

PURPOSE



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Artlink

From the beginning of March 2020 through to the present we have asked different artists and thinkers to respond to issues that were being unearthed as Covid-19 took its toll on our communities. Each writer was asked to respond to a simple brief that in some way related to their lived experience, providing the opportunity to open up these issues, to better understand what we could and should have in common.

I'm not very good at going to parks.

It took me a long time to realise this: I'm just not very good at going to parks. This felt like a bizarre thing to say, but understanding why I felt like this, especially during a time where people hunger for and most need civic green spaces, has been crucial in understanding and tackling how purpose is defined across multiple contexts. Parks as 'purposeful leisure' makes sense to me, I understand it - I just didn't 'feel' it the way others seem to ... but this has started to change.

Growing up on a farm, I realised that being in a grassy, green space was always connected to a unique task; it required careful thinking, there was risk, unknown outcomes, danger even. The event or circumstance surrounding why I was in a green space was dictated and attached to a discernible goal. The pathway to this goal was something that revealed itself in the 'doing.' The pre-defined purpose was measurable in success by the clearly visible outcome.

Parks, or green spaces within urban contexts, are vital for human health - exercise, fresh air, proximity to nature, a psychic de-contextualising of yourself from a built, made environment into something slightly riskier, more subject to change, unruly ... more real? This innate need is termed 'biophilia' or a tendency to seek connections with nature and other forms of life. Offices hang green rectangles to increase employees' work flow, green chairs are installed in waiting rooms and trauma centres. Our need to connect is incorporated into offices, foyers and;



This feeling I associated with parks (which heightened at the start of lockdown) was an example of how purpose or ‘purposefulness’ for me can stray, meander or part-vaporise. “How to have purpose in a world that’s paused? How to feel purposeful when restrictions pre-define possibilities of movement and restrict all physicality?” were all questions that hung in the air. I felt adrift and at sea in my studio with galleries closed, workshops shut, undefined project extensions and postponements. I experienced difficulty in feeling ‘purposeful’ within a very elastic, undefined timeframe. I love the outdoors and have lived in and with nature in a very rural Northern Ireland so this new feeling around parks and ‘purpose’ required more attention and prompted a shift in perspective. I thought I didn’t want nature or wildness to be dictated to me through pre-disposed paths, routes or limited expectation directed by ‘sameness.’ I was wrong about this, and the feeling, I’m happy to say, has shifted.

If I continue with this 'park' motif, it is inextricably linked to the reasons behind why I love art; why I make it, why I participate in it, share it ... and why I think it's becoming more and more vital within the world we occupy. Green sites offer a very particular type of felt language: a 'park' suggests a predetermined route with specific outcomes. There is nothing unknown or unexpected here? The point is being present 'in' it, to letting things happen around you, despite the predisposed pathways, routes and safety bark. It has always been clear to me that I am interested in art as a language that can increase proximity. It's a place that exists for us to think, to speak and to listen to languages which are outwith written, spoken or lingual form. The word 'qualia' goes some way to describe this, "*An unfamiliar term for something that could not be more familiar to each of us: the ways things seem to us*"¹ The redness of red, the feeling of a sunset, the pain of a headache; it is what it is directly like to be experiencing. By sharing experience we become closer and a language is created. It is in this space that 'purpose' is animated.

My interest in art, particularly sculpture, was with the aim to develop a language: a means of communication, sharing and exchange; a way to combine references, knowledge, research and lived experience and express these things through physical materials. For those sources to be 'held' somewhere and to be expressed again; to be caught and interrogated, to be felt 'more.' It was never meant as a way to be illustrative or to provide a specific, predetermined answer, it was about trying to get 'closer.' Film maker Trinh T. Minh-ha describes her approach as 'speaking nearby' rather than 'speaking about'. Trinh posits her works as 'boundary events', existing in a zone between labels, a place where new labels might form, dissolve or cross

¹ Dennett, Daniel (1985-11-21) *Quining Qualia*

over one another, and which allows her works to evade categorisation.² It sits outwith language and into something that can only be described or felt through shared experience. Sculpture especially holds particular power for me: it has a body, it occupies space that you understand through your own understanding of physicality. We all exist in a material body and by sharing space with an 'other' borders shift. I find this incredibly powerful.

