

ARTS PROJECTS IRELAND
Margaret O'Sullivan

A multitude of butterflies

Report of an Evaluation

The Amulet

A Collaborative Art Project led by Marie Brett

Evaluation Report Commissioned by: The Amulet Steering Group

Evaluation conducted by: Margaret O'Sullivan

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SECTION ONE

1. INTRODUCTION:

In this introduction, the background to the Amulet project is outlined, and the purpose of this evaluation is briefly summarised. The report is compiled based on a range of sources, which are described in detail below as part of a description of the methodology utilised in the reporting process.

This report sets out to capture the feedback of the participant-collaborators in the Amulet process.

Section one is designed to provide a comprehensive background to the project thereby documenting the project stages and providing an insight into the development process.

1.1 BACKGROUND TO EVALUATION

The Amulet project is the second phase of a process that began with a research phase in Cork University Maternity Hospital. This evaluation was commissioned by the Steering Group to record the second or production phase of The Amulet, and to capture and reflect on the experiences of the artist, the participants and the project group.

The Amulet is a natural progression in the work of the artist, Marie Brett, whose work largely takes place in Arts + Health contexts, with a particular interest in exploring ideas of ambiguous loss.

1.2 PURPOSE OF EVALUATION:

This evaluation is designed to provide a record of The Amulet project. It will also provide a platform for the voices of the participant-collaborators in the documentation of the project. Combining the participants' feedback with a range of other sources outlined below, the evaluation is framed by a set of indicators provided by Create and the Steering Group, outlined in Section Two of this report.

1.3 METHODOLOGY/PROCESS

This evaluation report draws on a range of sources as follows:

- A review of relevant literature, including previous project research, commissioned essays included in the Anamnesis booklet, Amulet funding applications which set out project proposal and aims, and relevant Create documentation accessed via www.create-ireland.ie

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- A general overview of relevant public literature, including Arts Council documentation, CUMH/WHAT literature, and critical essays and documentation of collaborative, participatory, or dialogic approaches to art-making
- the artist's own notes and writings, including co-authored pieces with collaborators
- Semi-structured individual interviews conducted by phone and in person with participants, members of steering committee, and the artist

1.4 SCOPE OF EVALUATION

The evaluation provides an objective overview of the project, based on primary material gathered from participants combined with information drawn from literature and resources outlined above. The evaluation scale and scope was determined by limitations of both time and funding resources, as well as the sensitivity of the subject matter due to the experience of loss of the participants. The geographical spread of the individual participants meant that most of the interviews were conducted by phone, and all respondents gave most generously of their time. Most importantly this project aims to provide a comprehensive overview of The Amulet project. It is not a critique of the work, but a documentation of the process of artist and participant working together, the 'what' and the 'how' of The Amulet project.

1.5 REPORT OUTLINE

This section outlines the layout and shape of the report. Section One introduces the project, setting out the background to its development and emergence in the process of the artist's work, the purpose of this evaluation and the methodology and approach to gathering material for it, as well as addressing issues of scope and scale. Section Two is a description of the Amulet process, and attempts to document the 'hidden' processes within the work of the artist and collaborators. Section Three is a discussion of the collaborative process in a broader context, while also addressing the artist's intention to create an ethical collaboration with a community of shared experience. Section Four documents the voices of the participants under the themes emerging from semi-structured interviews conducted by phone and in person. Section Five draws a conclusion to the evaluation process within the frame of the artistic indicators and the emerging themes of the primary source material, the participants' voices.

SECTION TWO

2.1 THE AMULET PROJECT DESCRIBED

The nature of the collaboration between the artist and individual participants is outlined in this section of the evaluation report. Effective documentation of the project requires a thick description of the 'invisible' layers of process laid down throughout the research phase, built upon throughout the planning of the production phase, and in the resulting contact, collaboration, communication and creation of the art-works, leading to the Anamnesis exhibitions and culmination of the Amulet project. Through this comprehensive description I will attempt to document the 'hidden' process of collaboration between the artist and the participant, as described by the participants and the artist. The aim is to provide a comprehensive record of the Amulet project in all its dimensions. Finally this section of the report will set out the indicators agreed by Create with the artist and project manager regarding the evaluation of the Amulet Project. These indicators will acts as a frame through which to view the data gathered in the process of writing this report.

2.2 TIMELINE

The Amulet project took place over three years from 2010 to summer 2013. The following table provides a timeline of the project from the initial conception through to completion of the exhibition and associated events.

Amulet Timeline		
Dates	Project Phase	Outcomes
2010/2011	Research Phase	Evaluation Report by artist outlines a range of outcomes, including clear potential for progression to a further creative phase of art-led exploration
February 2012	Amulet Production Stage	Production of collaborative project 'The Amulet' in partnership with Cork University Maternity Hospital, Waterford Healing Arts Trust, The Midwestern Regional Maternity Hospital, Limerick, with Arts Council of Ireland support via Create AIC realisation award.

