

Artist Researchers -

The Umha Aois Project as Interdisciplinary Research Environment

The notion of interdisciplinarity has become popular in recent years, not only in art practice, which has long been using combinations of ideas and media, but also in the more traditionally academic fields.

Discipline boundaries have begun to dissolve, with research increasingly based on issues and specific questions, rather than the disciplines themselves. Collaborative projects are emerging, and scientists are more and more turning to contemporary art practice for new insights.

With increasing confidence in art as a research process, combinations such as Arts and Health, or Art and Science, have established a prominent presence in the professional artworld in Ireland and the UK.

The degree of freedom and input of the artist in such collaborations is often varied – the artist may act as illustrator, technical advisor, communicator, researcher or theorist. It could be argued by sceptics that there is a danger for artists in these relationships to simply provide the aesthetic facade for the other parties' work. This article will explore the role of the art practitioner in such collaborative partnerships.

While often initiated by institutions such as hospitals or universities with appropriate resources – and an agenda of their own –, some interdisciplinary projects are led by individual artists or artists' groups with notable success.

One of the longest-running collaborative research projects in Ireland is “Umha Aois” - The Bronze Age 4,000 Years On”. Established in 1995 as part of the European Year of the Bronze Age, its original aims were to research and experiment with Bronze Age casting technologies, making them accessible to contemporary artists as an affordable alternative to the often expensive modern foundry.

Since then, Umha Aois has been making significant contributions to archaeological research. It acts as a forum for experiments and discussion, illustrating the mutual benefits which may be gained by representatives of collaborating disciplines.

Founder members Niall O'Neill and Cliodna Cussen were principally concerned with an authentic reproduction of Bronze Age casting techniques as a way to re-connect with past societies and cultural identity.

From its initial stages until 2004, the group was concentrating on reproducing the processes of melting bronze with charcoal and bellows in pit-furnaces, and authentic mould making during the annual Umha Aois symposia. Archaeologists were able to provide some insights on finds and sites. The main source of information, however, were the artists' own experiments and the input from experienced craftspeople, such as Peyju Leywola. Stemming from a caste of bronze workers in Benin, she contributed through her knowledge of traditional mould making materials.

With a number of working pit-furnace designs in operation, the project began to draw more interest from archaeologists once again.

Throughout 2006, and especially during their symposium at An Creagán Visitor Centre, Co. Tyrone, members of Umha Aois have been working on more specific problems, such as the manufacture of Bronze Age objects, for example horns and swords, or the casting of maquettes for sculptures.

Coinciding with the development of the group has been the emergence of a new school of thought in archaeological theory, which is less interested in measurable facts, but includes the question of

human experience in past and present. This has resulted in an increased interest by archaeologists in contemporary art practice.

Archaeologists such as Colin Renfrew have written extensively on the importance of contemporary art as a process of enquiry, liking it to “a vast, unco-ordinated yet somehow enormously effective research programme that looks critically at what we are and how we know what we are [...]”¹ Other archaeologists have taken a more theoretical approach to the role of art practice in understanding material culture. Abstract questions concerning materiality, object agency and human experience have been raised and applied to artworks as well as archaeological finds.

However, in the past five years, theorists in archaeology and anthropology have begun to refer back to materials and environments as integral elements of human experience. Ingold in particular criticises the lack of direct engagement with materials and processes by archaeologists and anthropologists.

Here the theoretical value of a project such as Umha Aois becomes obvious. The activities at the annual symposia differ markedly from an archaeological experiment, although some of the outcomes are providing similar information. While the archaeological experiment takes place under controlled conditions, with accurate measurements and repeatability as their framework, the artistically motivated exploration does not concentrate on the outcome. The making and positioning of things – images, objects and sites – to the art practitioner is a way of thinking through a physical medium.

Umha Aois therefore operates on both a philosophical and a practical level. The rediscovery of ancient techniques of bronze casting and ceramics with minimal equipment opens new possibilities to artists to re-discover this traditional sculpture material directly through their own experience. Additionally, the experimental environment provides a conceptual background and access to imagery which is not usually available in a modern everyday setting.

The performative aspects of the ancient craft skills have been explored by Anne Burke through video, sound collage and photography. Her photographic portraits of tools and artefacts show the objects as separate from their environment, speaking for themselves of their manufacture and life history.

