

In-Kind

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One of my intentions as an artist is to give myself and my collaborators the time and space to critically consider our situations, and to use creative tools to give these thoughts expression. Making work that is personal and intimate takes time, and in making the work public there is a risk that people can feel exposed or misunderstood. The commissioning agenda for *In-Kind*, a project funded by Islington Council over two years, was therefore crucial in that it allowed me time to develop complex relationships with unpaid (or 'informal') carers across the borough. During an interim reflection, one carer commented that "*this project felt like it touched my soul...stuff I have kept boxed up for years. My creativity that I haven't felt for a long time was given a place to come out.*"

One of the difficulties in making this work was accessing carers, who are often unable to leave their homes, keep appointments or allow themselves the 'indulgence' of taking part in an art project. What I learnt from working with these carers was about living with care rather than simply experiencing it on an occasional basis; how private yet political this role is; how the carers wellbeing changed and mostly deteriorated over time and how seldom carers were able to live a life outside of the (sometimes self-imposed) shackles of their role. Or as one carer expressed, "*I have to go to the moon and back before I can leave the house.*"

As an artwork, *In-Kind* developed into a one-to-one performance in the back of an ex-military ambulance. The ambulance toured throughout February 2014, with carers, health professionals, politicians and general public invited to spend twenty-five minutes in the back of the ambulance with performer Erika Poole, herself a carer and local resident. During the project I worked with a small group of collaborators on a regular basis but also led workshops, screenings and events with wider participatory audiences. Most of the people I worked with were women aged over fifty, long-term carers looking after elderly parents, disabled, mentally ill and/or dying partners and/or children.

Intimate, emotionally challenging, melancholic as well as absurd, inside the old ambulance the performer danced with an inflatable zimmerframe, played a musical saw, applied sudocreme 'war paint', balanced on balloons and tried to organise medication whilst wearing boxing gloves. Every day the van went to a different location and part of the work became about caring for its curious position in these public contexts. A small, incongruous green ex-military vehicle, many people stopped to ask us what was going on inside. Standing outside the ambulance in the sleet and wind throughout February, we met many people who wanted to talk about their own care roles. The work and the performer needed looking after, as did the audiences and so did we, those who had made it and felt responsible for it. Aside from the weather, we also had to deal with marauding football fans, Landrover enthusiasts, Valentine brides and many other curious people who felt compelled to question what it was doing in their locale. One audience member commented that it was like discovering "*a whole life in a room parked at the end of Hargrave Road*", and another said it was "*not like the day in the life of a carer, but the life in the day of a carer.*"

According to Carers UK it takes about five years for someone to recognise that they have become a carer. The process often happens slowly, the workload and sense of responsibility increasing as the washing becomes cooking becomes regular medical checks and constant emotional support. Although everyone's situations were different, many shared common experiences of being over-whelmed by paperwork and anxiety. I overheard one woman asking "*I am eighty and I just want*

to know who will look after my son, who has schizophrenia, when I'm gone?" and all the carers I worked with had become increasingly ill themselves from the financial, emotional and physical stresses of their work-load and isolation. One carer commented "my life is ruled by alarms now, I haven't realised this until just now. I am on tenderhooks most of the time, especially at night." Although I was initially resistant to notating a public record of this work, it became a useful tool to collate the many contributions and ideas. Thoughts and images from the project can be accessed at: www.amillionminutes.org along with the twenty-three other projects commissioned around Archway and Finsbury Park over this period.

In-Kind coincided with the introduction of the government's Bedroom Tax which reinforced our idea that the performance needed to be within a 'spare' confined space as well as able to travel to people who found it difficult to come to us. On seeing the performance, artist Becky Shaw reflected "we [audience and performer] are almost on top of each other in the van so perhaps I am trying to occupy less space so I can give her more. The performance is for me, but I am uncomfortable at how hard she must work on my behalf." Becky went on to reflect how "in the past, we are told, we would have looked after our loved ones or relatives without being a 'carer'. Care would have been just one part of the flow of family life. We imagine somehow that in the past 'caring' was less burdensome. This is unlikely, but perhaps in the past you were less likely to 'care' on your own- facing the desperate binary interchange of 'you' and 'me'. Perhaps in the past the carer didn't sit on an uncomfortable perimeter between professionalised 'carer' and loved one. Or maybe care is harder now because in the past there was less notion of a 'personal life' to lose." Many of the carers I met spoke of losing time, having got old and not known how they got there. This idea of time well spent, and how subjective this notion is, was a pertinent question throughout the project.

The early stages of the project were based at Islington Carers Centre, where I took up residence every Friday afternoon, where we ate lunch, talked and tried out ideas. The project had to be flexible, and the facilities and goodwill of ICC meant that we could explore a broad range of ideas and processes, with an open brief that could go off at tangents to follow the ideas wherever they took us. The first phase of the work was entirely speculative, although we did have a public sharing hosted by ICC in January 2013, with the staff as well as carers taking part.

For an artistic enquiry to become something meaningful for everyone involved I have found it is important to take small steps, to try out ideas with supportive audiences before testing them more publicly. It goes without saying that the infrastructure of this project was extremely important, with the staff at ICC, Carers UK and Islington Mind being key to making the work happen in the way that it did. Making work with people about something as everyday as care isn't glamorous and yet as an artist this idea of what we care about, how and for whom we care, is at the very heart of what I am interested in. Or to quote Stephanie Smith, "this concerns us all, but is hidden; swept away - hoovered away - we don't like to look at it or contemplate (understandably) mortality and responsibility."

(Image: pg.47)