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March 7 th 2013	Anamnesis Exhibition and related events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anamnesis exhibition opening at Sirius Arts Centre, Cobh, Co. Cork • The Amulet Collaboration: A Journey of Trust Seminar, Crawford Gallery of Art, Cork • Private viewing of exhibition for participants and their families
April 23 rd to May 3 rd 2013		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anamnesis exhibition, Waterford Healing Arts Trust, Index Gallery, Waterford City Library • Public interview, April 24th

OUTPUTS

- Evaluation: Research Phase
- The Amulet Book
- Anamnesis Exhibition
- Anamnesis - Related publication featuring commissioned essays by Annette Moloney, Louise O'Connor (Foott), JMK, Edelle Nolan, Jenny Butler
- 2 X Public Seminars and Talks discussion events
- Video documentary of seminar held on March 7th, 2013 at Crawford Art Gallery
- Written response to discussion event, held in WHAT. Public Interview: April 24th 2013
- Radio Documentary by Giant Leap Productions. Broadcast on Dublin City FM in April 2013, and on Youghal Community Radio - Wed 24th April 2013, 9.00pm.
- Further plans for exhibition touring and related events

2.3 RESEARCH

The research phase of the Amulet project had three main aims:

- to explore ideas, reaction and influence stemming from the notion of using amulets for babies;
- to explore the site of the maternity hospital as a place of significance for mothers/families and how this is or perhaps could be marked;
- to research what support might be available for a project at CUMH from within hospital site.

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The outcomes of the research phase have already been documented and evaluated in a report by the artist. However, key outcomes included the development of relationships of trust and the necessary supports for further artistic development, as well as providing a basis for further exploration of the concept of the Amulet.

The research phase revealed considerable support from within the hospital for further development of the Amulet project, and provided key learning outcomes in relation to approaches to participatory methodologies for the artist, as well as highlighting potential issues that might impact on the success of any project in this particular setting. Most significantly the research led to an exploration of 'The Amulet' as a creative response to the issue of pregnancy and infant loss, with a view to creating a showcase/exhibition which would invite public response to the work. Highlighting the issue of pregnancy and infant loss, while not a core objective of the project, was viewed as a potential outcome.

2.4 PHASE TWO: THE PRODUCTION PHASE

In developing the production phase of The Amulet, a steering group was formed, comprising representatives from the fields of arts, arts + health, healthcare, maternity care, bereavement and loss, community development, social health and counselling, and the arts/crafts community. A partnership was created between Cork University Maternity Hospital, Midwestern Regional Maternity Hospital and Waterford Healing Arts Trust, with a view to presenting a resulting showcase or exhibition. A further partnership with The Social Health Education Project was formed to provide access to counselling services for the artist, Steering Group and participants. All of the partnerships, members of the Steering Group, and collaborators who had participated in the research phase made a commitment to the project based on a solid foundation, composed of layers of trust and communication built up over previous 18 months.

The Amulet was conceived as a collaborative project, in which selected participants were invited to work collaboratively with the artist and with members of Ballyphehane/Togher Arts & Crafts Initiative (BTACI) on the creation of new artworks out of an exploration of personal amulet or keepsake objects. The focus on pregnancy and infant loss emerged from the research phase as a direct outcome of

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discursive meetings facilitated by the Acting Director of Midwifery, which acted as a very successful means of engagement with hospital staff. In the production phase, the initial collaborative proposal was for each participant to meet with the artist and members of BTACI. However, all participants indicated that they would prefer to meet with Marie (artist) one to one, and she responded by facilitating one to one meetings with each individual participant, over the course of several months from February 2012 to approximately July 2012.

2.4 A NOTE ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS

Criteria for participation in the project were based on advice from the specialist staff engaged in bereavement and loss support in CUMH and other participating settings, with the support of the steering group. Participants must have been bereaved for a minimum of two years (the loss could have taken place at any time during pregnancy and within the first 12 months of the infant's life). Also, the participants were required to be interested in contributing to a creative project. Ten participants were selected, seven of whom were nominated through consultation with the bereavement and loss specialists in three participating hospitals, CUMH, Waterford Regional Hospital Maternity Unit, and the Midwestern Regional Maternity Hospital in Limerick. Three additional participants nominated themselves, having been familiar with previous work of the artist and strongly desiring to engage in and contribute to a creative project. A third participant can also be said to have self-nominated as she was a member of a hospital midwife team, with a personal interest in the area of bereavement and loss. One of the self-nominating participants was a member of the steering group and a member of the participating arts and crafts group also, bringing a unique perspective on the project, having participated in the research phase. The involvement of the hospitals was seen as critical to supporting the engagement of participants for whom exploration of the amulets or object signifiers of their own ethereal loss may have caused distress, requiring support beyond the scope of the creative dialogue. Both CUMH and Limerick provide specialist bereavement and loss support, and, although Waterford does not provide a specialist service, both participants from the southeast were supportive and aware of each other's involvement. All of the participants had retained personal objects and keepsakes, which they made available for exploration with the artist. As each participant confirmed her involvement, the collaboration between artist and participant progressed towards the creative dialogue stage.

2.6 THE COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

Apart from the three self-nominating individuals, the first contact with each of the participants was made by the relevant bereavement and loss specialist in the participating hospitals. Following the first contact being made, the potential participant was given some time to consider getting involved. At this stage it was suggested that the participant could talk to Marie on the phone, and arrange to meet for a coffee and chat and would be given further time to make a decision about whether or not to participate. If the participant decided to meet with Marie, it was further assumed that participation was not fully confirmed until the participant had given a definitive answer. The process of initial communication took time and was given time by the artist, supported by the relevant hospital personnel where possible. According to the artist, upon confirmation of participation, she arranged an information meeting with each participant in a location of their choosing to explain the background to the project, and take care of procedures such as letters of agreement and consent, crediting of work, plans for sharing/showcasing, and any other practical and logistical arrangements that needed to be made. In most cases, a second meeting took place in which the artist and participant would commence their journey of collaboration.

