

“It’s being given its moment!”

An opinion piece about the Helium Community Engagement Programme Showcases—June 2022

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In early June 2022, I engaged in a series of conversations with each of the artists leading Helium’s Community Engagement Programme, which were enlightening in terms of understanding the processes of making and collaborating that led to the work on show in the art showcases. Through these conversations, I have made a series of observations around the following themes: Process, Production, Space, Audience, Professional Arts Practice and Further Thoughts.

Process

The three artists shared a strong vision for collaboration, and a passion for child-led and child-centered approaches, which they all understood to be central to the ethos of Helium as an organisation. The artists are experienced practitioners and collaborators whose vision is to provide a space for emergent processes of making. It was clear from all three artists that they recognized the need to be adaptive and responsive when working collaboratively with children. And most especially, given the unique circumstances of the particular children involved—having health issues and diverse needs—which made this all the more important. There were some inconsistencies in terms of attendance, but all artists had core groups of children who attended the workshops consistently over a 6-week period.

In spite of the showcase being a required output of the project, all the artists wanted the engagement to be focused on process, first and foremost. One artist said, “I wanted it to be about the process from the start.” Another—despite her participants being very conscious of the showcase, and excited by it, said that she “knew that whatever the process was, as long as it was well documented and they explored it fully, it would be beautiful.” The third artist said that she had to “trust in the process”. Playfulness was an important element of all three processes. Quality was also a common strand. One artist said, “You want it to be good. You want to make this space that’s really rich and nourishing and the best it possibly can be”.

All three, in varying ways, described the process as a kind of “stepping into” a space together; presenting an “invitation” to the children, where they could play and influence how the work developed. It was important to have a structure or framework of ideas, but also be adaptive to the children’s interests and where they would take it. Two artists gave examples of having predefined ideas of particular activities, which they then had to jettison, but with a positive realisation that this was responding to the children’s own ideas and interests.

To my mind, this represents a best practice model in terms of cultural agency within a professional arts context and within a children's rights framework.¹ The process was also deeply supported by good organisational structures to support the delivery, such as, a strong team of volunteers who were highly praised by all the artists, artist mentors, team meetings, etc.

Production

The 'art production' or showcase is built into the Community Engagement Programme, as a required output. There is clearly a strong belief among the artists in the value of the showcase, even though all acknowledged some level of pressure that the production side demanded. There is an inherent dilemma between process and product, which emerges when engaging in a programme of activity that—within a relatively short period of time—must lead to presentable outputs. A natural question emerges: How to engage the children in meaningful work that is "process-driven", while also keeping in mind the need to produce a showcase at the end? One artist described it as "challenging, but also good". Another artist described "a lot of creative demand production-wise and output-wise without a lot of time to sit and process the work".

All artists acknowledged this dilemma but managed to balance this exceptionally well without compromising on the process. In some cases, the children had less anticipation of, or interest in, the showcase. In other cases, they had great excitement and expectation. Either way, the artists carried the "pressure" of the showcase for themselves but didn't want to transfer this sense of pressure to the children. One artist spoke about "holding space for the workshops and also holding space for the showcase".

All of the showcases include presentation of "process", as well as completed artworks. I believe that showing process is a very valuable part of presenting work from collaborative engagements. And often, this in itself is beautiful to behold: artwork in its own right. Marks, maps, lines, voices. This gives visitors to the showcase who know nothing about the programme some insight into what took place. The child's voice is also actively presented as part of the work on display, which I really welcome in terms of feeling that the participants could have a verbal presence within the space, as well as a visual one.

Logically, each of the artists takes on a curatorial role for the showcase of their own project, and this is also part of their contractual obligation. Given a longer period of engagement, it might be interesting to consider whether the participating children can also be actively involved in the

¹ **From the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**

Article 12

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

Article 13

1. The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

curatorial process. But much more time with the children would be required —partly because decision-making processes with children require a lot of time and a different set of facilitation skills; and also to avoid an exhibition narrative impinging on the making process itself, where the children are described by one artist as being “very present in the moment”. But in terms of the child-centered approach, this would give the children greater agency in terms of presenting their work to a wider public.

Nevertheless, the artists were very careful to consult with the children about the aspects of the work that they wanted to present; and took great care in giving the work due respect. All artists had an understanding of their responsibility in this regard and expressed a desire to bring the best production standards and professionalism to the presentation of the work. One artist spoke of the “ethics of curating without the children”, in terms of a strong consciousness that she must do justice to their work: “You want to get it right as well as you can.” Another artist said, “I want it to look its best to show off the beautiful work they’ve done.”

