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## **Project *e-ma*; Socially-engaged Visual Arts Interventions for Belfast**

### **Abstract**

This case study explores the use of Japanese *e-ma* (絵馬) as a conduit through which to explore the qualitative Arts-Based Educational Research (ABER) paradigm of Socially Engaged (visual) Arts (SEA) in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Firstly this paper places *e-ma* in a social and cultural frame, it then goes on to describe the context and rationale behind the considered adoption of *e-ma* as a pedagogical artefact. Before then describing eight key tenets which link the use of *e-ma* to Belfast via SEA; SEA being the conceptual frame which undergirds this research. Finally it describes one specific intervention; multiplicitous mural, which is a proposed, cite-specific public artwork intended for Belfast. A community installation which utilises *e-ma* as a means and site of disruption and détournement to the metanarrative murals, and monolithic Truth. Factors invariably prevalent in Belfast's much lauded

street art; a way therefore, to engage with the ‘vernacular’ rather than simply the ‘official memory’ (Bodnar, 1992).

### **Keywords**

Socially Engaged Arts (SEA), Arts-Based Educational Research (ABER), Japanese *e-ma* (絵馬), *shin-tou* (神道), postmodern epistemology and pedagogy, Mindfulness, Belfast

### **Background**

The author has, since 1998 been working with *e-ma* in the creative educational domain. *E-ma* (pronounced like the girl’s name ‘emma’) are postcard-sized wooden prayer tablets from the indigenous Japanese belief-system, *shin-tou* (神道). *Shin-tou* or *kami no michi* (神の道) is a secular, animistic belief system predating christianity which holds reverence for the natural world, in which it is believed dwell *kami* (神); deities. Shaped roughly like a gable-end, *e-ma* are traditionally used for much the same purpose as Western New Year’s Resolutions; to focus the mind on objectives for the coming year. In the case of *e-ma*, however, they are used to physically manifest, record and hold the wish, prayer, hope, or future aspiration of the writer. This wish has traditionally been written onto the tablet before being offered to the shrine’s *kami* in the hope the wish will be granted. In the current epoch, however, it is not uncommon to see the wishes also drawn on the *e-ma*, and it is this later phenomenon that this research largely engages with. *E-ma* are what Wenger (2000) would describe as ‘boundary objects’ which he defines as ‘Some objects find their value, not just as artifacts of one practice, but mostly to the extent that they support connections between different practices.’ (p. 236)

### **Context (Process)**

When utilising or (re)appropriating cultural artefacts it is obviously imperative to ensure that any transposition is done sensitively, and both retains and

maintains the integrity of the original artefact and context. Not only would it be unethical to transpose artefacts without due consideration, or for purposes of cultural exploitation, but it would also be inappropriate and unprofessional in that it occurs within academe.

The reason the author has elected to utilise *e-ma* in this research is based upon the following tenets. Tenets which they believe align with sentiments Schneider (2003) expresses when he states, 'For anthropology, it is important to develop a proper context of appropriation: one that takes into account (i) the 'original' context of the artefact and its producers; (ii) the artefact itself; and (iii) the appropriating person or agent' (p.224). In this instance, the original context of the *e-ma* (i) has been laid out above, as has the artefact itself (ii) and the appropriating person or agent is introduced below. Extending from this, *e-ma* were therefore chosen for development during doctoral research in Belfast because they fitted a number of pre-requisites and assimilated with the local culture(s) in a number of ways; these arguments are presented after the general points.

### **General Criteria**

#### **i) Positionality**

Firstly in terms of positionality, the author initially began researching and working with *e-ma* as far back as 1998. This was followed by a period of fourteen years living, working and researching in Japan where the artefact and *shin-tou* were engaged with on a regular basis. As such Japan can be said to represent a good deal of who the author is, not only as an individual, but also in the way it manifests an entirely different *weltanschauung* to the dominant Western epistemological and ontological sensibilities. Factors which in turn also lay the foundations for scholarship and research.

