

Taking Everyone Else into Account

Edmund Clark in conversation with Jonathan Watkins

Jonathan Watkins: It's now more than one year since the Grendon residency started. How is it going?

Edmund Clark: It's going well. Looking back, it took quite a long time for me to get a sense of the place and how it worked. There are six prison wings, and I'm working mainly on four. Getting people to work across wings was much more complicated than I anticipated. Also getting a sense of the bureaucracy of the prison; getting to know how to operate in that kind of environment, physically opening and shutting a lot of doors and barred gates to get from one place to another ... Slowly I'm getting used to the rhythm of the place.

JW: I remember when you started you stressed that you wanted to deal with the whole institution, not just the prisoners - that you were also interested in the management and the staff – and that that was met with some nervousness.

EC: I think there is an element of nervousness on the part of some of the people there, and for many of them I'm still quite a strange creature. I'm still an unknown quantity in the prison. When I'm out with my camera equipment I can still get people occasionally stopping me and asking "What are you doing? Do you have permission for that?"

JW: Was it easy to get permission to have a camera in the prison?

EC: Yes. I've compiled a list of equipment that I want to use which includes reference and serial numbers and every time I go into the prison I let them know what I'm bringing, and everything gets ticked off. Every time that I want to bring in a new piece of equipment I have to get it approved by the Head of Security. I am currently talking about digital tape recorders in light of the protocols about how recorded material is handled, the sensitivity, the security, the encryption ...

So every step of the way is a process of dealing with the bureaucracy of security, but I was expecting that that would be the case. It's a theme that runs through all my work, dealing with such processes, and it shapes what I do.

JW: To what extent you feel fettered by conditions and restrictions, or is it a case of necessity being the mother of invention?

EC: I am having a dialogue with an institution that's holding some very serious criminals. It has to have its own protocols and conditions and ways of doing things and I have to respect that, even if sometimes it is not so relevant for me.

JW: Was there something that surprised you? You are no stranger to institutions of incarceration, but was there something about Grendon that you weren't expecting?

EC: Two things come to mind straight away. One is being a key holder. I've never been in control of keys before and that was very strange for me. It may seem a small point, but actually it's quite profound.

JW: Does that mean you could open a wing and let people out?

EC: Yes. For me to be able to operate in that environment I have to be a key holder. So I've had security training, I have a set of keys and basically the rule is that as long as my key opens the door I can go there, and so I have privileged access which the men obviously can't have. Now when I worked in a prison before, I was very clear that I didn't want that, rather to be more on the side of the prisoners ...

JW: Does it make you feel like a gaoler, more on the side of the staff?

EC: It doesn't make me feel like a gaoler, I'm a key holder. I'm a turn screw. That is obviously something that divides the population of a prison.

JW: And the other surprise?

EC: The other surprise was the openness, the directness of the men. And that's part and parcel of the place that it is. It's a therapeutic prison and they are there to talk and to share and to communicate. At the same time they are also very capable of learning how to deal with everyone at different levels within the hierarchy, and are very forward in calling others to account. Together we sit in group meetings they will criticise a member of staff, have a go at prison officer, disagree with a therapist and so on. They are challenging, I am challenged, and I find that good.

In this respect Grendon is certainly different to other prisons I've been into. There it's possible to get to know people well enough, so that there can be very informal relationships, but there are always some who are very reserved. Whereas in this environment all the prisoners are genuinely very forthcoming..

JW: And what effect do you think that might have on your work?

EC: I think it means that those who wish to engage with what I'm doing are open to being challenged and responding to that. There are some who are actively seeking that to challenge me with what they're doing and what they're thinking. They are open to sharing their outlooks and understanding my ideas and that is something that will reflect back and engage them with what I want to do.

JW: To what extent are they involved in your work or where do you draw the line between your work and the work they do?

EC: I've been clear that there are two aspects to my role in the prison. One is to make a body of work and one is to facilitate others to make their own work. They are both important and don't necessarily sit together comfortably all the time, but I have been clear that the work that I'm doing for the Ikon exhibition, for the publication is my work, that's not a place for their own work, but that it is very much a place for their responses to my work. The space for their own work is in the exhibitions I want to organise every year in the prison, to which people are invited from the outside.

That's very much their space, also with dedicated pages on the website for art by Grendon prisoners.

JW: It's a very rare thing to have an exhibition in a prison. How did you manage it?

