

Challenges to community arts and online communication during Ireland's Covid-19 lockdowns

Kathryn Crowley

Summary This paper is an auto-ethnographic account of an online project that I instigated in Ireland during the Covid-19 pandemic. It reflects on the difficulties in building a group project with people who had never met before, the move to online events, my lack of skills and experience in that realm, and unexpected communication that was unsettling, all of which were exacerbated by my personal struggles during a global pandemic.

Keywords lockdowns, social arts, solidarity

Copyright This work is licenced under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 licence.

How to cite Crowley, Kathryn. 'Challenges to community arts and online communication during Ireland's Covid-19 lockdowns'. *Culture Kaleidoscoop* 1 (2023). DOI 10.57031/culcal.v1i1.12142

Community arts / Socially engaged practice

'Community' refers to people who live or work in a specific locality, whether that be a housing estate, a rural area, or a prison. It can include groups that share a particular interest, such as music, the environment, or human rights, and it can exist online.¹ In *She Flows Along* (2022) the connectivity that I hoped to encourage was rooted in a shared interest in women's health and equality.

There were three main reasons for instigating this project:

1. to keep myself content and to feel useful through creativity,
2. to try to unite more people (even in cyberspace), and
3. to sustain the momentum of fighting to make abortion legal, safe, and accessible that had been building up since 2012 when people sought to overturn archaic laws in Ireland.²

Not long before *She Flows Along*, my multigenerational poetry project *Magical Moments* (May 2021) had attracted 67 responses and resulted in a chapbook of

poetry and stories from 16 people. It evolved smoothly and I expected that it would be easy enough to follow that up by creating an open space for women everywhere to share their honest experiences related to menstruation, menopause, and other taboo subjects through art or poetry.

The Ireland context

Apart from short periods of six to eight months in other countries (Ethiopia, Nepal, Morocco), I have lived in Ireland my whole life. The mental scars of colonialism run deep here, and working-class women in particular have suffered greatly from misogynistic policies of the state,³ including anti-abortion laws. My art is informed by this Irish context and focuses on community building in a society that has experienced some tense, polarised political contexts over the years; two of these events in particular – the movement to make abortion legal and the Covid-19 pandemic – framed the art project I will discuss below. Despite the progress made after repealing the anti-abortion amendment in Ireland, many elements of women's health remain taboo, including menstruation and menopause, which were central themes in *Crimson Waves*, the precursor to *She Flows Along*. This project – Ireland's first art and poetry project concerned with female health from menstruation to menopause – began in 2017.

Open call and promotion

To connect with the intended audience and recruit participants, I first produced an open call, wrote about the project on the blog section of my website, designed a graphic, and kept the project description concise.

I shared this open call through the Visual Artists Ireland:

'She flows along.'

Open call for art and writing. 'She flows along' is not about going with the flow; it seeks works that communicate solidarity, compassion, and a thirst for social justice.

There are 12 themes, and you are welcome to respond to one or more of them through imagery or text: Menstruation. Stigma. Perimenopause. The divine feminine. Menopause. Being a woman in Ireland today. Motherhood. Social justice. Earth mother. Female health and hope. Nature. Healing.

An email address was shared, participation was open to women everywhere aged 18 and over, and respondents were invited to send writing or an image for consideration by email.

Next I circulated a press release to two local newspapers, but these were not picked up. In my experience, it is challenging to secure support from national newspapers unless a famous person or a government organisation is involved. For the first year of the pandemic, I had written health features as a volunteer, and my writing was published in full by local newspapers. Editors happily took these free contributions. But later, when no support was given to *She Flows Along*, I was sorely disappointed.

I also invited people to participate on social media. I did not have a Twitter account, so I set one up. At first I shared the open call on my own Facebook and Instagram accounts. Instagram, not for the first time in my experience, seemed to be the least successful. Events on Facebook often reach many people, so I created an event to see how it would work. It did not offer scope for discussion on topics, so I deleted it after a few days. Facebook groups are more intimate, and I shared the open call in two of my private writing groups.

Phone communication was something I felt an aversion towards during Covid-19. My thinking at the time was that so many people were working from home (and frazzled), and I did not want to put them 'on the spot'. Now, however, having come through the storm with everyone else, I can see in hindsight that phone calls would have been easier and faster in many ways to get the word out.

As well as using email and social media, I reached out to local radio, but they did not share the open call. Usually local radio advertises community art events for free, but during the peak of the pandemic the station was being bombarded with requests to publicise events and services.

