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# Supported Studios: Crawford Artists in Context

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## **Introduction**

This article explores the concept of the Supported Studio and examines the history of such studios in Cork. It sets out the extraordinary contribution of Hermann Marbe, an artist facilitator who pioneered provision in the city. With particular focus on the Crawford Supported Studio, the article communicates some of the achievements of studio artists who have exhibited their work across Cork and in Dublin, delivering mainstream learning programmes and working alongside European and global partners. Finally, it gives mention to future work to be delivered by the Crawford Supported Studio.

## **Supported Studios in Ireland**

Supported studios are sustained, creative environments that foster and support the art practice of individuals with health or social needs. They enable marginalized individuals to develop their professional practice, providing technical artistic support, promoting artists in the marketplace and building audiences outside health and social care settings. Irish supported studios are a precious ecosystem, without which many artists would be deprived of the means to make their work. Supported studios in Ireland, including KCAT in Kilkenny and the Arts Ability Studio group in Wexford, enable people with intellectual disabilities to have a meaningful creative presence within the cultural life of their communities. Pdraig Naughton, Director of Arts & Disability Ireland, has described in conversation

with us advances in supported studio practice as “long fought” and “hard-won” by small groups of dedicated arts workers.

## **Glasheen Art Studio Programme (GASP)**

At the John Birmingham Day Care Centre in Cork, since the early 2000s artist facilitator Hermann Marbe had created a supported studio, the Glasheen Art Studio Programme (GASP). Here, he introduced art techniques and provided a space where people could try them out and identify the media that best brought out their talent. Every morning Hermann would visit each room, inviting its occupants to make some art. The studio door was open to all and residents could come as often as they wished. He patiently encouraged people to build their skills and confidence, discovering their unique creative natures over time.

Hermann met many unique artists among the residents of the day care centre. Ken Daly, a very quiet man, liked to draw portraits from magazines or photo albums. He captured the look of a person in a very caricatured way, adding humour that nobody had ever suspected from him. Siobhan Mullane would be working on a painting, and, if distracted, could not finish the piece that day. She would return the following week and, barely looking at her painting, would mix exactly the same shade of paint and continue to work as if she had never stopped. These are just two of the many talented artists whom Hermann met and supported, but they provide rich examples of how



Portrait of Hermann Marbe reworked by Marie Sexton.  
From the collection of Hermann Marbe.

art reduced the impact of individuals' physical and psychological conditions on their engagement with the outside world.

Hermann rejected the dominance of disability as a theme in people's lives, blending away the "special needs" aspect of his work. He believed that we all have special needs and need help in different forms: he was more interested in people's strengths. Hermann strove to help people to become stronger within their community, shifting their status from day-care residents to self-sufficient artists. He recognized that to do so, people had to come out of the big day-care "bay" rooms in which they sat, to work in the heart of the city alongside other artists, meeting visitors and participating as equals.

By building GASP's relationships with other organisations, Hermann Marbe impacted visual arts practice across the city as a whole. In the Mayfield Arts Centre, GASP members developed their professional skills and gained accredited

arts training. With Meitheal Mara, a community boatyard and training centre, they built and launched a boat, the *Friend-Ship*, later exhibited in Cork Public Museum and at Cork Educate Together national school. CIT Crawford College of Art and Design provided studio space in the city centre where artists could explore new work, meet and work alongside students, participate in projects and teach classes. Crawford Art Gallery invited two to work as artists in residence, during which time they contributed to the Gallery's Learn & Explore programme by designing and delivering engagement activities, including for Culture Night.

Over time, GASP artists became increasingly visible, undertaking projects with schools, in restaurants, cafés, a nursing home, in *Irish Examiner* and *Evening Echo* premises and in other local offices. They used the Bank of Ireland's *Workbench* exhibition space, established a studio on the Cork-Dublin train, occupied an empty retail unit and exhibited in numerous cafés in Cork and at the Royal Hibernian Academy in Dublin.

### **The Crawford Supported Studio**

In May 2018, Hermann Marbe passed away. With this, the GASP artists lost a formidable mentor and their greatest friend, but Hermann had seeded love for his project in many people's hearts. His death coincided with the removal of funding from Cúig (Creativity Unlimited Integrated Group), founded ten years previously by the Mayfield Arts Centre, a vibrant art-facilitating and training centre that is deeply involved in its community. The idea for Crawford Support Studio was born.

The Crawford Supported Studio, established in 2018, is delivered through a partnership of institutional allies, comprising Crawford Art Gallery, CIT Crawford College of Art and Design, Cork City Council's Arts Office and COPE Foundation. It is itself a legacy project, aiming to carefully hold over ten years' worth of supported studio practice and sustaining that initiated, nurtured and developed within COPE Foundation by Hermann Marbe.

The Studio's ethos is embedded in that of Marbe, and centres on recognising and valuing difference and enabling marginalized artists to shape their own cultural identities. Two dedicated facilitators, Karolina Poplawska and Mairead O'Callaghan



John Whelan in the Supported Studio.