Space

The responsibility for sourcing the space to present the showcase lies with the artists. This potentially presents an additional challenge for the artists. In one case, not knowing where the showcase was going to be, was somewhat stressful for the artist; but securing the space mid-way through the engagement period was “a relief”.

The spaces comprise two libraries and the Hub at Limerick City Gallery. All are democratic, community-centric spaces, which prioritise connection with the community, accessibility and visibility. With the presentation of work that has emerged through community-based collaborations, there is a *potential* tension between **accessibility**—where the work can be brought to a diverse public audience, but with possible spatial challenges— and **status**—where the work can be presented within a high-end context that gives it prestige and validation within a visual arts context. In spite of this, the choices, in this case, feel very appropriate, and all three artists were excited by the spaces they had chosen and the possibilities that each afforded. Consideration of the audience is central here.

Audience

The audience for the showcases is diverse. All the artists, first and foremost, were clear that the primary audience were the children themselves and their families and friends. This is key in terms of motivation and curatorial drive. One artist described it as “a really nice opportunity for them [the families] to celebrate the work of their children,” and she also spoke about the work being “validated and valued—it’s being given its moment.” Another artist spoke about her curatorial choices as a gift to the children, “returning the favour to them and playing with it myself”—presenting it back to them in a playful way that referenced things they had experimented with during the collaboration. The third artist wanted it to be “engaging and sensory and tactile” and said that she hoped the children would be “inspired and in awe of what they have done and feel empowered [...] that they can realise the power of their creative

agency". All used the term "family-friendly", which sets a very clear vision for the purpose of the showcase.

That is not to say that the general public are excluded as an audience. They aren't. And the community-centric nature of the spaces really puts the work into the public realm in a way that is totally accessible and not exclusionary or elitist.

Professional arts practice

An area of interest for me was how this whole programme—the engagement and the showcase—connected with each artist's own practice—the extent to which it enriched or enhanced their practice and, reciprocally, what they brought of themselves as artists to the work. While the conversations were relatively brief, I was struck by the depth of process within each programme of engagement, and the richness of the work that was produced over a relatively short period of six weeks. All of the artists are professional and experienced practitioners. While each process was not without its individual challenges, the artists strove to make the work meaningful and to overcome challenges with authentic, considered responses, rather than being reactive. There was a rigour and integrity at the heart of each artist's work. This is visible in the rich outputs and displays of process that are presented. The provision of mentorship adds more layers of depth and expertise to enrich the process. Two artists made reference to their mentors in relation to finding their way through problems and challenges. In addition to what they brought as professional artists to the process, there was reference to how they had grown and developed as practitioners through this collaboration. One artist said, "I've stretched and grown so much as a practitioner, in terms of being a collaborative artist and working with other people's experience." Another artist said, "I felt like I was bringing in a lot of my own practice. It's great when you feel it's enriching your practice. [...] It worked well with all the things I'm interested in."

Further thoughts

From an external perspective, there is very little to criticise about this programme and the showcase element. The artists are strong practitioners, well rooted in their own practice and show excellent skills as collaborators; adapting and responding to the needs and interests of their child collaborators—and foreground their cultural agency as participants and co-creators. There is a robust structure of support around the artists to assist them in the delivery of the programme.

Here are some general observations for further consideration:

- While the current structure appears to work well, I was curious about the showcase element coming after a short six-week period, when the community engagement takes place all year round. My instinctive feeling was that a showcase or exhibition could

represent a full year's work, but this would probably be a bigger undertaking, requiring greater resources.

- The community aspect of the showcase is critical—its value is really centered around it being rooted in the community and a focal point for the participating children and their families. It provides an opportunity to families to connect and celebrate the children's work, in a similar context to the one where the work was created. Nonetheless, it could be exciting to consider a larger-scale exhibition that combines the work emerging from the three community engagement programmes over a year-long period or more, and present this in dedicated exhibition spaces to give national profile and status to the work.
- From a rights-based perspective, it would be very empowering to enable the children to also become the curators of their own work. It would be understandable if resources and structures were not able to facilitate this, as the priority is surely the engagement itself within the community context; and extra layers of participation and consultation cannot always be reached within the limitations of funding or programme structures. But if dedicated funding for this were available, it could add another rich layer to the work. If involving all the participating children in curation were too much, a youth panel could be developed, involving some of the more interested and consistent participants.
- My conversations with the artists took place ahead of the showcase events, so at the time of writing, the children's responses have not been elicited. I think it would be important to capture the children's responses to the showcase, to feed into the narrative to funders, and also to inform the thinking around the value of the showcase element and the impact for the children of seeing their work on display.

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