#### **ii) Links to Socially-Engaged Arts (SEA)**

As the theoretical frame for this research is based around SEA, it is clearly important that *e-ma* assimilate with key tenets of SEA, four of which are listed below:

- a) The ability to re-engage, to overwrite and 'speak back' (hooks 1989),
- b) The ability to create a dialogical piece of artwork (Bakhtin, 1990. Kester, 2005)
- c) Multiplicity and plurality. This intervention endeavors to utilise as many of the voices and narratives present in that community location as possible, attempting to capture the diversity of communities,
- d) Quality of art. Although 'art' here is simply defined in the purest sense as 'mark-making,' and the usage has no connection to value-judgements of 'good' or 'bad,' it is intended to align with Bishop's (2006, 2012) concerns that it actually *be* art, that the Art in Socially-Engaged Art can stand alone, and not be judged with a sympathetic eye.

iii) Mindfulness, *mu-shin* (無心)

Langer (1966, p.9) suggests that the 'primary function of art is to objectify feeling so we can contemplate and understand it.' However, whilst the author would agree with the sentiments of contemplation, they would not necessarily agree with the absolute of arriving at understanding, or any end-point. It is arguable that her earlier observation that art provides 'insight into the nature of sentience' (Langer, 1957, p. 91) is a more accurate observation. That in the interspace, the liminal space between contemplation and understanding lies a rich domain for contemplative *being*. In this quietude, in the brief clarity that exists, when participants interact with the unfamiliar *e-ma*; when they are presented with the opportunity to think about what they wish to paint and record as their hope, aspiration or wish for the future. In that there lies great potential for interacting with a different way of knowing and understanding. As Sutherland and Krzys Acord, 2014, p.135 state 'knowledge lies in encountering art' and whilst it might be too grand a parallel to draw - in the contemplation of this unfamiliar object, in the mindfulness that is present, in the inter-space between thinking and putting brush to paint. That there might

exist an element of what Japanese call *mu-shin*; no mind, literally an absence of conscious thought, a foundation of Zen Buddhism and Zen Arts. As Kester (2013) notes 'new insight is transmitted to the viewer through a singular and a-temporal moment' (np).

#### iv) Postmodernism

Further disclosure of the author's positionality would reveal that they align with postmodern epistemological and ontological values. The use of numerous individual *e-ma*, therefore, to produce a single 'Dalivision' artwork, is, in a sense a Lyotardian (1984) inspired philosophy based not upon one dominant (visual) metanarrative/grand récit, but rather upon a pluralist petit récit or micronarratives (multiple *e-ma*). That the plurality sought in the research is also echoed in the practice which aims to 'show rather than tell' (O'Donnel, 2013) and to further engage the reader/viewer as a third person/space, who brings with them their interpretation of the work. This not only explores postmodern notions of heterogeneity and plurality; many truths not one Truth, but it also touches upon certain peripheral postmodern values such as contradiction and paradox. Which is to infer that the intervention 'multiplicitous mural' which is explained below is not actually a mural per se! Besides it contradicts the function and purpose of a mural - the conveying of a singular or unified narrative. This also introduces another postmodern tenet - disruptive agitation which is reminiscent of Debord et al's (1957) *Situational International* concept of détournement.

#### v) Conduit

"The visual media allow us to construct knowledge not by 'description' but by a form of 'acquaintance'" Bertrand Russell (1912) quoted in MacDougall (1997, p.286). The mélange of rationale mentioned above is, therefore, held in place by the final keystone which transcends the actual *e-ma* as a distinct object per se. and focuses on the proclivity of arts and crafts to facilitate and engender commonality and community. Gauntlett (2011, p.3) observes that "Having an image or physical object to present and discuss enabled them to

communicate and connect with other people more directly” and it is this sentiment which is shared by women making arpilleras. As Roberta Bacic recently intimated, it was not necessarily the fact that women in rural Chile gathered to make art, rather they made art over conversation (Bacic, 2014). And through art as a conduit to dialogue, there undoubtedly occurs what Belenky et al (1986) called ‘connected knowing,’ So in the case of running pilot workshops in Belfast, one of the most important observations the author has noted is how the *e-ma* acts as part teacher, part facilitator. It is partly inert and partly active and enabling, and it is really this forage into the unknown and the potentiality of artefacts, this ‘accumulation of moments’ (Highmore, 2002) that has been most inspiring in this research

### **Belfast specific**

#### vi) Anonymity

“Loose talk costs lives... whatever you say, say nothing” (nd) is the copy that dominates a famous Republican handbill from ‘the troubles.’ In a divided city like Belfast such sentiments are arguably still prevalent some fifteen years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) (1999) and this guardedness presents genuine challenges for the researcher in the field gathering primary data. One of the potential attributes of the *e-ma* is that they are used in total anonymity thus guaranteeing peace of mind for participants to express themselves freely. This particular aspect of the *e-ma* really solidifies its use as a legitimate vehicle for exploration in the Belfast community.