I contacted artists and writers directly, and they spread the word via social media, email, and word of mouth. What proved most successful were endorsements by others. People who had taken part in projects in the past with whom I had a working relationship, friends, and people who know of my work (even though we have never met in person) helped spread the word through their social channels and by email.

When I spoke with friends and colleagues about menstruation education, most of them revealed that they had not received any (neither had I). I also observed this in my yoga classes, where my students were expressive and talkative, yet shy when it came to any mention of menstruation. So began a new art project. The lack of education around women's biology during primary school could be part of the reason that college students with dysmenorrhoea have been identified as

‘assuming symptoms are normal, thinking providers would not offer help, being unaware of treatment options, and feeling embarrassed or afraid to seek care’.⁴

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire refers to how dialogue with people is radically necessary to every authentic revolution. While an art project may not be considered revolutionary to any great magnitude, it is radical insofar as it shines a light on all that is usually unmentionable.⁵

For a year I made pictures and wrote poems about menstruation, taboo, shame, and menopause, then invited submissions for a group exhibition, which attracted artists and writers from Ireland, the UK, Scotland, Slovakia, and the US who read about the project online. The cervical smear scandal was unfolding at the time, and I was also working on art in support of the Repeal campaign. Freire was right: dialogue, the self-expression of individuals, and their effective participation in power matters. Before the *Crimson Waves* exhibition opened, featuring 28 artists and writers, I had spoken with over one hundred women, and everyone had plenty to say.

Social art action

The Tate reminds us that ‘socially engaged practice can be associated with activism because it often deals with political issues’.⁶ At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, many cartoonists commented on the situation around the world through their art.⁷ I wanted to respond to what was happening in my work too, but with a focus on women’s health.

Art space

Before the pandemic hit, I had booked CB1, a wheelchair-accessible, secular community space and gallery in Limerick city centre for *She Flows Along*. As the lockdown continued, the venue was closed, and the ban on all cultural events and social meetings was very difficult. At that time Ireland’s lockdowns were harsh compared to those of other European countries.⁸ In July 2021 the CB1 manager informed me that he was moving to a new job, and a Methodist reverend would be taking over the space. The reverend did not want the exhibition to take place (as I write this in July 2022, the CB1 community art gallery space remains closed). This experience felt disappointing; with *Crimson Waves* I had more support from the gallery, local printed media, and radio. It also emphasised the importance of

building relationships with gatekeepers of community spaces. When it became clear that the project could not happen in person, I decided to move it online. That had never been my intention; however, I thought that a Facebook community would be better than nothing.

Getting the word out

Getting the word out was tricky. I continued to invite participants. Local and national organisations such as Age Action Ireland (who work with people aged over 55) were not able to help. They had enough to contend with in trying to maintain their services. After a few weeks I got a reply from one organisation for disabled artists. I had hoped that the administration team would share the open call if I made the text extra-large, but by the time I got a response, it was too late. It turned out that the 'organisation' is one woman working alone on a part-time basis with extremely limited funding. I regretted not phoning her instead.

Discussion

Personal and public challenges

Participation in the project was limited. Perhaps this was due to online fatigue and the sheer volume of web-based events. Throughout the process I was also busy working my way through my MA, which was delivered online and extremely challenging as all the screen time was causing headaches and feelings of anxiety. I did not have budget to pay for any advertising of online events, which may have helped reach a wider audience abroad. Above all else there was probably too much competition with events globally.

The rift between anti-vax and pro-vaccine camps mirrored the abortion debates of a few years before. There were online campaigns that hoped to make the government see sense, and endless debate, statistics, reports, and conspiracy theories related to Covid-19 ruled the web. It was all too busy for my liking, too noisy.

I felt vulnerable too. Societal polarisation online was more obvious, and the algorithm supported that. I did not want to feel exposed or deal with complaints if the project was considered too graphic. I worried about anti-abortionists attacking me online. I had shared a lot of my art in public leading up to the referendum,

and it was hard not to notice the online abuse hurled from one side to the other at times. My stress levels were increased for sure, and I felt intimidated online. In my conversations with women since then, everyone has mentioned having intense emotional reactions during this period.

Although it would have been better to rest and process all that had happened in the previous two years, I carried on in a state of technostress.⁹ After putting months of work into the project, I did not want to cancel the final exhibition. It would have been wise to do so, however. It was an intense time, where everything seemed magnified. I was not alone in my struggle. During Covid-19, according to one paper, women were more likely to use the arts to 'avoid negative emotions'.¹⁰

To make the open call as inclusive as possible I included 12 themes so that everyone could find one that they related to. Looking back, I think it was a mistake to include so many themes. The phrase 'solidarity, compassion, and a thirst for social justice' might have been enough. So why did I make it so broad?

