

Learning through Listening

– A text by Clare Breen reflecting on *The Breadfellows' Chats* project, part of a school- based residency.

A “listening context” is created when individuals feel legitimized to represent their theories and offer their own interpretation of a particular question. We enrich our knowledge and our subjectivity by listening to others and being open to them as we learn as a group. - Carla Rinaldi

Recently I have I have been thinking about listening and how to facilitate learning through listening. I have been a resident artist in St Ibar's National School, since October 2017, through the *Living Arts Project* run by Wexford Arts Center. Over the course of 15 workshops I collaborated with 48 children from 3rd and 5th class. I brought the work of 11 artists, including myself, to the classroom with the aim of introducing the children to varied contemporary art practices and asking the question “what does an artist do?”

I wanted to create a safe space for conversation and meaningful interaction with these artists' work, to facilitate a space for research and learning through conversation and to include opportunities for the exploration of curiosity, desire, doubt, and uncertainty. These artists were Angelica Falkeling, Daniel Fogarty, Katherine MacBride, Daniel Tuomey, Kari Robertson, Vasiliki Sifostatoudaki, Raluca Croitoru, Madison Bycroft, Sarah De Wilde, Hannah Fitz, and myself, Clare Breen. I invited these artists due to their varied material and conceptual practices and receptivity to dialogical exchange. As an arts educator working with children, my aim is to create workshops in which mutual learning can occur between children and artists through meaningful engagement with the questions at stake in an artists' practice. It was important that each artist came into the project seeing it as a mutually beneficial learning experience and opportunity to explore their ideas in a new context and with new collaborators.

Breadfellows' Chats is an artistic research methodology I developed as a way to become more familiar with an artist's practice in order to collaboratively develop workshops. It has now evolved and adapts to many different environments. During a *Breadfellows' Chat* two or more people come together to have a conversation about making art whilst they make an object from clay. I call these clay objects *companions*. (Fig 1. below)



The word *companion* means friend - someone or something you spend time with. The word “companion” is derived from the Latin “com” meaning with and the French “panis” meaning bread, so companion literally means “with bread” or “breadfellows”, hence the name *Breadfellows' Chats*. (Figs. 2 & 3 below)



The only requisite of a *Breadfellows' Chat* is that it should be possible to use the *companion* to share a meal. Talking and making together, followed by the sharing of food, are foregrounded in my practice as intimate gestures of care. The conversation that takes place during a *Breadfellows' Chat* is as important as the *companions* themselves. The outcomes of *Breadfellows' Chats* include exhibitions, workshops, meals and public programmes inside and outside of the gallery context.



(Figs. 4 & 5)

In preparation for and during the *Living Arts Project* residency I conducted *Breadfellows' Chats* with the 10 selected artists and we developed workshops together. Following these *Chats* some of the artists came to the classroom to conduct workshops, some sent instructions, some developed the workshop with me and some sent artworks which I devised workshops around.

In the introduction to this text I quoted the Reggio Emilia educator Carla Rinaldi's essay "The Pedagogy of Listening". In preparation for this residency I visited Reggio Emilia, the famous Italian center for early childhood education, and devised much of the framework for this project drawing from this visit. I believe that children give meaning to the world around them through the development of narratives. Constructively learning, learning through listening to one another and developing tools for encountering the world together "transforms a world not intrinsically ours into something shared." (Rinaldi, p234) It was a deeply held intention to create safe spaces, through the pleasurable and sometimes curious encounter with artworks, supporting learning that is collaborative, collective and as democratic as possible.

One of the artists who visited the school was Katherine MacBride. I invited Katherine to participate in the *Living Arts Project* because, although we were already friends, I was very keen to learn from her work. The following part of this text is intended to give an insight into our collaboration, which is an ongoing and evolving process.

