

Reflections - 26th March Hastings Intervention

What was interesting?

Watching the general public respond to The Library. I allowed some people just to view the objects without any explanation from me. I observed how easily people were able to understand the premise and how they engaged with the activity. I would say that it was not very easy to understand exactly what The Library was for people who were seeing it for the first time without explanation.

Although I could see that many people were drawn to the aesthetic, one person exclaimed "Look! Books!" as they stopped. But for whatever reason they didn't go as far as to pick one up. I would say that people were generally reluctant to touch the books without guidance or permission from me.

In the end only 4 people actually took part in the activity, and no one was eager to sit at the window unit I had made. This might be because I wasn't able to erect the booth to put it in due to the wind, and without the booth it didn't seem like much of a feature. But it might also be due to the fact that I was not persistent in guiding people towards it.

I realised quite soon after setting up that the environment was not conducive to introspection, although many people were delighted by the idea and drawn to the aesthetic, it didn't feel like it was easy for people to make a meaningful connection with themselves.

What was insightful?

I did have a couple of conversations with people that provided valuable insight. When one person started the activity they said "I'm a bit worried that I might get sad." I realised straight away that this was a comment that went right to the heart of my current research question. I tried to assure him that that was ok and touching those feelings was really the point of the task. After he completed the activity I asked him if any of those sad feelings came up, he said they had a little bit. Then he started to allude to some physical abuse that he had suffered as a child and hasn't told anyone about. He was speaking about it calmly and didn't seem to be in any distress, but I realised in the moment that this was actually quite a serious position I had found myself in. I had encouraged this gentleman to make contact with these experiences and I had a responsibility to care for what came up.

I suggested therapy and mentioned an organisation that I had found helpful who ran sessions over zoom. He expressed that he found zoom sessions too difficult and said that he would probably organise some therapy for himself eventually. He left the experienced seeming generally quite positive and thankful for the opportunity, even though I felt that I wasn't really able to offer him any help to move forward with. But upon further reflection it is apparent that I can't hope to offer any meaningful help to process his trauma, at the end of the day this needs to be handled by mental health professionals.

Overall I was really encouraged by this interaction, it was exactly what I had hoped to achieve with The Library, and I was surprised that it had been achieved despite the less than ideal conditions for meaningful introspection. It made me realise that I don't actually need to go to extreme lengths to get people to reflect on themselves, it seems to me that generally speaking people are carrying their experiences around with them wherever they go. What is important is the space that I create to hold these people and their experiences.

Another insight I had came from a deaf woman who took part in the activity. She indicated that she was deaf when she approached, luckily I had written step by step instructions for the activity. I was really pleased to see that she was able to understand what she was to do and took part in the activity. She left some positive feedback about the experience. I was gratified to see that the activity was accessible to her and her hearing difficulty was not an impediment. She even came back a little while later with a friend who was also deaf to share the experience with them.

What was intriguing?

Another person who took part in the activity declined to fill in the section of the booklet that was about the past. As he was looking through the archetypes he said “ I don’t want to go to the past, let's skip that one.” I didn’t get a chance to ask him why, perhaps it might have been too personal a question. But this reluctance surmises how a lot of people feel about introspection, especially regarding the past. For many people, looking backwards is too difficult or feels unnecessary. Again it made me reflect on the efficacy of asking people to tackle their experiences directly, for some this method is too confrontational.

What was inspiring?

I managed to make contact with a key stakeholder who had seen The Library previously. Her name is Tara Reddy, she runs Arts On Prescription which its an organisation based in Hastings that implements arts based therapies into GP referral pathways. This is exactly the sort of area that I am interested in taking The Library. She came and said hello and reiterated how much she loves the project and how inspired she was by it last time she saw it. She went as far as gathering people she knew at the event and shepherding them over to meet me and see the project. She remarked “I just think it’s so magical!”. I found her enthusiasm to be very inspiring, especially the use of the word “magical”. It was just the sort of reaction I was hoping to elicit and I am bolstered by the encouragement. I think I will take steps to push the project more in this direction.