I realise now that my own fears partly drove this decision. One reason was that I did not want to risk alienating the women who might be put off by something more political. But unfortunately, that diluted the whole sassiness and oomph that I was aiming for.

The call was also open to professionals and amateurs, and that might have been off-putting to those who only wished to exhibit or share space with people who have a similar level of expertise. I do not try to persuade anyone to take part in projects beyond sharing a description online and in print. If the theme resonates with people, they could get in touch.

Boundaries online

At times, I felt overwhelmed and gobsmacked. I had never before been in a situation where people sent so many sad stories and details about tragedy and violence. I am an empath who has never received training around boundaries, and I am not a therapist, so the experience was excruciating. Many of the mothers sent me rants in private messages, but they would only post pretty art in public.

Within days people posted on the project page: one in the US and two in Ireland. None of them had applied to take part during the open call in July. One woman posted a photo of herself on the page with some text about her location and how she was feeling. Someone else used the page to advertise a book. It seemed that the three people had just happened upon the page. I was unfamiliar with the settings and how Facebook pages operate. Nobody would walk into the physical gallery, as described above in the 'arts space' section, and put whatever they felt

like on the walls. The lack of boundaries felt odd to me. To ensure that future posts would be relevant to the project, I consulted with a friend who runs an online community writing page. She told me about the benefits of creating a Facebook group (as opposed to a page) and acting as the moderator, so I created a group.

Online outpouring

Around 50 women had been in touch with me to share their art and poetry. One artist showed images of various women in her family at different stages: the photos were taken 10 years apart. Another woman responded with a poem about her son's birth. I regretted including 'motherhood' as one of the themes. Posts about the memory of a child speaking his first word ('mama'), his first steps, and the first day at school were gushing, and not interesting as social commentary. Most of us mothers adore our babies.

At the extreme end, I received horror stories and complaints about the HSE (Ireland's health service) and the government, and even an account of domestic violence in private messages. I did not expect such responses. Not everyone wrote to me about problems; some women reached out to say thanks for making the effort.

The project was a success in how it resonated with women of different ages and attracted a variety of responses. The women were based in Ireland, the UK, Australia, and various parts of the US. Some did not pinpoint their exact location and they were not asked about it, or their age, at the outset for the sake of privacy and the creation of a safe space. Initially I had expected a multicultural, local group to participate in person, so I was happy that the project ended up attracting international participants. A few women revealed their age when they wrote comments, but most did not. If I were to guess by looking at their photos, I would say that the women who were the most open and engaged were in their 60s and 70s. Their delight that younger generations of women were working to break the chain of shame and secrecy was palpable.

One woman wrote about her visual response as a 'universal and personal mood of the complexity that is menopause'. Some women wanted to highlight menopause as a normal part of ageing. Others were concerned about health risks, such as depression, anxiety, osteoporosis, dementia, cancer, heart disease, and other issues related to the lack of oestrogen in a woman's body once she hits perimenopause. Many women were interested in kicking the taboo around menopause and talking about the serious issues surrounding half the world's population.

The group format became a safe space online, and people shared all sorts of experiences and opinions around the central topics. In this regard it felt like a suc-

cess. I had wanted to bring women together and hold a space for their experiences, facilitating their sharing of their own artwork, writing, and photography.

The poetry was fantastic and tragic in equal measure. Women wrote about cruelty from doctors, stories of recovery, and how menopausal symptoms can happen earlier than expected. The writing was raw, energetic, relevant, and brave. The chance to talk, or rather, type, about everyday lived experience brought satisfaction to many women in the group. People expressed feeling frazzled from so much screen time at this stage; Covid-19 culture was wearing everyone down.

Conclusion

She Flows Along resonated with women around the world, and over 50 artists and writers participated. Viewers responded to the work, and some added their own comments and anecdotes. Many women were shy or distrustful of Facebook, so they contacted me privately to express their gratitude that through art we were, once again, tackling stigma and bringing a topic into the open.

Real-life connections interest me. I do not know how other art projects evolved for other people, but in my case the online experience was exhausting, and I have no desire to curate a project in that way again. The project was never meant to happen online, and the process caused me to experience burnout from the huge amount of screen time. Despite the challenges, a lot of awareness can be shared through the web. Community building can be assisted through Twitter and other sites.