#### vii) Non-sectarian

Furthermore, as a non-denominational belief system, it is arguable that any *shin-tou* artefact, such as the *e-ma* might legitimately be transposed to another arena like Belfast and have a greater potentiality due to its innate neutrality. When one considers that the sectarian divide was historically (and arguably is still so) one of the strongest points of leverage in dividing Belfast apart, if a cultural artefact is to be utilised in post-conflict/post-ceasefire

Belfast then it makes sense to employ a non-denominational item that can potentially be embraced equally by those on both sides of the (perceived) religious divide.

#### viii) Belfast, memory, and the past

‘Rather than trying to fix problems with our points of view, we might focus more on knowing them in creative ways.’ (McNiff, 2007, p.38.) Cultural memory and commemoration of the past is very important in some cultures and to some people, especially here in Belfast. As Neil Jarman said at a recent colloquium, “Belfast is like a person looking backwards, walking forwards” (Jarman, 2014). Hence the business of the past, its ownership, authentication and interpretation, the ‘politics of memory’ (Schwartz, 1996, p.909) continues to dominate public discourse and political life. It has also spawned an entire industry dedicated to remembering, and given rise to an array of groups exploring its capacity such as Healing Through Remembrance, and Remembrance Network NI. With regards the past, and especially its contestation, Burke (1989) tells us that ‘it is important to ask the question, who wants whom to remember what, and why?’ (p.191) - and to that, the author would also add *how*? Because how we remember and how we are allowed to remember is vitally important for the safe passage of officially sanctioned cultural and social memory. It is however, speech in those terms which is ultimately limiting discourse here and so it is hoped that engaging with *e-ma* will allow as Dunn and Leeson, (1997, p.27) state, ‘the use of the creative process as a vehicle to allow people to move from the present circumstances to future possibilities.’

In addition to the social function of memory, the neurological aspects too can be represented through the use of single *e-ma* collected together, something which has the potentiality to physically replicate human memory. Insofar as the assembled *e-ma* act as metaphorical engrams, and replicate the way physical memory is constructed, encoded, stored and then reconstructed in the human brain (Olick, 1999, p.340). On a second level too, the individual *e-*

*ma*, painted in a given community, which are then displayed together, appear from afar, to form a singular abstract image. On closer inspection, however, it is not unitary but multiplicitous, and this too becomes a further metaphor for collected or collective memory; i.e., whilst communities may purport to share collective memories, in actuality members will have a different perspective on the same event, ranging from slight to divergent.

### **Project *e-ma* (product)**

#### **Background and context**

The author would be the first to declare further positionality, and admit an ardent distaste for Belfast's favoured street 'art,' the murals. From an aesthetic, political, cultural, and democratic viewpoint they can and should be challenged as the legitimate heir to, or undisputed champion of 'community art' in Belfast. In the same way that plop-art or any attempt to 'gild the ghetto' (Dunn and Leeson, 1997, p.31) should be resisted, so too, the author maintains, should the pervasive, one-trick mural. Project *e-ma*, being 'site specific, people centered, and critical' (ibid, p.33) is therefore attempting (even if only as a transitory means) to reconfigure the urban artscape, and open it up to a greater array of choices for public (pedagogical) artwork than simply wall painting.

Furthermore, given the author's alignment to Socially Engaged Arts and the fact that the university where the research is being undertaken is the Queen's University of Belfast, the multiplicitous mural was conceived as an attempt to 'challenge dominant representations of a given community, and create a more complex understanding of, and empathy for, that community among a broader public' (Kester in Zucor and Leung, 2005, np). This research sought to challenge not only the dominant artform in Belfast, but to further open up the whole debate surrounding the critical examination and deconstruction of power in current public artworks. Finally, it is hoped that use *e-ma* in the public domain will act as a means of engaging and empowering citizens in discourse around public art in general, providing the critical tools to



contemplate alternatives, reconfigure the power ratios, and, critically examining the dominant visual codes, signifiers, emblems and rhetoric prevalent in the murals. That 'Art is in fact a form of knowledge. It becomes the site of knowledge production and does not restrict itself to integrating previously know concepts.' (Busch, 2009, p.3) is important for citizens to grasp.

