

## DE FIL EN AIGUILLE... SNÁTH NASC

What is the relationship between process, artwork and context?

**Françoise Dupré** discusses the question in the light of her art project at the Irish Museum of Modern Art

There are many interconnected issues that concern me when involved in an international community-based and collaborative art project. They include: context, content, duration, production and authorship/ownership. While I am equally concerned by all these issues (and they have been discussed at length in a wide range of publications including CONTEXTS) the question of the artwork remains today a challenging one. I here propose to use my project *de fil en aiguille ... snáth nasc*, realised at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in 2003, as a case study to discuss the complex relationship between process, artwork and context.

Underpinning my practice is my concern with the nature of the creative process and the condition and location of art production. I create alone, or collaboratively, objects, site-specific work and installations in a wide range of contexts including the studio, the gallery, communities and non-art spaces in the UK and abroad.<sup>1</sup> Inspired by Michel de Certeau's concept of the art of making in the everyday, I create art work that aims to celebrate home craft and creative skills that are made invisible, marginal or are being

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lost through migration, socio-economic changes and the globalisation of capitalism. The physical existence of the artwork in my practice is therefore essential in addressing the de-skilling of individuals and communities.

There is a rich and broad range of work by artists working within the framework of context-based practice, dialogue-based public art, community-based art and relational aesthetics (to name a few...). There are probably as many types of art practices that engage with communities as there are projects. Each project has a specificity that comes about as a result of many interconnected factors between artists, art making, participants and context. However cultural and art theorists, when discussing these art practices, have a tendency to follow a model that uses an unchallenged evolutionary narrative where the making of the art object, perceived as a traditional activity, has been replaced by a performative process-based approach. This approach is for me problematic because it is trapped in an unhelpful dichotomy and because, in extreme cases, it excludes altogether the physicality of the artwork and the experience of art making: both intrinsically part of my practice. For me the solitary activity of making art in my studio, the collective activity of making art with participants in another place, and my intersubjective engagement with participants and communities are all part of the same practice. Indeed, in my practice, the entire creative process from experimentation with materials and processes through development of ideas, to the realisation of an artwork benefits from this multi-sited symbiosis.

*de fil en aiguille ... snáth nasc*

In September 2003 I moved to Dublin to undertake a four month residency at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA, Artists' Work Programme). The residency had an open brief and encouraged research, experimentation and development of ideas, rather than the realisation of an artwork. No pressure was put upon artist residents and no final exhibition was scheduled. This was an ideal environment for me to develop further my practice

<sup>1</sup>Previous international projects include: *emplacements*, an artist-led cross cultural collaborative project initiated by Françoise Dupré and Roxane Pernat. Over fifty artists participated in five events that took place between 1999 and 2003. *disEmplacements*, London 1999; *relocation*, London 1999; *New Holland*, St Petersburg 2000; *The Red Banner Knitwear Factory*, St Petersburg 2002; *Manchester Week*, St Petersburg 2003. The St Petersburg projects were initiated by Françoise Dupré, Gail Pearce and Roxane Pernat. For more information visit [www.emplacements.co.uk](http://www.emplacements.co.uk). My current research project *here and there* was launched at IMMA in October 2003, encompassing a range of projects and sites, it will be brought together on a website: [www.here-and-there.net](http://www.here-and-there.net)



at a time when I was searching for ways of bringing together the studio-based and solitary activity of object making and the public-based activity of making art with people. I therefore decided to use my time at IMMA to initiate and realise a community-based and collaborative project around the activity of French knitting or spool knitting. The residency provided me with an invaluable amount of uninterrupted time to live and work within the Irish cultural context, tap into its knitting tradition and find out more about the existing thriving programme of community-based and public art projects and debates.

*de fil en aiguille ... snáth nasc* participants were of different ages and from a wide range of social and cultural backgrounds and origins. However what they all had in common was a passion for knitting and the project brought them together.

A core group of eleven met and knitted every Saturday at my IMMA studio. Participants did not belong to an existing community group but were individuals who had responded to a call for knitters that the IMMA Education Department had put out in wool shops and knitters' newsletters and websites. A self-help group of four women with children with autism, based in Kilkenny, also joined the project and I travelled regularly to Kilkenny to meet the group and knit. Altogether twenty one individuals participated in the project. They were: Claire Bracken, Frieda Czerniak, Ria Czerniak, Theresa Czerniak, Maria Dollard, Tim Elford, June Elliott, Jane Flynn, Beverly Green, Breda Humphries, Silvia Hoefnagels, Ruth Morris-Grant, Alice Murphy, Susan Murphy, Máire Ní Neachtain, Maureen O'Brien, Vera O'Hearnáin, Hupert Pitter, Silvia Serban, Trish Walsh, Anne Marie Weafer and Orlagh Weafer.