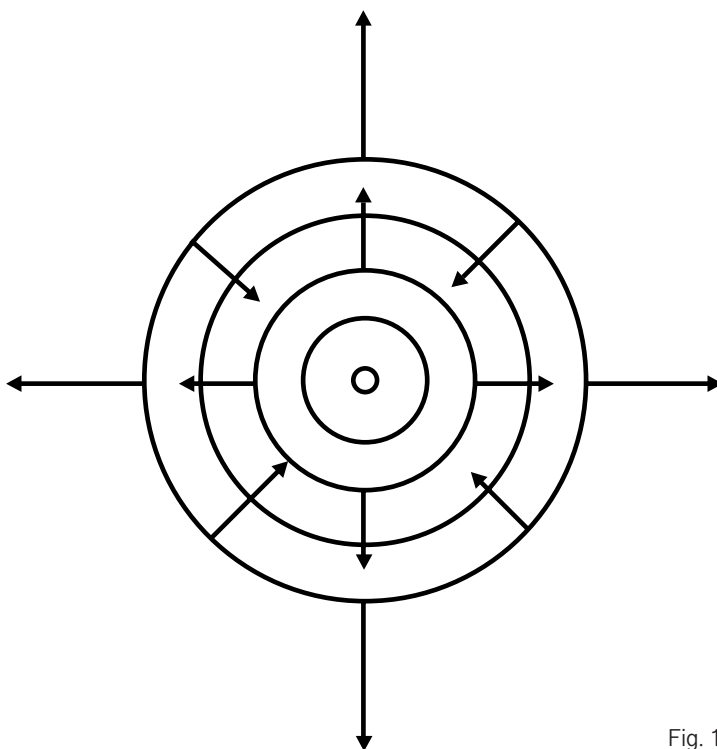


Fig. 1

² *Making the Fourth Dimension: Trinh T. Minh-Ha In Conversation with Xiaolu Guo*, ocula.com London, 2 March 2018

A shift in feeling happened when a friend took me birdwatching at a site near my tenement flat. The range and depth of species which had previously gone unnoticed thronged and chattered above my head. They were all so busy, so engaged and definitive in their actions and I felt part of that. I felt that *from* them and *with* them.

At Cherry Road and KMA, new types of language emerge; new ways of communicating emerge when time is spent, attention is paid and you occupy space together. This 'proximity' through shared space and spent time is where a shared 'purpose' emerges - you can start to speak 'closer' to each other. This approach was challenged during lockdown when physical channels and shared physical spaces were removed. We had to occupy space and place in new ways. How is it possible to be proximate at distance? To be physical when immaterial?

After a session with a young woman I am working on a project with, I asked her what she thought about this experience of lockdown and working together so far. She said, "The internet connection lets me see you, I plan my day around the session and look forward to it. We are getting stuff done!" She was right - the whole family is now involved in our enterprise. "IT IS SOO WEIRD!" she exclaimed, when thinking again about our current lockdown status, laughing and reminding me to send her a voice note of things we'd discussed and worked on that morning. We are getting stuff done. I learnt that you don't always have to be there to be 'there.'

The purpose of a practice and working together at Artlink is to try to share these often indefinable interactions: to give a type of language to it so this 'place' can be shared. This endeavour, the generosity of staff sharing and

feeling, of trying and testing, of time and porosity is, definitively PURPOSE. Purpose in doing: to do and do more. The 'arrow' for this particular path isn't linear or predetermined and there is something incredibly freeing here. It's now a larger group endeavour, expanded, and, for me, this model allows for a more radical interpretation of 'purpose' or being 'purposeful': the rules are changed for the better.

Working at Artlink, and especially over the past few months where significant challenges have been put in place has helped me realise the strength in team working, and an ability and determinedness to stay close. One body becomes a team of bodies: we are sometimes just avatars existing as voices on the phone, lines in emails, faces on a zoom call, torches and gold curtains and finger lights. But still, the idea, the 'purpose' makes the connections for us. It becomes a tangible presence.

