

Fold and Rise: Maeve Collins and Julie Griffiths

Fermenting the Conversation: research and art through fermentation and folding.

Intro:

We are two artists / researchers / cultural producers, Maeve Collins and Julie Griffiths, and we have placed ourselves in the territory of social science and fermentation, applying our competency as art workers to these fields. Our ongoing collaborative research project is **Fold and Rise**, which we developed in 2014, and since then, we have been travelling this interactive conversation in Ireland, the UK and Canada. We use the folding and rising of dough as both metaphor and research methodology, to ferment a feminist conversation around women, labour, politics and culture in time.

Our presentation will consider how art can 'gain access', and how it can incorporate input from unusual and unlikely sources to expand and ferment the flavour of research.

Description of the project

Within the structure of a **Fold and Rise** event, we take the folding of dough as a starting point to have a conversation. Bowls are laid out, alongside the ingredients for making a yeast bread. We invite participants to engage with a dense and vital materiality - the folding of live yeast dough - whilst listening to texts we have selected or written, relating to the folding of time, labour and the body. Following this process, the dough is left to rise. In the presence of the rising dough, we give a flavour of our own research and where we have gathered, slewed, folded and found rises. We leave plenty of space for a reciprocal conversation to happen.

Collaboratively constructing any project is complex and challenging, not least, for us, because we live and practice 300 kms apart. Our approach with this project was led by the topology of the initial inputs, and we developed a 'folding' methodology of enquiry, passing the ideas over and back between us, as opposed to the more usual funnel shaped research model. We have relied upon this paradigm throughout, with each other and with our wider collaboration.

As in bread making, this folding approach creates air pockets, which give texture and produce 'the rise' in the oven and the dynamic in our emerging body of research. The durational quality of the practice allows for actual and metaphorical fermentation of concepts and conversations, and the developing 'flavour' of the research increasingly draws interest and grants access.

RESEARCHING THROUGH CULTURE

Fermentation in bread making is a process that begins with what is called a starter or 'mother' culture. Flour, water and crucially, the spores of wild airborne yeasts are gelled together in active physical and chemical association. Starter cultures were traditionally handed down through generations from mother to daughter in dowries, as labour-saving devices.

Yeast starters or, for that matter, any culture it could be said, are flavoured depending on the particular aspects of the place in which they are created. Nowadays, you can use the internet to source starters which are many years old, choosing specific locations of origin. This is our starter culture, which, at 2 years of age, is relatively

young. (*show it to peeps here*) She travels with us to every research location and is flavoured simultaneously by the particular cultures of the space that we occupy, and the essence of the conversations that unfold. Participants add the starter to their ingredients, and take their dough home to bake and serve, extending the conversation to the inaccessible domain of private spaces, to further ferment.

So being passed through the domestic and public spheres, the body, and the body politic, the flavour of our research has been informed by multiple senses, sensibilities, temporalities, scales and meanings.

Our sourdough embodies the connective thread of production and consumption between the diverse sites, constituencies, social strata and time frames of the unfolding project.

Using fermentation as a research practice has allowed for speculation and experimentation, playing into the relational, the physical and the affective. Movement and access between the body as cultural site and the culture around it, is folded over with research questions, drawing out the threads of conversation and creating pockets of potentiality for something else to arise.

We have consciously and conscientiously held space for these 'something else's' to develop and contribute, enabling disparate spaces, times and knowledges to speak to each other. The slow pace allows us to recognise and temporarily align with these micro happenings, folding their production over into the macro 'dough-body' of the overall project.

Researching through culture allows for the production and negotiation of meaning and value. Understanding ferment as provocation, the mediation is as the yeast - vital, opening the possibility for contestation, and for folding, including folding as difference, refusal and descent.

FOLDING

When baking bread, folding drives out some or all the gases that have been generated by the fermentation process and rearranges the dough so that the yeast has access to fresh nutrients. The build-up of gas in the dough can act as an inhibitor on the yeast, a chemical brake on its activity, so getting rid of the gas makes sure that the yeast can continue to develop and flourish. Folding stretches and aligns the glutes which form the structure that hold the rise. The process must be gentle, ensuring the strands so strenuously developed are not torn or destroyed.

As a research methodology, folding as 'continual rearrangement', can be considered as a process of rigorous critique, essential for the full leavening action and flavours of fermentation to 'rise'. As a fundament of women's work, folding connects the project with the domain of the domestic, and thus the conversation is, by default, essentially in, and of, the feminist.

OPENNESS

There is an Irish anecdote which tells of a tourist who goes into a pub looking for directions. The customer at the bar responds: 'If you were going there, you wouldn't start from here.'

Applicable in many walks of life, this sage observation relates very much to *Fold and Rise*. If we were setting out to reach all the many places, and meet the many people that we have, we would have chosen neither the means nor the route that we have taken.

And so, we started from our remote locations, coming together to access places and people that we would have been neither clever enough to predict, nor presumptuous enough to imagine. We have advanced at a slow pace, waiting for the leavening action of our labours to coalesce and ripen.

We have folded the poetic with the political, the theoretical with the intuitive, the central with the marginal, in a slowly turning, fermenting and rising coalition.

Our action slowly and gradually created solidarity, leverage and traction, illuminating and sometimes creating the cracks through which we have managed to tiptoe.

As researchers, we are interested in how the material and the discursive are constructed in and through food, bodies of culture, cultural bodies and performatives. Our work is grounded in the affective, the sensorial and the peripheral, questioning hierarchies of knowledge and giving credence to the intuited knowing of the hands and the heart.