### The artwork

As the leading artist I was entirely responsible for a project I had initiated and I facilitated its realisation. I proposed to the group to create a knitted installation inspired by the design of the formal garden at the Royal Hospital Kilmainham (where IMMA is located). Through time, participants contributed to the design and introduced Irish knitting and four needle knitting. The particular technique of French knitting consists of making knitted braids using a spool with four or more pins. It is a simple and flexible knitting activity that allows a great deal of experimentation with materials and scale. The Irish knitting stitches included cable, blackberry and moss stitches that are part of the Irish Aran sweater. A wide range of mate-

*Digital photography and traditional home craft became one artwork instead of being seen as two opposing art practices.*

rials were employed and only white yarns were used to give the artwork a formal visual coherence.

Although the residency did not include a final exhibition, it became clear from the start that it was important to show publicly the finished artwork and I negotiated with IMMA for the work to be exhibited after completion. In January 2004 I returned to Dublin to install, with participants, *de fil en aiguille... snáth nasc* in IMMA's Process Room (6- 18 January 2004). The piece was later exhibited in Kilkenny at the Kilkenny County Council 72 John Street Gallery (5 November - 10 December 2004). The installation was a four square meter textile-based floor piece surrounded by a narrow horizontal wall mounted strip of 209 video stills images (6cmx4.5cm each).

*de fil en aiguille... snáth nasc* literally means from 'thread to needle' and evokes the slow unfolding of a narrated event. Associated with textiles, the phrase evokes story telling and indeed personal stories were told, collective experiences shared and through the knitting sessions I progressively got to know individual participants, and a little bit more about Ireland. The knitted floor installation alone evokes process and time as these are inherent to knitting, but I choose to further contextualise the work with a visual record of the processes and dialogues that underpinned the project to give viewers a sense of time and place. I edited my video diary and printed hundreds of still images to place on the Process Room walls to frame the floor piece. These images were visual records of the four month residency and the knitting project.

*de fil en aiguille... snáth nasc* was about my intersubjective engagement with participants and my new location, and about the making of an artwork. This was visually achieved by bringing together the still images and the knitted piece. Digital photography and traditional home craft became one artwork instead of being seen as two opposing art practices. For example the digital images could have been shown alone, emphasising process rather than artwork. However without the making activity there would not have



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been dialogues and interconnectivity. Choosing not to show the knitted artwork would have been ethically extremely problematic as participants would have become a means to an artistic end. Exhibiting the finished artwork at IMMA and in Kilkenny was about acknowledging participants' involvement and work, though this was not about validating participants' skills as they were already expert knitters. Moreover the physicality and materiality of the knitted artwork itself and its public viewing remained intrinsically part of the concept and meaning of the overall project. The installation went beyond a spatial response to the IMMA's formal garden and Process Room to address the slow disappearance of traditional textile-based skills within the socio-cultural and economic context of Ireland. All subtlety interwoven issues and experiences that participants and artist wanted to share with our audience.

**Françoise Dupré** is a French London-based artist. She studied in London at Camberwell School of Arts and Chelsea College of Art and Design and is a permanent lecturer in Fine Art at the University of Central England, Birmingham Institute of Art and Design

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The digital images above and overleaf, edited specially for *CONTEXTS* are from the artist's video diary and include some of the images shown at IMMA and Kilkenny as part of the *de fil en aiguille ... snáth nasc* exhibition







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Aideen McCarthy, from Caught on Camera, 2005, published by Dublin Docklands Development Authority



Austin McQuinn, from Ape Opera House, 2005, courtesy the artist

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10/11 Earl Street South, Dublin 8, IRELAND  
TEL: (01) 473 6600 FAX: (01) 473 6599  
EMAIL: info@artsincouncil.ie  
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Local Rural Population

Fig. A

Fig. A

Fig. B

Paste sheet  
Heavy card  
cut figure 3  
twice. Cut  
slots and  
together at  
shown.

THE ART WORK ISSUE