In her work as a sculptor, videomaker, writer, performer and educator Katherine is focused on listening; she considers how we might listen to what cannot be heard, to what is excluded, and to

what cannot yet be expressed. For Katherine, how we participate in conversation — understood to include speaking, listening, silence, and nonverbal communication — is always a political act. Her practice is founded on a desire to trust that practising doing things differently at small scales has potential applications and effects in wider contexts; working at micro-affective levels as a way to molecularly rework our relations is a way of acting in and on the world. (Her website can be found here <https://www.katherinemacbride.com/>)

During Katherine's visit we conducted a *Breadfellows' Chat*. This is an image of the *companion* we made together. (Fig. 6, below)



In preparation for the workshops there was an introductory text written to each artist. Some of these were written by the artists and I wrote others drawing from our conversations. These can be found on the website <http://breadfellows.school/>. Katherine wrote an introduction to her own work for the children.

Katherine is an artist who is interested in how people, animals, plants and things live together. At the moment she is working a lot with listening — listening with your ears to what other people are saying with their voices, listening with your body to what other people are saying with their bodies - listening with all your senses to pay really careful attention to how everything is all connected together and how our actions affect each other all the time even when we aren't aware of it. She's trying to understand how to listen to things like the environment that might not have a voice and how to listen attentively so we can take good care of each other. Katherine often makes things with other people.

Katherine's workshop consisted of a series of movement and sound exercises enacted from a score she had written for the workshop. The exercises were designed to help the children develop an awareness of embodying movement in space and doing so in relation to one another. They were invited to write and follow instructions for movements for one another and to make and listen to sounds produced by individual bodies and together as a group. At the end of the workshop the children made a large collaborative drawing together mapping the day, trying to draw a description of the workshop, adding as many details as they could collectively think of. Together they produced a new score of their experience.



(Fig. 7)

A detailed account of this workshop can be found on the breadfellows.school website here: <http://breadfellows.school/living-arts-project/katherine-macbride-week-5.html>

This was the 5th week of the project, in previous weeks we had worked with clay, drawing and fabric and the children had become increasingly exploratory and less self-conscious in front of their peers. Many of them were completely open to the prospect that making noises, embodying simple instructions or even thinking of instructions to give another body could be considered part of the thought process of making art. It was a welcome, exciting change to work only with their bodies. Following Katherine's visit, our *Breadfellows' Chat* extended into an email exchange.

Clare :

It is very difficult to evaluate a project like this, we talked about expectations and satisfaction yesterday, how to not “let yourself off the hook” when assessing how satisfied you are with a project. Did you identify any particular criteria for satisfaction through this collaboration?

Katherine: I've been thinking a lot about discomfort, and the difficulty of using this as a criteria, but also the necessity. I do want people to have a good time, but I don't only want people to have a good time, and focusing exclusively on that means I might miss other possible evaluations. Like sometimes learning is difficult, or complicated, so I'm not sure how to evaluate those kinds of experiences, without risking an off the hook placing, 'well everything is a valid experience' kind of thing. Because politically, I do believe that everything is a valid experience, but in terms of responsibility in a context like this, of a workshop, then it's also not enough to say that anything goes and everything is fine because it's not. So maybe criteria I would think about would be connected to each artistic process you're trying to think through.

For the children, the level of thinking, maybe even including confusion as an experience of thinking. How well they worked together, thinking in a different way than in class, being asked to think about your values and norms, of using processes of working together that hopefully encourage and foster a way of being in this normative space of the school that is different than everyday class. Sometimes those rare moments of reflexivity come up verbally, the odd kid will say something that shows they get the whole concept. This is the hardest thing to do with art, it's really quite advanced and I still struggle with it even as an adult with loads of education. I am delighted when it arises in moments like when that girl talked about how hard it is to work with other people.

In terms of working with a teacher I'm aware that art education in teaching education is very variable so some teachers are not very comfortable in that space. There's this long term project I think for all arts practitioners to demystify, undo prior bad experiences people have had, and extend the idea of what art practice is. Creative education is key for everyone and is not very well supported by the system. This isn't a criteria but it's a secret goal I guess, so you're not like an exotic bird that flies in but a person with possible shared concerns and passions.