Of the ten participants, four invited the artist to conduct collaborative meetings in their homes, while other meetings took place in locations including library meeting rooms, in the relevant hospital settings and in a social care setting. The artist travelled to spend time with participants in Limerick, Sligo, Waterford, and in various locations around County Cork.

In the collaborative meetings the artist made an audio recording of the creative dialogue arising from discussion of the objects brought to the meeting by the participant. Participants spoke of keeping a variety of objects, many having multiple items of importance. In some cases the objects were kept in safe places, in memory boxes tucked away in private places within their homes. Other participants had one single object or set of related objects that held considerable meaning and were immediately identifiable as the chosen object for the Amulet project. For others, the amulets were objects that the whole family cherished and used, such as blankets used by other children in the family. For some participants, the actual objects chosen were representative of ethereal signifiers in their lives. Rather

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than physical mementoes, these individuals had invested in intangible Amulets of deep significance including a song, a place, and an ever-present butterfly that appeared at significant times. In the creative dialogue that took place at each collaborative meeting, the significance of individual objects and signifiers gradually emerged, as the items that became the focus of the collaboration were identified through the conversational process of sharing each participant's particular experience with the artist.

For most of the participants, this was their first experience of engagement with an artistic collaboration on any level. For three of the participants who came to the project with various degrees of experience in art-making, the collaboration held different meaning and the journey between lead artist and participant may have had different starting points, although this could be said of each collaborative journey. Section Four of this report will provide the perspectives of participants on the collaborative process through their own words, while Section Three attempts to analyse the multiple dimensions of this collaboration in the context of the artist's desire to explore a new approach to participatory art-making.

2.7 AGREED INDICATORS

As well as documenting the experience of the participants, this evaluation is conducted through the frame of a set of indicators outlined by CREATE, which emerged from a discussion with the artist Marie Brett, key personnel in Create Ireland and the administrator of CUH Arts & Health programme, Edelle Nolan. **These indicators were agreed prior to the commencement of the evaluation process, and were intended to be used as a framework for assessing whether the artistic aims of the project were achieved or not. The brief for the evaluation was to focus on the artistic, and these indicators were designed to provide a basis for qualitative inquiry amongst the Amulet project group, including the artist, steering committee and participants. The main research question at the heart of this evaluation remains focused on the artistic from motivation and intent, through process, to material outcome, to residual and intangible effects.** While the agreed indicators act as a potential frame for the evaluation consultation and analysis, I did not view them as a rigid template for the evaluation process, allowing room for the emergence of ideas and a creative response to the evaluation process. Interviews conducted with the participants

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serve as the primary source material, to act as a record of the process for the individuals involved, and subsequently to be analysed in the context of the indicators provided.

The following list of qualitative indicators was provided by the above group as potential measures of the artistic success of the project:

2.7.1 ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT

- To broker ethics of making new artwork based on shared sensitive material, and make this work visible
- To make collaborative work from the artist's perspective
- For the work to be contextualised and critiqued

2.7.2 GROUP CAPACITY

- To develop new methodologies for forming a 'group of interest'
- To develop new artwork that highlights previous work undertaken in the research phase and the legacy of the crafts worker's layettes.
- To be involved in a creative process, as part of a larger collective, with a linked experience of pregnancy and infant loss.
- To offer an exhibition of the final artwork as a platform for the whole group to meet

2.7.3 DEVELOPMENT OF ART FORM (VISUAL ARTS)

- For the object (amulet/holder/token/abstract) to show and make evident something of the experience of loss
- For dialogue to be made visible and given status
- For contemporary craft practice to be positioned within a contemporary art context

2.7.4 DOCUMENTATION (*OUTCOME*)

- Artwork exhibitions (3)
- Publication
- 6 essays
- The evaluation report
- Seminar at Crawford Art Gallery Lecture Theatre
- Video documentary of seminar

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- Public Interview at Waterford City Library
- Written response to Public Interview and discussion
- Radio documentary

2.7.5 IMPACT FOR ARTISTS AND PARTICIPANTS (*LEGACY/CONSEQUENCES*)

- New artwork made visible
- Dialogue and experience of loss made visible
- Newly developed methods of Arts and Health practice
- Issues of collaborative ethics developed
- Social impact through a cultural shift, social wide, separate to participants

OVERALL

- Monthly **steering group** meetings - minuted
- Critical thinking (**invited responses**)
- **Critique:** Peer review (**seminar**)
- Interviews (video-diary) at beginning and end
- **Mediation: Reflective counselling meetings**
- Log book

SECTION THREE: COLLABORATION

In this section, the idea of collaboration is explored, in the context of the inherent challenges undertaken by the artist in the development of a participatory methodology in The Amulet project. This section will attempt to understand the special nature of The Amulet project through the following research questions:

- What is collaboration?
- What are the determining factors of the Amulet collaboration?
- What is unique to this project in the artist's approach to collaboration?
- How has this project extended the process of ethical collaboration?

