

THE AMULET: A DEVOTIONAL OBJECT

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*"I do not want you to know the pain of infant loss.
I do not want to feel alone in this place"*

*Louise O'Connor (Foott)
Anamnesis, 2013*

Perhaps the most poignant part of the permanent collection at London's Foundling Museum is the large number of 'foundling tokens' that nineteenth century mothers giving up their babies pinned to their clothes in order to help identify them. Often items such as coins, buttons, medals or ribbons, the tokens were never passed on to the children linked to them, and now these seemingly arbitrary objects are the holders of long-gone memories, acting as catalyst objects for the visitor's experience of the Museum's history.

Objects like these are freighted with a depth of emotion and meaning impossible to articulate by those who bestowed them on their lost children. Talisman-like, they also convey other meanings. For archaeologists and ethnographers, such items appear in many forms across myriad cultures, representing lost loved ones, symbolizing ancestors, or as grave goods accompanying the dead on their journey to the afterlife. Their potency, when representing a loss as well as a life, is familiar to us; they have been used throughout human history to embody memory after death.

In Ireland's post-Medieval Christian culture however, there have been no systems of memorializing lives that are not officially 'recognized'. That is, infants who have died at birth or during pregnancy. These infants have not traditionally been remembered with the same rites and rituals that babies who lived long enough to be baptized, and totems of memory are usually absent from their stories.

It was this void in the Irish tradition of grief and mourning that provided the starting point for Marie Brett's *Anamnesis*¹ exhibition, a collaborative art work that has involved artists, bereaved parents, health workers, and those working with the bereaved. In this environment, those contributing to *The Amulet Project* in the period of research and

¹ *Anamnesis*, from the Greek, 'recollection'

reflection that preceded the exhibition shared their experiences of birth, pregnancy loss and infant death, working with Brett over a number of years.

The fact of this type of loss of a child is not a recent phenomenon, but rather one that Irish society is beginning to recognize as it slowly separates itself from the stays of dominant Catholic religious convention. In the past, unbaptized babies would be quietly buried in *cillíní*, unofficial burial grounds often located in disused churchyards or on the literal margins of settlements, away from the sanctioned graveyards.

This veil of silence over the loss of such children has meant that historically, those mourning them had no sanctioned focal point or associated rites to manage the grieving process, which in Catholic Ireland has a distinct and ritualized structure. Anatomizing these rituals, ethnographer Lawrence Taylor describes the Irish way of death and mourning as having phases that are both in and out of the purview of the church, which while seemingly disparate, complement one another and contribute to the liminal phase of acceptance of the loss.² He also notes the importance of the 'devotional object' that is created to remember the loved one, the printed memorial card that is given to family and friends in the year after the death depicting a photograph of the deceased. This becomes an important signifier of the event, and is kept close by the bereaved.

It is this framework of ritual and memory that is called to mind with Brett's work in *Anamnesis*, where the objects that make up the work, or the *Amulets*, have been created to act as what one project collaborator describes as an "unmet commemorative need". These ordinary items, much like the foundling tokens, become something else. The *Amulets* are shown to us in photographs and are modest items. They are mainly recognizable as relating to an infant, although some are not: a tiny crocheted jacket, a card in an envelope, a model of a butterfly. Amulets are held to have supernatural protective power, so too are these objects transformed into containers for remembrance.

While positioned as collaborative and/or participatory art, unlike much of the current canon, this is work that is ultimately engaged with not by active participation – that phase of this project has now passed – but through quiet contemplation. Brett's practice often employs this approach, using stylized museum-like displays that disseminate information and objects in a setting that brings to mind the fastidious taxonomic arrangements of artifacts in a Victorian cabinet of curiosities. This familiar visual terrain invites the viewer to engage intimately with the work, yet also, in the context of socially engaged contemporary art practice, allows the artist to mediate the work into a form that can be accessed by a diverse public.

In her essay, *The Social Turn*³, Claire Bishop describes the rising of demands made upon participatory art, where ideas around social inclusion and the rhetoric of community have contributed to modes of art production that demand group activity in order to acquire the right kind of 'good' social and creative capital.

While Bishop observes that the increasing politicization of collective working – in as much as publicly funded work can be said to be independently 'political' – offers a foil to prevailing neoliberal agendas, sometimes work can evolve from the position of more

² Taylor, Lawrence J. "Bás InEirinn: Cultural constructions of death in Ireland." *Anthropological quarterly* (1989): p175-187.

³ Bishop, Claire. "The social turn: collaboration and its discontents." *Artforum* 44, no. 6 (2005): 178.

esoteric social needs. So it is also with Marie Brett's emotionally charged *The Amulet Project*.

To present work that engages so directly with particular participants to an audience no longer invited to contribute can be problematic in some contexts. There is also the danger of what Grant Kester refers to as the "orthopedic" or corrective relationship to the audience"⁴ (where the artist offers the 'remedy' to salve a social ill), here Brett has undertaken a significant extended research period involving developing significant relationships with her collaborators before collectively making the work. The research phase of participation required Brett to broach the barrier of unspoken grief attending pregnancy and birth infant loss, and to attempt to 'translate' sentiment into something physical.

In this way, the work embodied by Anamnesis contributes to a broader domain - Ireland's material culture around death and dying. The *Amulets* are new objects to add to those that we already recognize as denoting the loss of a human life, from coffins to memorial cards, wreaths and grave markers.

Like the production of the memorial card that follows the funeral, the resulting body of work answers a need: a recognized standing for pregnancy loss and infant death in a country with a strongly formalized tradition of mourning and grieving that nevertheless has omitted, until now, to include a discrete sector of its people.

January 2015

⁴ Kester, Grant H., "Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Contemporary Art", University of California Press, 20014/13 p.XVI,.