

Opening the Doors: Connection, Intimacy and the Power of Not Knowing

written by Ricardo Reverón Blanco

“How can we communicate our not knowing? We can be listening.”¹

Curating is an intimate act of interdependence. Exhibitions and art invite me, and I hope others, to be in direct contact with something/one they don't know. *Group Show's*² ethos and its public programme COMMUNAL, respectively explore who makes our communities and how cultural institutions can best serve them. This text and my curatorial methodology are an opportunity to hold space for contributions and use a *not knowing* mindset to foster intimate connections with those outside our immediate circles, and in doing so, learn from each other rather than declare wilful ignorance:

Not knowing sharpens your listening ear

Not knowing is an opportunity to learn

Not knowing lets others speak

Not knowing tests new ideas

Not knowing defies singular answers

Not knowing prefers collaborative practice

¹Eloise Sweetman, *Curatorial Feelings* ed. By Eloise Sweetman and Jo-ey Tang, published by Shimmer Press, 2021. Particularly the chapter on 'Not knowing. Intimacy. A door ajar.'

²*Group Show* was curated by Vickie Fear who kindly conceived the idea and preselected the artists who were contacted to be part of the exhibition.

In *On Not Knowing: How to Love and Other Essays*, Emily Ogden writes about how in incomplete moments, one must find use in having a mentality of *not knowing yet*. This approach becomes a point of departure in *Group Show*, where we aim to open ourselves to a variety of perspectives of what community formations look like and how different people perceive them. Ultimately, our doors are open to those interested in engaging with us and bridging the gap between art and audiences.

Communication ≠ Connection

Making connections is a serious business. Our desire to communicate, socialise and make meaningful relations are the driving forces behind understanding the human condition. And I would argue, as Paul Chan does in *The Unthinkable Community*, that communication does not equate to connection.³

So, as a curator at an arts space like ours, I ask myself: **what is the role of cultural institutions and the art it exhibits when making meaningful and lasting connections between people?**

[...] And, yes, we are far from polished, far from pristine, but that doesn't mean we are striving to form a union that is perfect. We are striving to forge our union with purpose.⁴

What is clear is that change and fluid response to the ever-changing needs of diverse and evolving communities are vital. One could argue that as a medium, the focus of our current show - painting - offers that elasticity, a medium that can be as transformative as a still life or an abstract red smear.⁵ This malleability makes painting a conduit for looking at things in flux.

³ Paul Chan, *The Unthinkable Community* (Issue 16: e-flux journal)

⁴ Amanda Gorman, *The Hill We Climb*, published by Vintage Publishing, 2021.

⁵ Katy Hessel and Louise Giovanelli speak acutely about the transformative power of painting in *The Great Women Artists Podcast* episode on the same-named artist.

Group Show

This exhibition hopes to represent the vast range of people in our communities by its various representational qualities, the ambiguity of figure and stylistic approaches. Alice Hayes stitches her drawings of people from Portsmouth onto linen to convey the connectivity we seek within our communities.

Similarly, Eileen Cooper's commitment to figuration results in moments that depict care, comfort, and compassion defaulting onto love amongst friends, family, and kinship. This is particularly true in the works *Mother's Day*, *Hug* or *Always Sisters*.

In Rakibul Chowdhury's and Uduehi Imienwanrin's works, we see the depiction of iconic celebrities such as Destiny's Child, Madonna, Spice Girls, Lady Gaga or N-Dubz. The archetype of the pop star becomes an investigation into how celebrity idolisation brings people together. The mystique of the celebrity, and how people worship what they represent, becomes a mechanism for communion and relatability. Through its luminosity, painting holds our attention and slows down our visual pace, where we scan what we see in the mixed colours and textures. This is much the case with

Janet Sainsbury's practice, where we are transported to surreal scenes inhabited by characters drawn from Western Art History to recontextualise the relationship between Artist and Muse. The works question who spaces are made for historically and use humour to make us think about who is seen and by whom in today's visual culture.

Communities are not monoliths; they require time, responsive attention and communication to deepen the connections among their members. Thereby, communities demand cultural institutions responsive relevancy. As the Jerwood Creative Bursaries Toolkit *Work in Practice* has determined: 'there's no one approach to being an inclusive organisation'. However, a mentality of not knowing (yet) might be the answer to ensure that the doors are inviting for those who understand that these institutions are willing to experiment, try new ideas and (un)learn ways of operating for the public. Communities deserve recognition of how they gather. Therefore, Aspex Portsmouth has chosen to experiment with providing access and the space for communities to meet through our public programme: COMMUNAL.

Perhaps cultural institutions should centre themselves entirely around the global and local communities they invite through their doors; after all, they inspire us to cater to culture that resonates with the pertinent issues galleries like ours should platform:

**‘You inspire me
to be better
You challenge
me for the better’**⁶

For these reasons, I urge you to consider the meaning of and opening doors figuratively and literally, and in doing so, foster a critical inquiry into who can enter and who would struggle to access these opened doors. With this, I leave you with some verse lines from artist Love Ssega who performed a newly commissioned spoken word piece at this year’s Whitechapel Gallery x Gallery Climate Coalition conference of the Climate Crisis:

**“Art is
expiring.
Open the
doors”**⁷

⁶ Lyrics from Cater 2 You by Destiny’s Child, 2004.

⁷ Love Ssega performance at Bishopsgate Library during The Whitechapel Gallery and Gallery Climate Coalition conference on the Climate Crisis, 2023.