3.1 THE AMULET – EXTENDING COLLABORATION

Collaboration is two or more people working together to realise a shared goal. It implies more or less equal partners working together, although dynamics may vary and roles may differ depending on the project. In community-based, dialogic or participatory art practice, the standard notion of 'equality' needs to be unpicked, particularly where an artist initiates a collaborative project with non-artist partners, with the artist taking a leadership role in the conceptualisation and initiation of the process, in leading the conversation and ultimately creating the work. In the report of the research phase of Amulet, (Brett 2011), the artist stated that an aim of the research was to test a shift in [her] participatory methodology, in which the work would be art-led, exploring a conceptual idea versus facilitating activity. The successful outcome of the research '*consolidated (her) confidence in the approach*'. That confidence in an art-led approach drove the development of the second phase of the Amulet project, in which the focus moved from exploring the concept of the amulet in a general maternity setting to the particular role of amulets or keepsakes in the context of pregnancy and infant loss. The nature of the subject matter led the artist to consider the challenge of an art-led approach that respects and honours the contribution and experience of the collaborative participant. To achieve 'ethical collaboration', while working towards the creation of a material outcome that meets the artist's aesthetic/critical ambitions, is one of the significant challenges the artist set herself in the Amulet project. This challenge highlights a multiplicity of determining factors inherent in the Amulet process.

3.2 DETERMINING FACTORS

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- 3.2.1 Invisible (hidden) process leading to material outcome (exhibition)
- 3.2.2 Intimacy of experience (intimate loss and intimate process)
- 3.2.3 Diverse and shared experiences of participants – honouring the common ground and the individual story
- 3.2.4 Motivation and Intent – the crux of ethical collaboration

3.2.1 INVISIBLE (HIDDEN) PROCESS LEADING TO MATERIAL OUTCOME (EXHIBITION)

The nature of the collaboration between the artists and individual participants has been outlined in Section Two of this report, describing the 'invisible' layers of process that were laid down throughout the research phase, during the planning of the production phase, and in the resulting contact, communication and creation of the work leading to the Anamnesis exhibitions and culmination of this phase of the Amulet project. This report aims to document and acknowledge the role of dialogue and conversation in the collaborative process of the Amulet project. In discussing participatory or collaborative art (in a commissioned essay for IMMA¹), Brian Hand argued (via Grant Kester) that, as viewers more accustomed to the banking model of art production, we may better appreciate collaborative or dialogic art if we *'locate the moment of indeterminateness, of open-ended and liberatory possibility, [...] in the very process of communication and solidarity that the artwork catalyzes'*.

Kester also contributes to the recognition of the role of dialogue or conversation in his article *Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art*² which discusses contemporary art practice concerned with collaborative, and potentially emancipatory, forms of dialogue and conversation. *'In these projects conversation becomes an integral part of the work itself. It is re-framed as an active, generative process that can help us speak and imagine beyond the limits of fixed*

1

A struggle at the roots of the mind: service and solidarity in dialogical, relational and collaborative perspectives within contemporary art, by Brian Hand, http://www.imma.ie/en/page_212537.htm#007 – accessed 21.7.2013

2

Kester, G. (2005). *Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art*, in *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*, edited by Zoya Kucor and Simon Leung (Blackwell, 2005)

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identities and official discourse.' In the artist, Marie Brett's own words³, *'Talking is really important to the process. The process is a creative dialogue, in which you keep bringing the conversation back to Amulet, the concept, the artwork... You're always keeping the edges clear, the boundaries. That is a massive challenge...and that's why I see the exhibition as crucial.'*

In viewing Anamnesis the exhibition, we experience the individual voices of the participant collaborators, in audio segments of the dialogue with the artist (we do not hear the voice of the artist). Our hearing sense is activated, and while wearing the headphones we are positioned face-to-face with the framed image, thus we are drawn into a very intimate engagement with the visual and aural elements of the work. We hear the breath, the cadence, the depth in the participant's voice in the selected audio clip. In that moment of hearing/feeling, we catch a glimpse of the invisible conversational process behind the material outcome of the work, as channelled to us through the curatorial/editorial vision of the artist. The authorship is clear – the artist is the editor/curator, while the voice/words/story remains completely in the ownership of the participant. The object captured in the accompanying photographic image, an object suspended in space within a frame, is the subject and catalyst for discussion. The material outcome, the exhibition, is on a continuum with the layers of process that have been laid down during the research phase, the collaborative development and production phase, the books and materials, and in the exhibition and subsequent related events.

3.2.2 INTIMACY OF EXPERIENCE (INTIMATE LOSS AND INTIMATE PROCESS)

Throughout the Amulet project, the particular nature of the shared experience of the participants has been a focus and a concern for the artist and the project group. Protecting the individuals in the sharing of their stories of loss, supporting the artist and the project group in their witnessing of a multiplicity of complex traumatic experiences, acknowledging ambiguous loss with its implied lack of closure for the participants – all of these dimensions were identified as risks inherent in the privileged territory tread by the project. The artist entered into an intimate engagement with each participant, inviting each to share her story of intimate loss, which many felt was invisible to others. The

3

Interview with the artist, 13.2.2012, conducted in the canteen of CUMH.

