

TRANSIT: A creative reflection

Georgina Aboud

Part 1: Story

I want you to breathe and imagine what resides within you. Not the fizz of electrons, the highways of neurons, the garden of organs that jostle in your chest, but everything else. Everything that makes up a person; the stockpile of experiences, the people and countries you know, the ways you show love, your mistakes, and your rituals of reluctance. The everyday which runs and runs and runs too fast, and the memories you recall and those altering decisions which were made in the turn of a head. These stories which stack inside us, with their shame and bristling beauty and sorrow and fortitude and bravery and hardship make up our lives. These are stories which create the strange, idiosyncratic republics, that are us.

In winter, in the no-man's land between Christmas and New Year or a January with three named storms, you meet the communities. I am told of draughty halls and cups of tea and the barrels of chocolate, with squeaky wrappers. Now that I have met you all, I can imagine you better. I can hear the singing reaching into corners, and the musical instruments coaxing in warm air and the participants eyes compelled by the grace of your movements across the space. There is curiosity and joy, and vulnerability and energy. I sit at my kitchen table and look over the wellbeing questionnaires, they talk of innovation and compassion, and the indicators are clear; the communities are overwhelmingly glad for your visit.

For you, some found the workshops gentle, and others encountered challenges. You adapted, you revived forgotten skills or found new ones. There is thoughtfulness in your reports back, they write of the tenderness of connection and the quiet power, and exhaustion, of care and reinforce what we all know; a new advent of loneliness and insecurity since Covid, the pile on of the cost-of-living crisis, climate change, wars that are felt deeply.

And you absorbed the feelings and the stories, some that smell as fresh as books, the casual retelling of the astonishing and the soft small histories of the good and the ordinary and the difficult. And then there are the stories that are fraying and tricky to find and catch, their fragments float in a mind's endless galaxy.

What is said is gently held and considered, it is another understanding of life, which is perhaps rarely spoken. Later this month, I meet you at a lodge in the East Sussex countryside, and witness you work and see how all our stories will begin to meet.

Part 2: Finding your way

'A good story can transport you to another world, while a great story can change the way you see your own.'

Martin MacDonagh, *The Pillowman*.

Frost dusted day. We are in a hall with a wooden Parquet floor, and lit by sky drenched with cold, clean light. It is the second day at Laughton lodge.

Yesterday, you used a story wheel to begin to uncover narratives. You note down fragments.

Today, there are 65 sheets of tablet paper at my feet, paving almost a third of the hall. Some are scuffed with shoe prints, others unmarked.

On one sheet you have written *'boarding, board, boarded'* and then ringed in a purple heart: *'Displaced.'*

On another you note the vast trajectory of a life: childhood, marriage, family, adventure. You write *'I met them only once, I shared only three hours with them, out of how many years of their lives.'*

On another still is written *'A society that enjoys hierarchy'* and a short, sharp line connects to an *'Exhausted'* set down in a black outlined cloud.

And voices and song lyrics drift through on other pages. And on others still, questions: *'Belonging... How do we show we care?'*

There is ice on the windows in this hall and some of the difficulties of living in this country at this time are on these sheets. But you also write of hope. You say:

'Queerness from fear to joy

From addiction to peace

From being bullied to becoming a warrior... Each story has a point of surrender.'

These are some of the seeds which will become the 'TRANSIT' pieces taken to Towner.

I see you work, solo, in pairs, in groups, layering and layering on an idea. Experimenting, moving from a notion into a burgeoning piece of art. And when it gets tough, you get playful, when it becomes hard you are tender, when it is loud, softness follows. This is a full-bodied process, which could have turned bloody: you are all so very different. There is dance and movement, singing, strings and drums, performing, writing and oral storytelling. Some of you are traditional, others more avant-garde. You have connections to many

continents on this Earth, which brings different approaches and yet you have also found yourselves here on the South Coast of England. You are also all local. This mix is the beginning of a spell. It is creating intricacy and interest. It is creating something universal and specific.

In a few weeks, after the pieces have marinated in your head, you will rehearse in a closed Towner, but before then you consider what the last two days have offered. A sense of community is suggested by many of you with collaboration and beauty and richness and liberation. Also a little uncertainty, a need for clarity, an understanding that you need to trust the process.

When we leave, the blue sky is dark, and littered with stars. I think of the way every life is built on minutes and I think of two sheets of paper I had read in the hall:

'Isolation' floats in the middle of one sheet, a single word in pink.