EC: Certainly putting on an exhibition in a prison is a complicated thing to do, but I was determined to do it because if I'm trying to facilitate the prisoner's art work and trying to get them to take their work seriously - and they want to take it seriously - then it's very important that they have opportunities to take control of how their work is seen. So the exhibition was organised with a group of men across the wings.

JW: Did they help you hang it?

EC: I try to do all my work there with a group dynamic. We all sat down and decided what we wanted to do – sometimes with the Governor joining us. We talked about what work we wanted to show, how we would curate it. We went to the space itself and talked about how we would use it, how we would take control of it.

JW: It sounds like a curatorial workshop.

EC: Absolutely, and I learned a lot from them, as we did from each other as a group. That's the whole point of a group dynamic; we all learn from each other. Then what was really interesting, and important, is that by having an exhibition inside a prison they can meet people coming in from the outside, and talk in front of their work. It is as if they are no longer prisoners, but artists instead.

Apart from meeting me every fortnight or so, or to each other, they don't have the opportunity to talk about their art work. They have art therapy but that is a very different. I know from my own practice, that it is only when you talk about your work that you really start to understand what you've done. You have to find the right words, enter into a dialogue with someone, or a discourse with a number of different people, and then you find things in what you've done that you didn't even know were there. By letting other people influence the conversation, you can find it in yourself to learn.

JW: And from the visitors' point of view it's absolutely fascinating. It's a very rare kind of exhibition.

EC: I think what Koestler Trust does is terrific. I've been to [their] exhibitions and hear people talking about how it is the prisoners' work on display – "it's their work" – but their absence is profound.

JW: What was the men's reaction to the exhibition?

EC: On the day when the visitors came it was fantastic. It was great to see prisoners who are not normally very expressive talking and talking and talking. I think many of them got an awful lot from it, and it has encouraged engagement from other people within the prison.

Afterwards, some of the prisoners experienced a kind of comedown. On a social level they had a reaction because they don't get to meet people from the outside, unless it's someone like me, or academics who come in, or the occasional prison visitor, usually a member of their family. I don't want to put thoughts in their heads or words in their mouths or patronise in that way, but I got a sense from some of them that there was a reaction afterwards having had the chance to meet some of those people.

JW: And we'll do it again?

EC: Absolutely! We're doing it again this year and I've been talking to the Koestler Trust about getting some of their judges in. Having established a distinction between their exhibitions and what I'm doing, I am increasingly interested in having them involved, because that is essential to what I think I have to explore in Grendon, the nature of what is going on there.

I realise that there is no point in me doing work which is just a window on this place. It has to be driven by what happens there and my work has to go into the experience of these men. So what I'm trying to do is to make images which, on one hand, interest an audience on the outside looking in, encouraging them to reflect on the nature of the institution, and the way they see those inside. But also, given that this is a therapeutic environment, where people have come to reflect on the crimes they've committed, and to share that with other people as well as their observations on what has been done to them - a process of profound self-reflection - my work has to challenge them to reflect on how they see themselves and how they think they are seen by other people.

JW: Are you involving or engaging the staff in your work in a similar way?

EC: Yes, that's important for me, and I think very important for the men to see the staff engaging with my process in the same way they are. I am photographing, recording, creating images of people, and trying to engage the staff as much as possible in that process, getting them to respond to images of themselves and through that to their ways of seeing. As well it's about their experience of being in this extraordinary environment, a place where they have to share so much, and - given who is in this prison - they are sharing thoughts on some very disturbing experiences, and how that affects all of them.

Grendon is one of the most utopian places and one of the most positive places I've ever experienced. But at the same time, given the nature of the people imprisoned there, what they have done and their experience of sharing their crimes - as well as what's happened to them - on a daily basis, it is a very stressful place.

JW: This is something the prisoners told us when we visited the exhibition of their art work that you organised last year; that Grendon was very tough because of its psychological impact.

EC: And that is true for the staff as well. It permeates, and goes both ways. It is a lot for people to take on board.

JW: And stressful for you too?

EC: It can be. I've always thought that places of incarceration are a distillation of society .. In some ways people in Grendon are living a utopian way of life. There is an extraordinary democracy there; they give themselves, as a group, permission to take everyone else into account. To have such consensual, responsible relationships, having agreed to be in that environment, is like living in some kind of suspended utopia.

JW: A pure experience?

EC: In some ways it is, which when you reflect on it is no more than how society should actually function all the time and if it did these people probably wouldn't be there in the first place.