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complexity of mourning a loved being that, in many cases, did not exist in the world in the widely accepted sense was acknowledged in the writings and words of both participants and commentators. Annette Moloney referred to a potential process of social change in *The Amulet*, the potential 'to make visible the unsaid'⁴ (Annette Moloney). Louise O'Connor [Foott], writing from her insight as an artist and a participant, illuminates this point through her personal dilemma at the heart of *Amulet*... *'And so there is the struggle with the art; the excitement of participating in a project that acknowledges my daughter's life, the real difficulty with the fact that this is art, collaborative art, and the focus is on the artist and the making and the art, much less the need to understand this life and loss. Or so it seems.'*⁵

As an artist, Marie Brett is interested in the idea that *moral criteria* can skew aesthetic priority (Bishop, 2006 via Brett, 2012). She has set herself the challenge to negotiate this idea within her practice, and 'to do this in a manner which is underpinned by a democratization or parity in relationship between [herself] and [her] collaborators.' (Artist's Statement, accompanying AC Application, September 2011). The crux of that challenge lies in the process of collaboration with potentially vulnerable participants, as in *The Amulet* project. The ideas of ambiguous loss explored throughout Marie's work are often characterized by lack of closure, as in the *Amulet* project with many participants living with the paradox of absence and presence: 'We live with her ever-present absence.'⁶

The challenge of giving voice to loss is significant and full of risk. Adhering to the boundaries imposed by the focus on the art, identified above as 'the struggle', the *Amulet* project potentially creates a platform for acknowledgment of the loss by giving it creative expression on the one hand and, on the other hand, by concretising and validating the experience of loss through the creation of the exhibition, rendering the unsayable said, the invisible visible.

One participant questioned the focus on retained keepsakes, rather than the creation of new Amulets, which evokes the compromise in the collaborative process, relating back to the opening discussion of the varying roles of partners in collaboration. This question may be further explored (though maybe not conclusively) in the discussion of intention/motivation following this section. During the

⁴ Annette Moloney: Essay in *Anamnesis*, the book

⁵ Louise O'Connor Foott: Essay in *Anamnesis*, the book

⁶ *ibid.*

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consultation process many participants referred to their need for acknowledgement, for validation of their babies' lives, and the importance of the exhibition in providing a public platform. In the words of one participant, reiterated in Section Four, *'I had made peace myself with it being fine for Marie to get what she needed out of the meeting. I felt it was a collaboration, but it was her authorship. All I needed to know was that she would be respectful.'*

Further research beyond the scope of this document may be valuable in examining the questions that are raised in this report, arising out of the very valuable contribution of The Amulet to discourse on ethical collaboration.

3.2.3 DIVERSE AND SHARED EXPERIENCES OF PARTICIPANTS: HONOURING THE COMMON GROUND AND THE INDIVIDUAL STORY

While sharing the common ground of maternal loss, the experiences of the ten female collaborators were individual and varied. Among the aims identified by the artist was to explore the potential for the creation of a new community of shared experience.

As described in Section Two above, the composition of the participant group varied to include self-identified non-artists, as well as practising professional artists, including those whose work has encompassed Arts + Health contexts. The participants were all female, although some of the bereaved fathers and other family members were partly present during the work, in a 'back seat' capacity. All participants shared the individual experience of maternal loss either during pregnancy or soon after birth.

The key to the establishment of the community of shared experience may be held in the ethereal hidden acts of the collaboration process. In the opening paragraph of this section, collaboration is defined as a process that implies two or more individuals working together towards a shared goal. In the Amulet, eleven individuals (the artist and ten collaborators) worked together in pairs with the artist acting as the hub or centre from which all of the collaborators radiated. In this model of collaboration with the artist as the lead partner, the image of the hub of a wheel from which the spokes radiate can help us to understand how the group exists as a whole, while never actually having met as a group during the process. Individual participants collaborated with the artist, and through the artist, with the

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other participants. The artist is the core of the cluster, directing the process, leading the conversation, triggering the energy through creative dialogue and stimulating the necessary tension for creativity to occur. The participants radiate like spokes around the core, while the shared experience of both the loss and the collaboration brings all of the participants together in relation to each other. In addition, the involvement of BTACI through their layettes as well as their institutional and personal collaborations, radiated around the whole project group as well as strengthening the core of its structure and process, forming a second cluster of collaboration.

The artist described her consciousness of the responsibility of honouring each participant's contribution in relation to the whole group and ultimately in the creation of the work. *I suppose the responsibility for me is to make the best kind of artwork I can make and also that there are other participants, and it's how the work will relate to all the other works, and how the work is made special amongst a group of other pieces...*

The artist and the Steering Group were keenly aware from the research phase that the individual participants may not be comfortable with working in a group context, and that this collaboration would require a unique approach. In the words of one artist, 'there was a sense that the project was being shaped by the participants.' The project group responded to the expressed needs of the participants, interpreted by the artist and supported by the Steering group. *When Marie was setting this up first off, it was set up that myself and Nancy would be there to meet the participants, to show support...and I realised that wouldn't work...because it's so intimate that you wouldn't want to share it with anyone else, so instinctively I knew why participants wouldn't want to do that.* Bernice Jones

In her aim to develop new methodologies for forming a group of shared interest or experience, Marie emphasized the 'hidden' elements beyond the creative dialogue, comparing it to the 'temporal' nature of the song, one of the chosen Amulets. *I think it reflects in a way what we're doing...that's hidden. Because when you see a work in a gallery it would be a very physical thing. You know, what we're doing here, when we meet for coffee, that's [kind of] the work, but it's hidden. And that's kind of the song too [...] all of that is hidden, but it's part of the work.*

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An unanticipated extension of that hidden dimension of the process and collaboration became evident when members of the BTACI also began to share experiences that resonated with those of the participants, catalysed by their ongoing contribution of layettes/amulets to the hospitals involved, an initiative which laid the foundation for the project. That '*the very process of communication and solidarity that the artwork catalyzes*' forms part of the whole experience for the many collaborators in the project, is potentially an indicator of the emergence of a new methodology within Amulet, a new approach to creating a community of shared interest and experience, a series of clusters of collaboration with and through the artist.