Credit: Hermann Marbe.

facilitate studio spaces, providing one day a week in each of the Gallery and the College of Art. Set up to provide a space for the GASP and Cúig artists to maintain their art practice, the Studio also continues to build links with organizations, artists, schools, students, community groups and fellow supported studios.

In 2019, the Crawford Art Gallery remains mindful of Hermann Marbe's insistence that public institutions must enable people to identify as artists rather than as disabled. Through its unique anchoring within both gallery and art college, the Crawford Supported Studio partnership has sought to rise to this challenge by supporting successful applications for Arts and Disability Ireland grants. Through a Mentoring Grant, artist Tom O'Sullivan will work with painter Tom Climent and studio-facilitator Mairead O'Callaghan to explore technique, paint on a larger scale and work more independently. Yvonne Condon's New Work Grant will be a site-specific project in rural and urban settings identified as suitable and permissible in partnership with Cork City Council. Through a Connect Award, Íde Ni Shúilleabháin, Ailbhe

Barrett, Bríd Heffernan and John Keating will develop new processes with Cork Printmakers. Supported and sustained by means of collaboration with a number of varied groups, the Crawford Supported Studio is broadening recognition of the importance of difference.

### **Exhibitions, Programmes and Partnerships**

Crawford Supported Studio exhibitions build on the now long-established presence within the Crawford Art Gallery of GASP and Cúig artists. In 2013 their work was exhibited in *Outside In: The Art of Inclusion*, a unique, collaborative project at three Cork venues – Crawford Art Gallery, City Hall and the CIT Wandersford Quay Gallery. The outcome of a partnership between Crawford Art Gallery, CIT Crawford College of Art and Design, Mayfield Arts Centre/Newbury House and Cork City Council, the exhibition showcased selected works of over fifty artists, working in supported studio settings, in Cork, Kilkenny, Youghal, Brighton, Amsterdam, New York and San Francisco. With a publication edited by Louise Foott, the exhibition was accompanied by discussions and workshops with participating artists, continuing through the



Supported Studio artists Katie Whelan and Rosaleen Moore, at 'Perceptions 2016: The Art of Citizenship', Crawford Art Gallery. Rosaleen writes, "When I heard the word college, I thought 'I am going to college'. Since I went there I can think a lot...When I go back on the bus I look at the buildings again and think, 'that's my picture'. In the day-centre it's too busy and too many people so I can't think so well. I can focus a lot on my work when I am in college".

Credit: Jed Niezgodna.

Gallery's Learn & Explore programme and also the CIT Crawford College of Art & Design's academic programme.

*Outside In* was followed by the exhibition *Perceptions 2016: The Art of Citizenship* which showcased the work of over sixty artists working in supported studio settings. Following an open call for submissions, work was selected from supported studios worldwide, including from GASP and Cúig artists. The exhibition, organized by Crawford Art Gallery, Cork City Council and Crawford College of Art and Design and shown in ten Cork venues, sought to place diverse perspectives and marginalized voices in the

cultural heart of the city, thereby challenging the still-unrealized 1916 Proclamation of the Irish Republic to cherish "all the children of the nation equally and oblivious of...differences."

*Perceptions 2016* also showcased outcomes from the *Expanding Realities* project,<sup>1</sup> a European Erasmus+ funded partnership between GASP Cork, Art in Motion (AIM) Bristol and Debajo del Sombrero Madrid to support the professional development of artists. *Expanding Realities* was an opportunity for artists to travel and visit each other's cities, to create new work side-by-side and to exchange ideas and experiences. *Perceptions 2016: The Art of Citizenship* was noted as important by Irish Museum of Modern Art Head of Engagement and Learning, Helen O'Donoghue, because it exhibited "the quality of work that is happening behind closed doors". 'Meet the Artist' events, tours, school and community workshops, a symposium investigating our understanding of citizenship within the unique context of the exhibition and with a further publication edited by Foott, completed the engagement programme.

### **Conclusion**

This article has set out to establish the importance of the Supported Studio concept, and to consolidate awareness of studio artists, some



Wall vinyl by Cùig artist Frankie Burton. In *Outside In: The Art of Inclusion (2013)* at Cork City Council.

Photo: Jed Niezgoda.

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examples of whose work are shown here. Aimed at museum professionals in Ireland, it is hoped that the article will lead to further collaborations within the sector. In 2020, the Crawford Supported Studio will embrace an adventurous and ambitious programme, focused on supporting the artists to continue to develop artistically and strengthening key relationships leading to broader creative networks. A 2019 collaborative Open Studio invited staff and students from the School of Visual Arts in New York to Cork, a creative encounter that has led to Crawford Supported Studio artists being offered their own show, in February 2020, at Flat Iron Gallery, SVA, New York. Meanwhile, discussions are ongoing concerning a possible exhibition to be hosted by University of Atypical in Belfast; and students of the Crawford College of Art and Design will experience further open studios there. There is art to be made, people to meet and a world to be explored.

**Emma Klemencic leads the Crawford Art Gallery Learn & Explore programme together with Senior Curator Anne Boddaert.**

**Karolina Poplawska has been a Supported Studio Facilitator for ten years. She is an occupational therapist who is qualified in Art Therapy.**

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1. [www.expandingrealities.eu](http://www.expandingrealities.eu)