Clare: I know that listening is essential to my work but it is also often the part of conversation that is taken for granted in the flurry and rush to move on to the next part of something, the next step in the process. In order to document and assess it is essential, but it is also essential to be actively present and listening through a process, I feel this is something I can learn from you. Can you say something about how you stay actively listening throughout your practice; listening not only to collaborators and visitors to your exhibitions but also to yourself?

Katherine: This is really hard. I'm not that sure that I'm very good at listening to myself, and when I do I worry that there's a kind of arrogance involved in that. This is to do with how I was raised and being a woman and so on, so I do also try to work with it, but I am often deeply uncomfortable about taking up talking space and have had to learn how to do that as a kind of feminist education. Practical things I do are: with exhibitions I like to be around and see how people interact with the work; I try to listen to feedback without explaining; I write a lot to people and this is a way of making possibilities for mutual feedback; I take time to reflect on other people's work and sometimes tell them and sometimes this becomes a supportive exchange; I try to think about what other people are doing from many perspectives. I think then I find it harder to form a singular opinion, and it means that I'm always entangling person, process and outcome in ways that might be infuriating to other people but that's how I find it possible to think. Writing is a space where I'm learning to say what I think which is basically a way of listening for ages and then trying to make something from that. Reading also, listening to others through their writing.

Clare: Did anything come out of the Breadfellows project that you didn't expect?

Yes. It was a good experience of dealing with myself, having all my insecurities and working them through, accepting what happened and what I wasn't so sure about in what happened. I thought a lot afterwards about how children get contemporary art, I had forgotten how much they just do...like they do it.

Reflections:

As I come to the end of the *Living Arts Project* I move forward first by acknowledging the ongoing nature of the learning that took place. The duration of this project allowed the development of relationships between the children, with the artists, between the artists and myself and with the teachers. The learning grew through a traceable arc, for instance, over time the children could compare an experience of one artist's practice with another. By the end of our time together they

could speak with conviction about aspects of work they enjoyed and things they found unsuccessful. Outlining an exchange such as this one with Katherine is a way to show a part of this learning.

I believe this project could have a far wider reach, if similar workshops were undertaken with groups of teachers. Supporting artists to demystify some of the processes of making art; not to simplify them, but to provide avenues of access to them, can be of great benefit, both for those who engage and the artists. A key motivation for the development of my practice has always been to devise ways to support, participate in and show how conversations about the processes of art practice are themselves potential learning spaces. Making space to support and listen to the needs of teachers in the classroom would also enrich the perspective of this project. Talking through the curricular requirements, figuring out where there is space to innovate and where the system is providing adequate support is a step in this practice that has not yet been given adequate attention. To paraphrase Katherine, creative education is key for everyone and is not very well supported by the system. Rather than coming to a classroom and developing projects that introduce a way of thinking with and through art, which inevitably ends, usually sooner rather than later, we could work to make changes in teacher's relationships to contemporary art and the way art is taught in schools.

- Rinaldi, C. (2012) *The Pedagogy of Listening*. In: Edwards, C; Gandini, L and Foreman, G, eds. *The Hundred Languages of Children, the Reggio Emilia Experiences in Transformation*, 3rd ed. California: Praeger, pp. 223 – 246.

Image List

Fig. 1

Image of *Breadfellows' Chat* with Clare Breen and Raluca Croitoru, Rotterdam 2016

Fig. 2

Double Bowl *Companion*, made with Bien Verworden, 2016

Fig. 3

Foundue Pot *Companion*, made with Simon Kentegens, 2016

Fig. 4

Breadfellows' Chats with children of Raheenagh National School during *I Sing the Body Electric*, curated by Jennie Guy for EVA International's Schools Programme, 2018

Fig 5.

Breadfellows' meal using *companions* made with the Chorus of *documenta 14*, in *Yellow Brick*, Athens, 2017

Fig. 6

Companion made with Katherine MacBride, 2018

Fig. 7

Responding to the work of Katherine MacBride, *Breadfellows' Chats* Workshop as part of the *Living Arts Project* with Katherine MacBride, 2017