3.2.4 MOTIVE AND INTENTION – THE CRUX OF ETHICAL COLLABORATION

At the beginning of this section, the idea of collaboration was outlined as a process of work between two or more partners. In any collaborative process, the dynamic between participants will need to be established from the beginning with clear boundaries, roles and responsibilities in relation to process and outcome. In an artistic collaboration in which the artist(s) initiate a project with (self-identified) non-artists, the artist will take a lead role. In Amulet, the artist has initiated the process of conceptualisation, research and development, leading the project and its partners towards the production phase, leading the conversation and ultimately creating the work. According to the artist (from a co-authored piece with McHarg and Kuczaj⁷), 'the intent at the beginning of the relationship has the greatest effect on the work'. The intent of the artist to extend the boundaries of ethical collaboration in Amulet has been explored in the first part of this section. The artist acknowledges the inherent risk in exploring potentially new forms of collaboration, and referred in both public seminars to 'the pivot of risk and trust' to be navigated in doing this work. The comments from many of the participants provide an indication of the trust and respect that they felt in the process of exploring sensitive material. The feedback of two artist-participants illustrates the risky path to be tread by the artist in this form of collaboration, where the artist has conceptualised both process and outcome and carries the responsibility of working towards that material outcome. Having engaged in the same process, one artist-participant ultimately expressed a desire for a more open-ended collaborative

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Working on the Edge: Exploring the Role of an Art Therapist compared to The Role of an Artist in Arts and Health Contexts – Similarities, Differences and Requirements by Marie Brett : visual artist / Ed Kuczaj : Head of Art Therapy Crawford College of Art & Design, Cork / John McHarg : art therapist from May 2011 Journal of The Irish Association of Creative Arts Therapists

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process, while the other had rationalised her own intentions in ceding to the authorship of the lead artist. Other participants with little or no prior experience of engagement in a creative or collaborative process were also alert to their ownership of their stories and objects, and were very clear about the intention of the artist, which can most likely be related to the acknowledged clarity of communication from the artist throughout the planning and delivery of the project.

The Amulet project demonstrates the many challenges inherent in socially engaged practice, for the artist, the commissioners and most importantly, for the participants. It is clear from the consultation process that the intentions of artist and participants differ enormously, and that the artist bears a considerably weight of responsibility for ethical process, collaboration and outcome throughout all stages of the project.

As we have seen, the artist's aim was to test a shift in [her] participatory methodology (in the research phase), in which the work would be art-led, exploring a conceptual idea versus facilitating activity, and her confidence in this approach was consolidated by that research, leading to the second phase of the Amulet project. Respecting and honouring the contribution and experience of each collaborative participant while exploring an art-led approach, was the acknowledged challenge undertaken by the artist. To conclude this section of the report, a number of determining factors were explored; the invisible (hidden) process leading to a material output (exhibition); the intimate nature of the experience of collaboration bound up with ambiguous loss (intimate loss and intimate process); the diverse and shared experiences of participants – the challenge of honouring the common ground and bearing witness to the individual story; and the 'pivot of risk and trust' which could be described as the crux of ethical collaboration, exploring the motivation and intent of both artist and participants. The complexity of the questions raised in this project, and the rich material drawn from the consultation process within the scope of this evaluation, point to the huge potential for further discussion and research on ideas of ethical collaboration. The creative dialogue catalysed by the research phase, the written contributions, the exhibition, the documentation accompanying the work all combine to position The Amulet project at the quiet battlefield of significant social issues that for too long have remained 'hidden', invisible and unspoken in Irish society, while making a rich and valuable contribution to participatory art practice and discourse in Ireland.

SECTION FOUR: PARTICIPANT VOICES

4.1 KEY WORDS FROM CONSULTATION CONVERSATIONS

Choice ~ Respect ~ Trust ~ Gentle ~ Healing ~ Struggle ~ Amulet ~ Absence ~ Time

4.2 CONSULTATION FEEDBACK

In this section of the report, the voices of the collaborative participants will be represented in their own words, under thematic strands that were explored in conversation with both the participants and the artist. In order to explore participants' experiences of engagement with Amulet, the consultation process was devised to allow for broad feedback to emerge in conversation, while loosely guided by the need to determine outcomes in support of artistic indicators devised by the project group and Create (outlined in Section Two and discussed in further detail in the concluding section below). To represent the individuals's responses in this section of the report, initials have been used as identifiers with a key provided in the Appendix under References (page 32).

