

Breaking Cover

CATHY FITZGERALD REPORTS ON AN ECOLOGICAL ART PERFORMANCE EVENT AT IMMA.

ON 13 NOVEMBER 2021, predictably disappointing news for Earth's citizens and planetary wellbeing emerged from the COP26 summit in Glasgow. Greta Thunberg and activists responded by urgently calling on UN Secretary General, António Guterres, to declare the climate crisis a Global Level 3 Emergency – the UN's highest category – to enact a coordinated effort, similar to the global pandemic response. But importantly, a seismic cultural shift from the ground up is also urgently needed. More than science or politics, informed creativity has social power to imaginatively and inclusively introduce citizens' hearts to new values and activities that will advance a just and life-sustaining era.

In Ireland, the Department of Education is developing strategies for the momentous UNESCO-mandated shift across the formal and informal learning landscape to prioritise citizens' urgent understanding of integrated sustainability and social justice. For the creative sector, this shift will insist on 'ecoliteracy' and collective-planetary wellbeing values in education. Corresponding training for cultural policy writers, art administrators and educators, and new long-term funding models to sustain creative workers interested in maintaining community wellbeing, is also foreseen¹.

In trying to imagine such widespread sustainable cultural renewal, the new artist-led Breaking Cover Collective developed engaging performative responses to the ecological emergency in 2020, including an innovative six-month ecoliteracy training programme. On 4 September 2021 the collective staged an inaugural two-hour performance for 100 people in the grounds of IMMA.

Embodying wisdom, beauty and an inclusive ethos needed for a better world, the 15 members of the collective were led by Paola Catizone (performance artist, facilitator and member of IMMA's Visitor Engagement team) and included: Rennie Buenting (organic farmer and ceramic artist), Carmel Ennis (gardener and dancer), Karen Aguiar (dancer), Thomas Morelly (illustrator and XR activist), Laura O'Brien (embodiment practitioner), Miriam Sweeney (student), Mary Hoy (visual artist), Paul Regan (performance artist), Hilary Williams (performance artist) and Sophie Rieu (therapist and artist), Rebecca Bradley (painter), Tom Duffy (musician, artist and educator) and Deirdre Lane (environmental activist and consultant).

Breaking Cover Programme

Paola Catizone has over 30-years' experience in performance art and holistic education. During the first lockdown, Paola recognised the unprecedented pause in human activity as a window of opportunity to reimagine sustainable cultural renewal. Paola developed a programme proposal on art and ecology and initially imagined involving 18 to 35-year-old participants. However, given the complexity of the topic, many who gravitated to Paola's invitation and committed to attend sessions over six months, were mid-career creatives and professionals, perhaps better established to grapple with this complex and confronting topic, as well as younger people and students. Older, seasoned artists also became involved. It was realised that the real power of the group was because it was intergenerational.

During the pandemic lockdown, startling images from global media of animals 'breaking cover' as humans withdrew, were an important reminder that thriving ecologies are paramount for interconnected personal, collective, and planetary wellbeing. 'Cows on the beach, coyotes in the car park' became the working subtitle.

The Social Power of Performance

IMMA agreed to Paola hosting two in-person pilot sessions at the front lawn pavilion in the summer of 2020. Working with physical, relational and educational group processes, the feedback from participants was resoundingly positive. However due to COVID-19 restrictions, the six-month Breaking Cover training programme was delivered online. This meant a larger group (oscillating between 30 and 50 people) benefited. Invited eco-social artists, scientists, philosophers and activists – myself (The Hollywood Forest Story / Haumea Ecovercity), Lisa Fingleton (Kerry County Council's first artist-in-residence/The Barna Way), Mary Reynolds (We Are The Ark), Oana Sanziana Marian (Active Hope Ireland) and V'cenza Cirefice (Dublin EcoFeminists) – helped initiate participants into the expansive concerns that ecological insights advance. Ideas from ecological philosophers Gregory Bateson, Glenn Albrecht and Joanna Macy provided foundational concepts. Whole-of-institution co-creative processes for conviviality, inclusivity and political ecological reorganisation were inspired by Andrea Geyer's IMMA exhibition, 'When We'. Also crucial were relational, dialogical art processes and employing performance art's historic politicisation to engage public awareness.

From July to September 2021, Paola's outdoor workshops for the collective included movement and music, Theatre of the Oppressed, Gestalt, Slow Looking Art, and performance practices. Artist Celina Muldoon visited three times to support the process. Composed of professional artists, enthusiastic students, educators, movement experts and activists, Breaking Cover Collective's combined resources and co-creative activity, accelerated learning and powerfully motivated the collective toward their first performance.

Inaugural Performance

The Breaking Cover performance at IMMA was comprised of four parts over two hours:

- Individual performances: These arose from the group's tension between individualism and awareness of interconnectedness.
- The drum: After the individual performances, a drum called the collective to the IMMA courtyard to form a large circle. Breaking Cover member Tom Duffy's experience with ritualistic Brazilian drumming reverberated an ethical transmission for the event, as within the drum each performer had previously written their intentions for their work. After gathering, the collective walked in a slow procession to the formal gardens. A viewer later shared that it came naturally to follow slowly along, to the pace of the drum.
- The Banquet: In the formal gardens was a long banquet table, decorated with herbs, plant dyes and animal skulls. After a spo-



All Images: Breaking Cover Collective, performance, IMMA grounds, September 2021; photograph by Molly Keane, courtesy of the artists and IMMA.

ken-word lament by Deirdre Lane, focusing on Ireland's boglands, the formal-looking dining event degenerated into chaos. Performers noisily toasted and poured their drinks onto the table, then gradually served the meal by emptying three wheelbarrows of earth onto plates, which overflowed onto the table, forming a mound of layered electrical and plastic waste, resembling landfill. Excessive consumption was the theme of the banquet, and viewers later shared that feelings of grief and shame overwhelmed them while watching.

- The Die In: As the once beautiful banquet table degenerated, keening from Paola and Hilary Williams prompted the group to walk towards a meadow. There, XR activist and artist Thomas Morelly with a megaphone called out the names of extinct species. Performers fell and rose, dying over and over, until the last creature, the dodo, was called. The lighting of a small flame symbolising hope concluded the event, and performers led a slow walk back to IMMA's Studio 10.

The Breaking Cover Collective's vision was to activate the power of performance art to communicate the urgency of the ecological emergency and re-enchant our relations to Earth and the wider community of life. With this positive response, the collective hopes to create future ecological performative actions in the near future.

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Notes:

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