

TRANSFORMATIVE SPACE

Patricia Mannix McNamara

The Arts are a wonderful conduit for giving space to expression of that which is often deeply felt but remains unarticulated or only partially stated. Often aspired to but rarely achieved, is the creation of an experience where the artist provides that conduit in a manner where their presence does not occlude the experience. This was the case for Anamnesis, an installation that evoked powerful responses amongst those who came to engage with it in Limerick. The amulets, the women's voices and the construction of the installation itself were a powerful representation of the experience of infant loss and of hope. Marie Brett in this work clearly achieved the balance necessary to open up the experience for us all in a manner that placed the infants, the amulets that represented their short lives and the voices of their mothers at the center of the experience.

The calm evoked within us as we sat in front of the visual representations of amulets, so laden with meaning, while we concentrated on the voices guiding us was quite remarkable. The stillness emanating from listeners did not seem to stem only from the stories of loss but also from the wonder that the voices instilled in us as we listened and gained insight into thoughts, feeling and responses that we would not have otherwise garnered. It was unique to be allowed into the once private thoughts of the women who shared the meaning of their amulets, capturing not only loss but hope. When I looked at the image of two small identity bracelets and heard their owner describe their importance in acknowledgement of her babies short lives, I was struck by the educative power of the installation. Her explanation that she did not wish for flowers (more commonly given at times of loss) but rather for a gift that one would give to a baby gives great insight to all as to how one can actually respond in times of loss and grief. To hear her say: *"I take them down quite often...I needed them near me"* struck me as an amazing gift to have received, one that provided comfort and connection. How the amulets took on a lived presence was also quite inspirational as one woman spoke about deciding not to formalise hers: *"I was going to buy a frame but I said no so I could carry it with me."* Sheer concentration was tangible amongst those who engaged with the blue cardigan amulet. How visibly moved they became was evidently etched across their faces as they interacted with the installation. The woman's gentle articulation of the importance of being able to personalize the clothing of her baby for burial was exceptionally moving. This was also reflected in the white cardigan amulet. Watching people's emotional responses as they listened to the owner describe how unprepared she was for how small (only 3lbs) her baby was when he was born, and how she adjusted the size of the cardigan that she had lovingly knitted in order to ensure it was small enough to fit him for burial, evoked deep empathy and connection. The cathartic nature of this installation was palpable among the women who participated in the project but it was also for those of us privileged to attend. Listening to the woman who had kept breast milk

pouches as her amulet, it soon became clear that not only had the project given her space to articulate her experience, it also gave her the opportunity to move into the next part of her own personal journey, that of letting go. Her words enunciated an empowering catalyst for her: *"I kept them because I wanted to do something. I didn't want to throw them out. The project gave me the space to let them go....I just couldn't dispose of them. I am really glad they are being photographed marking the end of storing them."* There was something heart rendering, and yet quite hopeful in her imagery and her words.

Listening to the responses of health care practitioners, mothers and members of the public, it became soon clear that all are affected in times of loss. The discussion that took place drew our attention to the importance of the amulets as signifying in a very powerful way that these children had life even for a short time. The amulets are an important and sustaining link to their short lives. The exhibition opened up opportunities of expression and dialogue about a grief disenfranchised because of the nature of infant loss and thus so often silenced. It was an exhibition of courage and integrity. Those who shared their amulets opened up their heart (and their personal journey) to us all and in so doing, I have no doubt, gave space to others who have not done so, facilitating them to privately reconnect with their own personal stories of loss.

Marie Brett in describing the project spoke about its significance, not only of the art work but also in the invitation it extends to come and experience a window into the lives of others. She conceptualised the project as an invitation to think more broadly about loss and as providing a distinctive space to engage with and to reimagine loss. This was uniquely possible with this exhibition because as one listened to the women's voices; all other realities became less in the moment. This was due to the voices transporting the listener into an almost surreal space, a gentle and intimate one that invited connection, empathy and deeper understanding.

As the evening drew close and the daylight faded, the exhibition took on a more prominent position both in our vision and in our thinking. It was as though in the half-light, the exhibition and our connection to it became more heightened. The lights over each amulet shone brighter as the light in the room faded drawing our eyes towards it. The darkness behind the installation drew into sharp relief its potential to shed light and hope. It was though the fading light metaphorically amplified our awareness of the uniquely cathartic, educative and potentially transformative space in which we found ourselves.

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