it to replicate the feel of a gallery. Life's No Picnic enjoys a closed audience, who are keenly aware of the weekend's cultural slant. Last year, the exhibition attracted over 5,000 visitors—an impressive degree of exposure for a volunteer-based venture.

Volunteer visual artists and the larger group of service users associated with Depaul Ireland produced a series of collaborations and installed their major works throughout the entire Stradbally Estate. These included Sinead Curran and Peter Kelly's *Hall of Mirrors*, a corridor of distorted mirrors built around a tree, one of which displayed a video of the service users. Alan Mongey's *Populloss 3*, produced with six of Depaul's homeless service users, featured a random placement of five hundred original figurines that the audience could either retrieve or ignore.

Fiona Walsh and the residents of Dublin's Tus Nua Apartments produced *Recast*, a series of human figure casts that were backlit at night. Service user Peter Kelly has taken fervently to visual art, and with the help of Katherine Sankey and Sinead Curran, installed his work *Can Tree*, a discarded Christmas tree, painted white and decorated with a series of brightly painted beer cans. Paraic McQuaid explained "The piece is supposed to be tongue-in-cheek but also has a poignant resonance because Peter has chronic alcohol problems which contributed to his homelessness."

For the service users, the success of Life's No Picnic on the Streets relies heavily on artists who can generate a critically strong result and inform the thinking of the service users in equal measure. A collaboration that fails to attend to both requirements is bound to eventually disappoint. Paraic McQuaid mentioned that the Depaul service users tended to hold back crucial events in their lives when talking with counsellors. However, in theatre workshops, when challenged to act out scenarios that mattered to them, the service users

were far more open about their respective pasts, and as a result became used to airing sensitive experiences that had never previously come to the surface. The Depaul coordinators initially worried that dealing with such difficult material would end badly, but the service users insisted on continuing to take real-life scenarios into the work, as this was proving more creatively useful, and offered a greater sense of personal value and attachment.

Life's No Picnic on the Streets is grant aided by Dublin City Council, Create Ireland and Pod Concerts. Create Ireland is this country's only dedicated patron of the collaborative arts, the organisation offers a rough annual total of €80,000 in project awards and bursaries, which they receive from the Arts Council. They split this amount to fund between four and six major projects and between ten and fifteen research projects each year. Create accepts a limited selection of proposals—funding for collaborative arts in Ireland takes only a very small part of the Arts Council's budget—but crucially, the group offers advice and engagement with groups who are seeking to organise collaborative work. Depaul receives financial support from Pod Concerts, the company that runs the festival, who were happy with the standard of work and are hoping to keep Life's No Picnic as an annual fixture. In 2008 and 2009, Pod underwrote the cost of with renting and constructing the festival marquee, for which prices can easily run into five digits.

Local authorities are a perennially strong source of support for work undertaken by groups like Depaul. Local arts offices are answerable to county managers as much as the Arts Council, and tend to seek out programs that have tangible value for communities, along with a high quality of artistic accomplishment. McQuaid noted of these issues, "There is something very different about an artist going out and deciding to work with a community because it ties in with the interests of their practice when compared to an artist applying to work on a predetermined relationship of arts organisation with community. There are artists who work within a community context in Ireland and produce art of 'excellence' but cannot get support to do so. This is something that should be addressed."^[4]

Depaul Ireland usually requires around twenty volunteers to run a project at the scale of Life's No Picnic on the Streets, but the organisation's most pressing directive is managed outside of the spotlight, in support groups and workshops that are held throughout the year with social workers, counsellors visual artists and theatre directors.

These groups would certainly subscribe to the idea of the 'ethical relation', the value and results that the facilitators can claim as their own are offset by the opportunities for personal growth and development available to service users. This is augmented heavily by the fact that service users are by no means easy to work with; a Sundial House staff member noted, "many do not behave positively in groups and as a result argue frequently and fight for attention by being the loudest present and displaying challenging behaviour. The art workshops have made being in a group easier and given them skills to get on with each other in a group in a positive way, [...] staff have noticed that they tell their life stories in pictures and communicate experiences they have never spoken about."

In a very meaningful way, collaborative practice seeks to exclude an individual from controlling the process of artistic realisation, de-normalising the notion of the individual as the best possible creative source, sharing research methods, and offering a challenging necessity for negotiation and flexibility.^[3] McQuaid concluded our interview on this point, "there is not a lot of training out there for artists relating to the sensitivities and values necessary to work in a collaborative capacity with a community group." The personal resources required for this sort collaborative practice are extensive, but to those who find their individual practice to be in flux, whatever the cause, volunteering might not be a bad idea.

Life's No Picnic on the Streets is initiated by Depaul Ireland, and took place as part of the Electric Picnic Festival, Sept 3 – 5 2010, Stradbally Hall, Co. Laois.

Seán O Sullivan

Notes

1. <http://www.depaulireland.org/>
2. Jochen Gerz, *Le Mots de Paris*, <http://www.gerz.fr/>
3. Mark Dunhill and Tamiko O'Brien, *Collaborative Practice and the Fine Art Curriculum*, <http://collabarts.org/?p=205>
4. Information for this article was provided by Paraic McQuaid, in a series of conversations with the author, between 17 August 2010 and 3 September 2010.
5. Information for this article was provided by staff from Sundial House, in an interview with the author on 31 August 2010.