The semi-structured interviews resulted in the emergence of the following themes:

- Motivation and Intent
- Process
- Collaboration
- Community of shared experience
- Objects
- Exhibition

4.3 VOICES OF PARTICIPANTS: THEMES EMERGING

4.3.1 MOTIVATION/INTENT

The question of motive for participation was explored with each of the participant collaborators, their responses yielding insights into the diverse perspectives of the individuals involved. An opportunity to re-tell their story, to tell somebody new, to create space for themselves, to create a tribute to their lost child, to help others – the motivations that emerged in the discussion were as individual and varied as the experiences of the participants:

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I felt it was going to do something for me. I was very happy for the collaboration to happen. I was almost able to put myself in her shoes, you know, how she might feel, handling my treasure...I knew that and felt okay about it [...] **M**

It was my first experience of an arts project. I used it as a healing process for myself, because I never had time to grieve. Amulet gave me time and breathing space. Time for me. I did it for myself, to close up a few of the holes that were there. **MF**

Marie was somebody new, who wasn't a family member – she would have new questions. It was a chance to tell my story again. It was nearly two years since Robbie was taken from us. **MG**

I don't think I'll ever be the same person...I just kind of felt it was almost another way of adding to her memory, because people will talk about Eve if I bring it up...and I suppose I would have been the same...whereas I felt that this was another part of her memory, a way of keeping it going... **AD**

I was apprehensive. I wanted to do justice for the girls, to be their voice. I had a lot of little anxieties. But I thought I might help others. **CS**

My Amulet was actually a get well card that was sent to me by the night nurse from my time in hospital. [...] Nobody else outside of myself would know what that meant for me. And this is a wonderful way to give voice to that. A few years after I tried to get in touch but she had moved, the card came back, so in a way this is a way of putting it out there and saying thank you. **BJ**

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4.3.2 PROCESS: CARE AND RESPECT

Each of the respondents to the consultation process described the communications and procedural aspects of the project in emphatically positive terms:

The care given to communication...The communications were always respectful. She gave so much time to every stage of the process. I was really impressed by how minded she made me feel. M

Even though I really didn't understand what it was going to be, I knew I could depend on her. She always came back to me with questions, and she was very understanding. I trusted her and knew she was going to do a great job. MG

There was lots of emailing and photography, lots of contact, checking back. [...] there was a sense that the project was being shaped by participants. M

I felt very minded. There was lots of contact, emailing, the communication was very clear and thorough. LO'C

She suggested that I might take my own photo but I felt it was Marie's project. I was very clear about that, and she is so good. I felt her respect... I trusted her... M

I really want to say this...Marie was very very good, she was very easy to talk to. She has a gift for dealing with people, as well as with art. She made it so easy. It wasn't difficult at all.

CS

4.3.3 OBJECTS

A range of perspectives were expressed by participants in relation to the focus on their objects. For some, there were lots of items to choose from and the process provided them with clarity; for others there was the sense of their precious objects being honoured in the process; for another it was a process of narrowing down to a singular vision of what an Amulet can be. The overwhelming sense from the participants was that the collaboration brought forth feelings of fear and pain, and the

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courage and generosity of the women in sharing their experiences and precious objects was a potent hidden force within the process. Their gentle words speak volumes:

The greatness of the oak against the bootees [...] They were precious things - I never opened up the box after. MF

She looked at them as important. No matter how stupid you might think it is, she never said that. She respected my little keepsakes – that was fierce important. She took time setting them up, getting the right light on the gown. She took ages and ages. It wasn't rushed at all. The whole process can't be rushed. She never once made me feel anything but important.

MF

I prepared the space, lit the fire. I did think to myself, 'how are you going to feel about this?' Marie looking at my precious things with her artist's eye. M

I think there's a challenge when there's more than one object and I'm trying to be very careful to not lead which is the right one....I was kind of hoping that that would work with people's objects...I was kind of holding back...wait and see what Ann says... and then I was delighted that [she] chose [the song]... MB

It was less about the object for me, more about the process. The house is full of little mini-installations, the family collects things [...] heart-shaped stones. We have a special place, a walk - that is the closest thing I have to an Amulet. LO'C

I had a few objects but in hindsight I had one or two favourites. The Amulet clarified that for me, that some things had more meaning. It drew that out. CS

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4.3.4 COLLABORATION

While the concept of collaboration was new to the majority of the participants, it was a more familiar process for three of the individuals involved. Across the whole group there was a remarkable clarity and depth in their responses as they considered ideas of collaboration and creativity.

*I had made peace myself with it being fine for Marie to get what she needed out of the meeting. I felt it was a collaboration, but it was her authorship. All I needed to know was that she would be respectful. **M***

*Just to see her take so much time with my precious things...she was so professional, so human. I definitely feel she collaborated. She took time, care, respect... **MF***

*It was actually very different, it surprised me. [...] Even though I know Marie quite well...it was quite different. I was very nervous...very vulnerable. Because I was approaching Marie in a different way, that you're not coming with the confidence and the backup that you normally have...even though that's still there underneath it all because it was very familiar...but coming in that morning there was a multitude of butterflies. **BJ***

*Some other artists mine people for their experience. I had seen her previous work, the Memory Dress and other work, and I knew that Marie was not just another artist making a show. You could really feel the collaborators in the work. **M***

*I felt the starting point was the object in Marie's mind. I had a different starting point in my mind, of meeting in a different unknown place, and I felt we worked very hard to get to Marie's place together. **LO'C***

4.3.5 COMMUNITY OF SHARED EXPERIENCE

Although there was a private group viewing of the exhibition in advance of the public opening, a number of the participants responded that they would have liked to have met the other participants in some forum prior to that event. However, a couple of individuals indicated that they were happier to have worked privately with the artist, affirming the instincts of the Steering group and of the artist. The

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exhibition appears to have performed the function of a platform for the issue of infant loss, and to represent the linked experience of the individual participants and this was acknowledged by a number of the respondents also.