The experience sharing of ideas, in the trialling, in the trying and in the 'togetherness' across this common goal of 'closer, closer' looks like circular ripples in a pond that continually oscillate from the central force, back and forth. It's a type of domino effect; purpose breeds purpose. Connections are made, consequences occur, pathways cross, and so on (See Fig. 1).

This energy becomes more integrated into a 'larger team' thinking: we are popping up in family homes, in residential houses, in gardens, on phones, in jazzy envelopes. As Alan, a member of staff at Cherry Road said, "We strive to make things better, simplistic, quicker and more interesting/enhanced, even during these times of pandemics and lockdowns. Overcoming ... social distancing to continue bringing a stimulating life for those we deliver our services to. In these days where everything is online, ideas cross borders

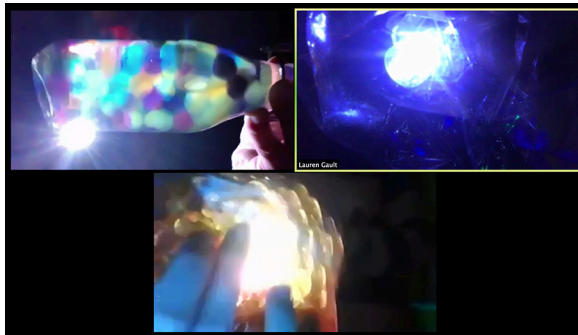
without the need of passports and customs!” (again see Fig 1!)

Purpose and vigour sit side by side, they speak to one another; increased vigour leads to heightened purpose, heightened purpose increases vigour and so on. To invigorate means to ‘give life’ or animate. Team working, sharing of ideas, attempts with materials (often without defined outcome) I find are a real raising agent. Encounters are witnessed and documented through tape-covered tables, bright liquid plastic bags taped to windows... all these small, discreet objects which seem of small consequence represent seismic shifts in confidence, proximity and language. These moments are acknowledged and their legacy is far reaching.



Art holds within its language an intention, an action, a moment, a thought - in the same way that many intangible or indefinable ingredients and reactions go into processes like respiration, growth, photosynthesis ... often moving at indiscernible pace they are part of a set of events that lead to actions, initiate

change and have real, far-reaching consequence. These intents should still resonate within the artwork - this is a type of charge that I feel is capable of creating a response - a setting into action a chain of consequences. This charge that is electric, energising and vital: it's here that art gains its most potential.



I spent some time between lockdowns in a gazebo I've converted into a type of solarium: there are spacelights, aurora borealis colours flickering and many reflective surfaces catching and throwing the moving lights. During my first session with Rebecca we sit in the space humming, and just looking for a long time together. We use different hand held lights and wordlessly make a type of game that only we understand. Those twenty minutes of intense, shared looking had a profound effect on me. From this one experience I felt like we shared a conversation. I describe this experience to one of her team and create some artworks and materials to complement and develop the conversation. The team member responds to this, following and expanding the original idea in new and unexpected ways. Rebecca responds and creates even more new scenarios and the conversation takes a new turn - a ripple effect occurs - 'purpose' gathers speed.

Participating in and working alongside these processes with Artlink has utterly changed my view on the world - my relationship to materials, my attention ... things I cannot describe in written language.

I have learned how adaptable, resilient and capable of collective, circular care we are. I have learned how art can catalyse a new 'closeness' and that there is a feeling of shared togetherness in pursuing this goal. Staying close IS possible with distance, and in a way, these challenges can direct more radical responses. Experiencing this 'closeness' gives me purpose - *I want to be there again. How do I get there again?*

The team is bigger now (Fig. 1). Art acts as a means to catalyse our shared endeavours - these actions have consequences and most thrillingly, our consequences have their own actions too.



Artlink

Established in 1984, Artlink is an arts and disability organisation. We believe participation in the arts has an important role to play in realising personal and social change.


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