

Kurnugia NOW!

Introduction by Celina Muldoon

“What you see is not what others see. We inhabit parallel worlds of perception, bounded by our interests and experience. What is obvious to some is invisible to others”, George Monbiot

I understand now what my role on this planet is. Until now, I have always struggled quietly amidst all the rhetoric and protestations about ‘The Environment’ and ‘Climate Change’; ‘Climate Awareness’ and ‘Climate Fatalism’. I have been lost in the bombardment of information around earth saving diets, solar panels, and electric cars. The flip side is that I have also felt safe (enough) in the knowledge that our family composts, we avoid fast fashion, we try and fail, and try again, meat free diets. We are trying to “save” for the solar panels and the electric car. “We are trying”. “We are doing our bit”. But still, wildfires rage, famine and drought have gained a firm grip on communities across the world and unprecedented flooding is destroying our planet at a faster rate than anticipated.

As I write this, we are experiencing record breaking heat waves in Europe, North and South America, Australia, and the rest of the world. While the media is glorifying this “beautiful” weather and those privileged enough to live in acclimated heat are slapping on the S.P.F, I am scared! I admit, it’s the first time, in terms of the environment, that I have been afraid of what the future holds. For decades now, George Monbiot has been laying the groundwork and pleading for us to wake up, challenge the system and work together to try to save what is left of our planet. If you bring up the subject of Climate Change, in any given scenario, I have learned that it is an increasingly divisive topic. Recurring responses range from exasperation, hopelessness, and shame to absolute Climate Change denial. My internal voice has wondered, “if a small group of people cannot agree on solutions to this, then how will we ever survive?”.

This project arose from a desire to explore identity in the human brain. I wanted to investigate how identity is formed, to understand how biological and environmental factors shape and mould one’s sense of self, and to unpick the specific social and political issues which may contribute to the development of the human brain. I am fortunate to personally know Dr. Clare Kelly, Associate Professor in the *Trinity Institute of Neurosciences in Trinity College Dublin*. We went to school together in Ballyshannon, Co. Donegal. At a time when I had just finished a recent exhibition series, my mind was bubbling away about who I could collaborate with around behavioural science. At our twenty-year school reunion, myself and

Clare hunkered down over a beverage and had a chat about what we are both doing with our lives and almost immediately we began discussing these ideas. The seeds were sown, and we pledged to begin a collaboration. Since that reunion in 2018, those seeds have been watered; fed and have grown into a behemoth interdisciplinary project of multiple collaborations. These collaborations include working with production company *Sixbetween* to develop the film piece *Kurnugia NOW!* and with German composer Moritz Fasbender to create the sound piece *Istar's planet*.

What has been revealed, through our collaborative research, is the need to examine the recurring links between climate change and anxiety and how the effects of these influences shape the development of our identity and our understanding of ourselves in relation to time and place in the brain. In particular we have been investigating the relationship between narrative identity and behavioural change and how we might bring about behavioural change with respect to the climate and our environment by accessing, drawing out, and exploring people's narrative identities. This has led to a combined collaboration with Dr. Francis Ludlow and Ph.D. candidate Rhonda McGovern in the *Trinity Centre for Environmental Humanities in Trinity College Dublin*

Rhonda McGovern's research is centred around reconstructing the climate of ancient Babylonia for the years 652-61BCE based on extracting content from the *Astronomical Diaries and Related Texts from Babylonia*. Rhonda is also a friend with whom I went to school. Because of my interest in re-imagining mythological stories and how this could be linked to climate change, I have been fascinated with her research over the past number of years. I think it is somewhat serendipitous that we three are good friends and presaged that our professional worlds would cross paths. We believe in the power of storytelling in shaping our identity. We seek ways to effect behavioural change. The kind of change that would promote agency and unify the public around the most critical issue of our time - the climate and biodiversity crisis.

Over a period of two years, we have met either in person or through zoom meetings. Together we engaged in conversations around psychology, art and culture and the environment. These lengthy conversations became the bedrock of our research. They fuelled our passion for collaborative investigation, and we mobilised around areas which required further exploration. We have set up a WhatsApp group which extends our communication and a google folder which contains related journals, papers, and quotes. The project has become a space for academic exploration and collaboration, but it has also thrived as a space for solidarity and connection.

The essays included in this publication are written by Dr. Clare Kelly, Rhonda Mc Govern and Dr. Áine Phillips. They are written with the expertise of each author, in their respective fields, in response to and in collaboration with *Kurnugia NOW!* Part 1 of a story in 3 parts.

Clare Kelly Ph.D. is an associate professor in the School of Psychology and Department of Psychiatry at the School of Medicine, Trinity College Dublin, and a Principal Investigator at Trinity College Institute of Neuroscience. Clare has been an enormous advocate for equality, inclusivity, and diversity in Trinity College. She responded to the call for climate action in her role and is working with colleagues to develop planet centred policies for the college. Clare

discusses the role played by narrative and storytelling in the development and understanding of who we are:

“Stories are central to how we understand other people and ourselves. As key to our identities, narratives enable us to make sense of who we are, how we behave, and what we value, and through the process of simulation, they also enable us make sense of other people, predict how *they* will behave, and make inferences about what *they* value.”