ORIGINS

The project originated as a response to a lecture on the life of Countess Constance Markievicz, a seminal figure in Irish history and the founding of the Irish State. We took an extract from the essay: **Topologies: Michel Serres and the Shapes of Thought**, by self-styled cultural phenomenologist, Professor Steven Connor, which conflates the non-linear shape of time with the folding of dough. Actively employing this analogy has allowed us to consider how chronologically disparate moments can speak to each other. We can contemplate an embodied mapping of the contemporary relevance of Markievicz, who in 1916 took a leading role in the Easter Rising in Ireland, and in 1918, was the first woman elected to Westminster, following the enactment of the Representation of the People Act, the centenary of which will be next year.

Connor describes how the action of continual folding brings the outside in, until the mass becomes full of itself. We are trying to create research which is crammed with its own peripheries, that takes its flavour from unusual and unlikely encounters and juxtapositions, democratizing inputs and facilitating conference between those on the margins with the great and the good.

Constance's own life spanned the gamut from privilege, power and access, to derision, incarceration and penury. Once photographed for her gazelle like beauty and hailed for her artistic talents, she became only the second woman in Europe to take on a ministerial role, becoming the Minister for Labour in the first Irish Government, but she met a premature death, precipitated by her participation in the revolutionary process.

We opened our first **Fold and Rise** conversation in Lissadell House, County Sligo, the country seat of the Gore-Booth family, of whom Constance was the eldest daughter. She was born and grew up there and she is our 'starter' to other conversations, because her life situates cultural practice at the heart of society and

politics. We cultured our yeast starter at the original kitchen table, which still bears the indent of where the bread for the house was kneaded.

Since then, we have had **Fold and Rise** conversations at kitchen tables and coffee shops, men's sheds and reading groups, gallery spaces and university libraries, community centres and art institutions, conferences and castles. In 2018, we advance on the corridors of power and contested colonies.

Convergences, collaborations and coalitions

We are looking for the folds and rises in individual lives, collective experiences and cultural and knowledge production, and we gently breach social, legal, physical and conversational conventions.

In the tradition of 'Useful Art', initiated by the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera, this is art at a 1:1 scale, meaning it is both the thing itself (a fermented conversation) and a proposition of that thing, where its symbolic value is realised. The focus is on horizontal knowledge exchange as a cultural form, involving groups of people from a broad spectrum of society, and other researchers from both within and outside the field of contemporary socially engaged art.

We have instrumentalized collaboration as both an essential element and a dynamic tool of fermentation, folding, permission and access. We owe a debt of gratitude to artist Donal Sheehan for ongoing input, and to doctoral candidates Mary Farrell and Fiona Woods, whose early invitation into their own research processes, became part of the supportive structure which allowed the project to progress.

Each discursive Fold and Rise conversation explores the collective and relational production of knowledge, combining conceptual and embodied methods. In an atypical workshop format, the theory and the practice of *thinking with hands* is introduced as research action, drawing on aesthetics and feminism as critical discourses of the body, actively engaging the bodies of the participants.

Our ongoing alignment with the National Women's Council of Ireland brought early credence, traction and momentum, giving us access to a broad demographic of women, in both rural and urban locations, and at one point allowing us entry to the American Embassy in Dublin. In 2018 we will work with them to deliver the project to a caucus of women representatives from both houses of the Irish Parliament, discussing women's experiences of meeting and delivering power.

Working with women from the Traveller Community at Pavee Point in Dublin, we presented a rearrangement to normal practice, by entering a rare production between 'settled' and 'Traveller' women. This is a pernicious cultural fault line, and, the community believes, settled women too often fail to deliver solidarity with their position of marginalisation.

We encountered their cultural obsession with cleanliness. Long discriminated against on the grounds of their purported contamination, they found the idea of the yeast starter too disruptive and would not add it to their bowls. (They are not alone in this, and we have encountered a lot of fear of the microbial 'other').

They were also troubled by hearing about Constance Markievicz's abandonment of her life of privilege, but acknowledged parallels with women in their own community who have taken a principled stand.

This summer, we worked with groups of a largely male cohort, beside artist Tricia O'Connor, and her 'Traveling Tea Party Project', opening the conversation of women's reproductive rights and abortion, a highly charged topic in Ireland at present. This is increasingly an area into which younger men especially, do not feel entitled to contribute.

Taking **Fold and Rise**, to University College London in 2016, through collaboration with artist David Blackmore, we crossed paths with Markievicz once again, as she studied there at the Slade. Through David's research, we were able to witness both Markievicz's presence and absence from the archive of distinguished alumni.

We entered the hallowed space of the library with our disruptive and messy paraphernalia of the domestic, situating the intuitive in the sanctum of the academic, and in-so-doing, managing to align ourselves with future research prospects.

IN CONCLUSION

Fermentation and folding have leavened the conversations and altered the trajectories of our knowledge production, allowing them to mature and develop slowly, with a less linear progression, bringing a continuously evolving shape to the research.

Fold and Rise creates conditions in which participants can directly interact with different ways of knowing, an experience that can be disorienting and surprising, producing fresh perspectives on questions of 'temporal relations', 'bodies of knowledge' and bodily knowledge.

The universality of the process grants access as an obvious and natural progression. By firmly maintaining our position as the artists, and by genuinely trusting the process, the outcomes, rather than being prescribed or predicted, can simply be allowed to unfold.