

Mystery Shopper Report for 'Histories'. EATc Conference 2009.

The conference opened with a metaphor that we were gathered to drink from the water hole; and once the day closed I can say that I felt watered and refreshed by what I found there.

The speakers were well ordered and the day as a whole took the delegates on a journey from Outside to Inside, from Civic to Personal. Each speaker seemed to be an adventurer: trying new things, fighting, pushing boundaries; sometimes on instinct alone, but always based on the strength and knowledge of past experience.

Vanessa Newcombe spoke of her career shift from psychotherapist and student counsellor to City and County Councillor. She told us about her years knocking on the doors of council departments, the changes that had come about through her persistence, and talking to people about the issues she cared about. This has effected real change for foster children in the care system, specifically for older children.

She put the idea of 'talking to someone' in a wider context for me. Out of the usual small group or one to one work encouraging expression in others, and for therapists to go and 'talk to someone' to improve professional systems. Out of the small room and into the streets.

Neil Springham talked about a project that takes service users and carers to The Tate Gallery to look at and respond artistically to chosen pictures there. In the telling it sounded pre-planned and easy. Neil spoke about the struggles of learning how to do it successfully, for example- beginning with the carers and getting it right with them before working with the service users. The visits involved spending time with a picture, discussing personal responses to it before moving into their own art work. This developed into making film and audio recordings which are today available on headphones for the general public to hear on their gallery tours. The carers were really boosted by this development, and pleased to open out their experiences for others to hear. This was an unpredicted outcome and Neil's talk continued the theme of opening the

closed door. He provoked me to think differently about safe space, and facilitator/therapist assumptions of what people want.

Karen Brett's film making work also showed us how personal stories can keep travelling through culture. She was another speaker who had had a radical career change, and whose past work still influenced her present concerns; from nurse to film maker. By spending significant periods of time with the people she films she builds up a strong trust that comes through in her digital storytelling. The whole room was enthralled by the intimacy and empathy of her films. She hopes that once facts and events are known about people lives then they are treated differently, with more respect, by those around them. She spoke about her film of a person who has OCD, and the role of film making within memory clinics.

It was inspiring to hear both Neil and Karen talk about how they involved the participants in the editing choices and process, and the boost that had given the individuals.

Alise Ojay had the awkward after lunch spot and with the lightest of touches got all of us singing almost without our realising it. A truly joyful noise was made. I wasn't the only one to feel both invigorated by it and astonished with the ease with which an audience of mostly non singers were enabled to sing.

Camilla Carr's personal story drew us into a narrative about looking behind people's masks. She told us the story of how her and her partner Jon survived fourteen months of captivity after their kidnap in Chechnya in 1996. Her personal storytelling drew me vividly in as she described the layers of her story: the landscape, their hopes and intentions, emotions, the descriptions of different characters, the affect of war on the children. She told us about the techniques they had used to survive and remain sane, how looking beneath the mask of her captors, and the ways she responded to them, sometimes brought about profound changes in the way they were treated. She also talked about the journey of forgiveness that she is on, and her involvement with The Forgiveness Project.

Malcolm Learmonth chaired the conference and dropped thoughtful gems and interesting facts and histories in-between the speakers, linking the day together and adding to it's

richness. He spoke of the arts as being fundamentally humanising and the old, but true, chestnut of how simplicity is the hardest of all things.

As seems to be usual with an ***Insider Art*** event the venue was interesting, all ran to time, the organisation was efficient and the food was great. What will they do next year?

Sara Hurley

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