And on the other: *Bring a little gift by adding to the story.*

Part 3 – Eastbourne

Towner is bright in all weathers; its pantone colours and geometric shapes are a surprise from whatever angle the gallery is approached. Its modest Bilboa curves are set against buildings that either have Victorian grandeur or post-war functionality. Until mid-April, it houses the internationally recognised Turner Prize, and for four days in February, TRANSIT lives in its liminal spaces.

And suddenly under stairs, against concrete pillars and lockers, on top of benches that look like tombstones, in alcoves and corridors and a lift big enough to house Monet's Water Lily series, utilitarian components of a building become places of enchantment.

Each chapter is its own story rooted in the communities' narratives and your unique experiences. You bring an intimacy to all the pieces, with some inviting direct engagement. People are visibly moved when they request, and you sing, their familiar childhood songs. Puff the Magic Dragon whisps through reception and the café, bringing a specific brand of melancholy.

Gallery goers are in turn mundane and profound when approached and asked to jot down their near misses, their personal 'almosts' either recent or memorable. Love, death, pain, joy are all collected, alongside an unsurety for the small decisions in life, which perhaps speak to a global uncertainty.

And there is play, 'The Twins' create an alternative mischievous universe of spirited hide and seek, high fives and funny questions in a usually more sensible space. Children who are otherwise bored are thrilled at subversive high jinks.

In another area, the public contribute ideas to the live writing of mini plays, poems and stories. You develop their thoughts into sometimes absurd, sometimes profound and sometimes darkly funny fragments and project them onto a wall in the cafe.

Other chapters, equally intimate, are simply watched. The balancing of a spirit level on your head whilst in sheer drop high heels around the bustling reception area, is surreal and compelling. You provide a masterclass for studying comfort, curiosity and openness.

In the window, you stand as Unseen Woman, both a figure of isolation and sculptural glamour. You watch blankly and move slowly, with a precise fragility and people are spellbound. They stop on stairs and between the reception's sliding doors, they gather close around you, and outside they walk past, and double back to watch through the window. You are not unseen and capture the highest audience count.

Another piece offers a different interpretation of loneliness and isolation: Moira wanders around the gallery in a blue cleaning pinny, a pink woolly hat and pull along luggage which perhaps holds her entire life. Moira shows us stories that are uncomfortable. People ignore and move on, and others aren't sure whether she is part of TRANSIT and some enquire after her, believing her real, because she is.

Every piece leaves the audience with something that stays; In Hand to Hand, a woman turned to me and said '*it made me think about the importance of human touch, the time recently I held my friend's hand.*' In another piece there is the vision of discarded drawings blowing across the reception floor. And another still, the power of a voice draws people up flights of stairs. There is a piece about time, and another sensitively depicting the confusion when the memories of a life begin to recede. And there is Blind Faith, held in the lift which is gentle and profound and sad and bound with trust. And during Blind Faith, there is rag rug which represents the sea and is worked on throughout the residency with anyone who wants to join in. This act of making invites more stories and sharing.

Each chapter is so rich and layered and the pieces grow and change. You are given notes, *you can do less, try emphasising the movement, what would happen if you were softer?* I marvel at your ability to switch and transform, to find different sides of yourself within minutes, to create these pieces fresh each time.

Some gallery goers believe they have stumbled upon a secret and others travel far to watch. '*It's very un-Eastbourne*' one says, as others visit for multiple days, bringing their mum, bringing their baby.

It made my visit very special, the pieces were accessible, humorous, emotionally moving and thought provoking.'

Another says, *'We should do this more often, to make connections, be spontaneous and not be frightened.'*

People enquire how they might join your collective and community members also visit, excited to meet the artists again and remarking on the residency's accessibility. An art hierarchy doesn't exist, children in secret lives from adults react to pieces which their parents don't see, whilst regular visitors almost become part of TRANSIT.

For four days, Towner feels different, as stories and art become animated.

4 Spit and Glue

When the residency is over, you discuss what you have gained and many mention community and finding your tribe. You talk about undertaking more compassionate disruption projects, exploring unfamiliar creative practices, ideas for site specific work. We ask what next?

There is an English saying, 'holding it together with spit and glue'. Our stories can be hard, and times are difficult. But our bodies containing all our secrets and desires and hopes, also contain many elements which were made in stars and travelled through supernovas.

On days of connection and community and illumination of what it is to be human, yes, we are held together with spit and glue but also stardust. It is important to have days like these to help us remember the stardust.