Combining Kelly’s point with Monbiot’s quote, I propose that if we can understand the way in which we construct narratives, then perhaps - through art and culture and in particular live performance – we can construct positive stories. These stories, then, will cultivate collective experience, mutual understanding, and acceptance; giving us the tools to adapt to the climate and biodiversity crisis.

Kelly also posits that we are hardwired to collaborate. The late capitalist model promotes the story of human nature which describes us as a selfish, self-destructive species that is doomed to fail. However, in Kelly’s expert opinion, this is a lie. We have evolved to collaborate. It is necessary for our survival. But for capitalism to thrive, the system requires us to believe in this false narrative. In her essay titled, “The stories we tell; the stories we are told”, Kelly outlines the causes and effects of this peddled story and makes the case for us all as collaborative; empowered humans who can – if we connect and organise – challenge this terrible lie, overcome our sloth like inaction and work together to save our future.

Rhonda McGovern is a Ph.D. candidate under the supervision of Dr. Francis Ludlow in the dept. of History and *Trinity Centre for Environmental Humanities*. She began working on the *Climates of Conflict in Ancient Babylonia* project in March 2019. McGovern completed a masters in climate science in 2018 where the focus of her research was on the examination of the ‘social weather’ of climate change through media. Part of the motivation for this was to highlight how and why the media framed climate change stories. The other part was a newly acquired knowledge that above all else, communicating with others is key to action. The ability to tell stories; to relate; holds the capacity for understanding, negotiation, and change. To many, who look from the outside, the change from a ‘political / social commentary’ focused body of research to a historical climatology focused perspective, makes little to no sense. But for McGovern, it was the capacity to work with such compelling sources from an equally compelling period, that led her to the Trinity Centre for Environmental Humanities and the *Climates of Conflict in Ancient Babylonia* project. For what better story than one of the Ancient Babylonians.

In her essay, “Writing from beyond, a window into Ancient Babylonia in the first millennium BCE”, Mc Govern discusses the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration:

“Climate change is deeply complex, with interconnecting systems changing and heading towards tipping points. As someone with a background in youth work, and an

education in geography and climate science, I feel it is my duty to engage and collaborate with artists in order to explore ways to investigate and understand adaptation better for our intergenerational future.”

Dr. Áine Phillips is the leading expert on performance art in Ireland today. She is a nationally and internationally celebrated artist whose work is unparalleled in the field of Live Art. Based in Galway, she has exhibited and performed in Ireland and internationally since the late 1980's. She has created work for multiple contexts, public art commissions, the street, club events, galleries, theatres, and museums. Her work deals with feminist philosophy and politics, using art to comment and make propositions on subjectivity, gender, and social change. In 2015, she published 'Performance Art in Ireland: A History' (Live Art Development Agency/ Intellect Books UK), which includes an anthology of the rich and diverse canon of practitioners based on the island of Ireland.

I first met Áine Phillips while studying for my MFA in *The National College of Art and Design*. She had been invited to give a talk to students based on her practice. I accidentally bumped into her beforehand and was overcome by her presence and the sheer energy that resonates from her body. Performance art is about the body. Artists who engage with performance in their practice employ techniques that push boundaries and break through the “fourth wall” to connect with the audience. In Ireland, performance artists have become what I would describe as a community of inclusive and diverse humans. And this community has welcomed me with open arms. It is this inclusivity and connectedness that embodies the objectives and motivations of performance artists to highlight critical social and political issues. Rather, it allows the artist to unashamedly set out their stall in the belief that we have the power to effect change. It is a privilege to me and to this project that Áine Phillips has agreed to write about our collaboration and the culminating exhibition 'Kurnugia NOW!', Part 1 of a story in 3 parts, in The Dock, Carrick-on-Shannon.

In the beginning of this collaboration, with such seasoned environmentalists, I was concerned that I may lack the passion and necessary credentials to bring the required momentum to this subject. I know now that I should not have feared. I believe the most significant learning outcome that I will carry with me throughout this project is the non-judgmental, inclusive, and patient acceptance of my collaborators. I realise that there is no time for self-pity or “doomerism”. There is only time to act. To challenge our governments. To stand up to corporations. Therefore, I will engage in uncomfortable conversations. I will share my knowledge without judgement. Because I have come to believe that we are all environmentalists.

Despite the common rhetoric that humans are self-destructive and doomed to fail, as Kelly states, “we are hardwired to collaborate”, and we can work together for change. Monbiot says, “we inhabit parallel worlds of perception, bounded by our interests and experience”. I believe that we can align our interests, cultivate shared experiences, and embrace McGovern's position which claims that we must ‘adapt to survive’. I understand now what my role on this planet is. It is to seek opportunities to bring people together to demand system change. It is to harness my practice, fortified by artists like Phillips, and contribute to the call for action to safeguard our future.