But Burke's documentaries include not only the activities directly associated with the work itself – casting, mould making, finishing of objects – but also provide a record of the social setting. Especially her sound recordings convey an impression of the immaterial environment. Conversations, hammering, footsteps and singing are underlined by the constant breathing of the bellows and the roaring of the furnaces. The symposium is presented as an event with its own dynamics.

The collaboration with archaeologists takes the form of communal activities, rather than discussions between representatives of different viewpoints. This very direct engagement with archaeological questions through art practice provides a research environment in which the question itself drives the enquiry, not the discipline-specific conventions or institutional direction.

The main question - “How could the process have worked with the materials available?” - is answered through direct experimentation, informed mainly by practice and the evidence provided by archaeological artefacts themselves. Umha Aois could thus be characterised as a forum for empirical data collection combined with free creative exploration and spontaneous action.

The outcomes from the symposia and other events have therefore taken two – not always distinct or separate – forms: Some findings have been of an archaeological nature, for example insights into the probability of the use of lost wax in the Bronze Age. Other results have been of rather more

artistic interest, both technically and philosophically.

An example of work that blurs the boundaries between the archaeological experiment and the artwork is the image of a glazed object in a furnace by this author. Originally a reconstruction of a Bronze Age artefact, the object underwent a series of formal and aesthetic transformations, before being exposed to Bronze Age firing processes. The object itself is a record of the way it was made, but the image resulting from this can only be a visual snapshot – the images cannot portray the full spectrum of experiences associated with the object.

While stemming from a technical question about the function of a specific artefact, the photographic work alludes to the theoretical archaeological problem mentioned at the beginning of this article, the reconstruction of human experience through material culture.

Working from an interest in traditional skills and ecological sustainability, Holger Lönze's work at the Umha Aois events may be characterised as research-based art, where the process of enquiry itself constitutes the work.

While the artist experiments with the techniques associated with Bronze Age casting, the site of work develops into an installation of its own – objects begin to gather around the furnace. They are re-arranged, constantly being added to or re-invented to fulfil a new purpose. Crucibles combine with clay vessels holding water, clay moulds and the circular opening of the pit furnace, interrupted in their regular forms by jotting willow sticks and copper pipes – tongs for lifting the glowing crucibles, supports, blow pipes.

Lönze's tools create an aesthetic of functionality, with few objects being added arbitrarily. For archaeologists these workshop installations may hold a particular interest, as they illustrate the manufacture and accumulation of many objects in the natural course of working with Bronze Age technologies, over the comparatively short period of two weeks.

The variety of the work produced and findings made at the Umha Aois symposia illustrates the creative and scientific potential of such collaborative projects. It is, however, vital to their success that representatives from both disciplines are willing to respect the other's aims, and their methodological or philosophical background.

While one party may be interested in solving a particular problem or creating a specific piece of work, the other may need space to develop a new process or simply observe and record an activity. As with the Umha Aois project, running over twelve years and ongoing, organic growth and progress may require time and persistent commitment from organisers and participants.

In entering a collaborative relationship with another discipline, especially one with a long-established ideological tradition, artists need to ensure parity with their collaborator.

Artists are no longer the window-dressers of science but have begun to contribute through their own practical and theoretical expertise.

Cordula Hansen is a sculptor and member of Umha Aois. She is currently completing a PhD in Art at Waterford Institute of Technology.

1 Renfrew, Colin. Figuring It Out. What are we? Where do we come from? The parallel visions of artists and archaeologists. London: Thames and Hudson, 2003. p 7.

2 Umha Aois would like to acknowledge the generous support from their sponsors, Foras na Gaeilge, Údaras na Gaeltachta, Bronze Art Ltd, Alpha Metals Ltd, BOC Ltd, Isaac Mullen Ltd, James Murphy and Sons Ltd, Scarva Pottery Supplies Ltd, RPM Ltd, Weldtech Ltd, AE Ltd, Crinkle Merchants Ltd and PJ Dix Ltd. The group would particularly like to thank the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, the Heritage Council, and An Creagán Visitor Centre for their hospitality during the 2006 symposium.

1Illustrations



Bronze Age Stone Mould, Co. Tyrone



Holger Lönze: Workshop Implements



Billy MagFhloinn performing on the bellows