The pandemic revealed many gaps in accessibility. Having all events online was good in some ways, as it opened the arts up to everyone on a more equal footing. For example, an online poetry group of which I am a member recently hosted two women with disabilities and is making more effort to reach out to people with limited mobility.

Only in recent years had I adopted 'socially engaged art' as a professional tag, and I get a sense that the term is off-putting to the general public, whereas 'community art' is not: it is favoured by practitioners and organisations in Ireland. Perhaps I will revert to using 'community art' or even 'art for all' in descriptions in some future projects.

The impact of stress on one's health is lethal, and in recent months I have been doing what I can to reduce my screen time and focus on self-care more. While I have always been driven to be involved in art that makes a difference,

nobody needs me to continue to do so. At a certain point in life I, and every artist, must ask questions around seeking external validation. The experience taught me how to simplify my approach to any future attempts to foster community engagement.

To get paid for one's work is crucial, yet the mountain of paperwork involved in arts funding disgusts me, especially as so much of it is repetitive and unnecessary. Simplicity needs to be introduced within the system so that community artists have less bureaucracy to deal with. My intention is to avoid government sources completely unless things change, and instead ask for participant donations to cover costs.

Overall, however, I feel that I have 'served my time' in the realm of community arts. Teaching yoga satisfies my need to serve, and that is enough. Perhaps I will enter a new, selfish phase of making art just for myself, for beauty and my well-being? Time will tell.

Hoarse, by Kathryn Crowley

It's no secret
They failed to silence you
Even as you struggled with mud-caked wings
For you were cherished by silver birch
And carried by the wind.

Honeybees sought the song in your throat
When dawn was a hoarse whisper
The sun bestowed its morning dew
And clover willed your healing.

Now earthworms gather to knit a coat
And spiders weave new feathers
Forged by fire
Fed in clay
All conspire to give you strength
To soar in celestial dust.



Figure 1 'My body, my choice' by Kathryn Crowley. Mixed media on paper.

About the contributor

@ArtyShe

Kathryn Crowley has sustained a lifelong arts practice. She enjoys painting, drawing, textile art, and writing. Kathryn still believes in creativity and movement as social medicines. See www.ArtyShe.com.

Notes

- 1 'Socially engaged practice', Tate, accessed 26 August 2022, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/s/socially-engaged-practice#:~:text=Socially%20engaged%20practice%20can%20be,educate%20or%20simply%20share%20with>.
- 2 'History of abortion in Ireland', IFPA, accessed 6 January 2023, <https://www.ifpa.ie/advocacy/abortion-in-ireland-legal-timeline/>.
- 3 Meda Chesney-Lind and Syeda Tonima Hadi, 'Patriarchy, abortion, and the criminal system: Policing female bodies', *Women & Criminal Justice* 27, no. 1 (2017): 73–88, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08974454.2016.1259601>.
 For years women in Ireland were provided with inaccurate results for their cervical cancer screenings. This came to light after Vicky Phelan, who had been informed that her cervical cancer screening was clear in 2011, was told she had cervical cancer in 2014. Read more about the scandal here: Simon Carswell, 'Cervical check scandal: What is it all about?', *The Irish Times*, 1 May 2018, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/health/cervicalcheck-scandal-what-is-it-all-about-1.3480699>.
- 4 Chen X. Chen, Carol Shieh, Claire B. Draucker, and Janet S. Carpenter, 'Reasons women do not seek health care for dysmenorrhea', *Journal of Clinical Nursing* 27, no. 1–2 (2018): e301–e308.
- 5 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018).
- 6 'Socially engaged practice', Tate.
- 7 Michael Cavna, 'How the world's political artists are depicting the Covid-19 pandemic', *The Washington Post*, 18 March 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2020/03/18/coronavirus-political-cartoons/>.
- 8 Paul Cullen, 'Ireland had EU's most stringent lockdown this year, analysis finds', *The Irish Times*, 7 May 2021, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/health/ireland-had-eu-s-most-stringent-lockdown-this-year-analysis-finds-1.4557746>.
- 9 M. Chiapetta, 'The Technostress: definition, symptoms and risk prevention', *Senses and*

- Science* 4, no. 1: 358–361, <https://sensesandsciences.com/index.php/Senses/article/view/109/100>.
- 10 Hei Wan Mak, Meg Fluharty, and Daisy Fancourt, 'Predictors and impact of arts engagement during the Covid-19 pandemic: analyses of data from 19,384 adults in the Covid-19 social study', *Frontiers in Psychology* (2021), <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.626263/full>.