Project *e-ma* has a number of different formats which all revolve around exploring the pedagogical potential of *e-ma*. They are, however utilised in two common ways, firstly as a physical piece of a puzzle, and secondly as a meditative or contemplative tool to facilitate dialogue on what the future might look like.

As there are a number of interventions in the planning stage, the following exposition refers to a generic format which is currently being negotiated with community partners in Donegall Pass, Donegall Road, Sandy Row and the Tiger's Bay areas of Belfast. For reasons of brevity the entire negotiation process cannot be disclosed, suffice to state, project *e-ma*, was presented to community groups and representatives who then by proxy (of the greater community) accepted it. Participation in the actual act of painting an *e-ma*, was however, still optional amongst all community members.

## **Stages**

### **Stage one: sourcing *e-ma***

In the first instance, for reasons of democracy, ownership, and *right practice*, it is important that *e-ma* not simply be purchased as a commodity. Instead they need to be produced locally in either a men's shed or community workshop. Part of this process involves laying the foundations to the project, meeting those who will fabricate the *e-ma*, facilitating the dimensions, materials, and placing the *e-ma* in some cultural and social context.

Negotiation will likely take place over the materials, as not all materials are available through all local suppliers. One might, therefore have to substitute

'wood' for exterior plywood, and certain thicknesses may be unavailable. It is in this arena that SEA driven really comes into its own and enables joint ownership of the project, negotiation, compromise and critical reflection.

### **Stage two: Group sessions**

Once the *e-ma* have been sourced local citizens are invited through the community network and local media, to attend painting sessions held in the local community's church halls, meeting halls, or community centers. At these sessions they will be introduced to the *e-ma* and the project in greater detail, and asked to sign an ethics consent form which sets out what the *e-ma* (as data) can and cannot be used for, their rights, and the fact the sessions are being video-recorded, and for what purpose. The room is laid out so the acrylic paints and brushes are on the central table and accessible to all.

### **Stage three: Guided meditation**

If participants agree to sign the ethics consent, then they will all be asked to choose an *e-ma*, which resonates (in shape, colour, woodgrain, etc.) with them. Following this they will then be taken by the facilitator, through a guided meditation in which those present familiarise themselves with the physicality of the *e-ma*, its smell, shape and texture. They will then be introduced to the core themes of wish, hope, goal, future aspiration, and prayer. Following that they shall be guided to first consider themselves, and what those themes mean to them. Expanding outwards, they will then be guided to consider their immediate family, their extended family and friends, their neighbours, their local community, their spiritual or mental community, and finally their city, Belfast. Belfast in this case means not only those born in the city, but all the people who live there at this moment in time, all the different people who call Belfast home, either permanently or temporarily; and what might wishes, dreams, hopes, and aspirations look like to them. Participants can then begin painting when they feel ready.

### **Stage four: Painting**

Participants are left to paint in silence and the facilitator should refrain from interrupting or standing too long near a single person, hovering over their shoulder etc. When painting is completed individuals are given a piece of cord which they thread through their *e-ma* and tie, so it can be hung. They are also invited (optional) to speak 'one-to-one' to the video camera and explain something about their painting or the process, experience etc.

### **Stage five: Feedback**

Depending upon time constraints, numbers, concentration levels, and group dynamics etc. Participants can then feedback to the group and begin a group reflection. The facilitator should allow people to speak and observe the group, but guide and ask questions where necessary.

### **Stage six: Hanging**

As mentioned above, *e-ma* have a hole drilled in the upper portion through which cord is threaded allowing them to be hung on hooks and displayed on frames en masse. Once the *e-ma* have been painted (and if necessary dried with a hairdryer) they can then be taken outside (if the site of display is close by) and hung by the participants. If the site is far, or if the facilitation is taking place at a number of separate locations, then the *e-ma* can be gathered, placed in boxes and later transported to the site.

### **Stage seven: Feedback**

Following the painting/facilitation session and public display, local residents will, after they have had the opportunity to see all the *e-ma* in situ, be invited to attend an informal feedback session during which they will be given the opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings on the entire process of the intervention. This facet, which aligns with the cyclical nature of Participatory Action Research (PAR) aims to feed the community ideas back into the research, so that if it is continued again at a later date, it be improved. This improvement is especially important in terms of working towards meeting the core democratic aims of SEA and those other aims expressed above.

## Appendices

Spaces re-imagined, proposed sites for the project









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