I felt no connection with other women involved. I would like to have met the other participants before the exhibition, to have the name and the face, to know what their story was. MF

Even though I don't know any of the others, when I was there looking at the exhibition...you would feel part of a community...it makes you feel like you're not alone. MG

I do feel part of a bigger thing/shared experience although I did prefer to just do it myself alone with Marie. I just personally felt more comfortable...I'm not a great person for talking out in a group. AD

While I feel it would have been difficult to meet as a group, and I understand that maybe that was done to protect the participants, though maybe we were being over-protected? I would have been interested to meet the other participants as part of the process. LO'C

4.3.6 EXHIBITION

The exhibition was a heightened experience for many of the participants, and for those who spoke at either the seminar or on the night of the event, it presented a hugely emotional challenge. Participants eloquently shared their feelings of curiosity, pride, affirmation and connection, as outlined below.

I didn't know what to expect. I was curious. How were they going to be presented? Holly's piece was facing us as we went in the main door. It was lovely to see it in the book. I watched people listening to it. The main feeling I felt was...I felt proud. It was lovely to see people taking time to listen to my voice.

MF

I only viewed our own piece. My husband viewed all the other pieces, but I was exhausted. I hope it will travel. [...] I was very anxious about the Seminar and the exhibition. CQ

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We commissioned a replica for the house. We very much want her (our daughter) to be part of our lives. CQ

I wasn't able to make it to the group opening – there was no babysitter available that day. I went to see it the following weekend. I was the only person there, and that was nearly better because I was able to have a good look the whole thing and listen to all the stories. It was good to be able to spend time there on my own, and I listened to the whole lot of the stories. It was very emotional, but I could be emotional because I had the place to myself. It wasn't a shock or a surprise, and that was good, because it could have gone either way. MG

[The exhibition] was really understated in scale. It had a hushed quiet presence. Something you'd take your time with. It was so well thought through. It really asks a lot of you. I really felt a connection, felt part of something. M

I just feel very proud, that – I'm so glad I did it. Just to see, whatever comes out, just to see it up there. Very proud and very grateful, and to show that this is what I've been doing. AD

I thought it was really well put together, the way she did it. Even though all the stories were heartbreaking, you wouldn't find yourself breaking down. She only used a couple of sentences from each story but it really got the meaning across. MG

SECTION FIVE: CONCLUSION

5. Conclusion

The artistic indicators provided by Create form the framework for the conclusion of this report of an evaluation of The Amulet Project. The Timeline provided in Section Two summarises the outputs of the project, while these indicators were also outlined in full.

5.1 Artistic development

- To broker ethics of making new artwork based on shared sensitive material, and make this work visible
- To make collaborative work from the artist's perspective
- For the work to be contextualised and critiqued

Section Three of this report provides a detailed exploration of the process of ethical collaboration and its many determining factors in the context of this project. In addition it discusses the artist's aim to explore new art-led participatory methodologies in collaboration with a community of interest. The work has been both contextualised and critiqued by a number of invited commentators, whose work is published in *Anamnesis*, the book, in an essay by project writer Rebecca Moran on foot of the WHAT seminar, while the process has been comprehensively documented and discussed in this evaluation report.

5.2 Group capacity

- To develop new methodologies for forming a 'group of interest'
- To develop new artwork that highlights previous work undertaken in the research phase and the legacy of the crafts worker's layettes.
- To be involved in a creative process, as part of a larger collective, with a linked experience of pregnancy and infant loss.
- To offer an exhibition of the final artwork as a platform for the whole group to meet

Section Three of this report summarises The Amulet as a series of cluster collaborations, with and through the artist, linking individuals and communities of interest. The production phase of The Amulet followed the organic development from the research phase which was conducted in partnership with

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BTACI and participating maternity units, and has raised the profile of both the group and the ongoing process of layette making. Anamnesis, the culminating exhibition was the first opportunity for the whole group to meet. Reflections on this experience are provided in Section Four in the words of the participants consulted.

5.3 Development of art form (visual arts) *how could it be a model of practice for this art form?*

- For the object (amulet/holder/token/abstract) to show and make evident something of the experience of loss
- For dialogue to be made visible and given status
- For contemporary craft practice to be positioned within a contemporary art context

In the words of the participants, the evident power of the project was in making visible the experience of loss, and in the acknowledgement of that loss which remains an unresolved and ambiguous experience for many of the individuals involved. Section Two of this report outlines in detail the process of creative dialogue at the heart of this collaboration, which gave both voice to the loss and form to the memory through the concept of the Amulet.

5.4 Concluding Note

This report has drawn together the 'what' and the 'how' of The Amulet project, with the aim of recording the process for the artist and the participant-collaborators. The scope and scale of the evaluation necessitated a focus on the experience of the collaborators and the artist, while acknowledging that the voices of the Steering Group and BTACI remain largely unrepresented within this document. A reflection on the project from the perspective of BTACI by Ballyphehane CDP will be included as an addendum, while members of the Steering Group, BTACI and other commentators have contributed to the broader body of material stimulated by The Amulet Project. These include the book of the research phase, Anamnesis, the book, and other reflections provided in the online presence for the project on artsandhealth.ie.

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Key to initials representing artist and participants' voices in Section Four

AD - Ann Dorgan

BJ - Bernice Jones

CS - Cathy Sutton

CQ - Claire Quinn

LO'C - Louise O'Connor [Foott]

M - Mary

MB - Marie Brett

MF - Maria Fitzhenry

MG - Marion Gabriel