



The following narrative is taken from a transcript of a discussion/interview between Louise (Art House Volunteer) and Dan Bustamante – artist and Art House Volunteer (October 2017).

The discussion focussed on Dan’s stone sculpture work in the River Don at Ladies Bridge, The Wicker (for more images see Art House website).

Many thanks to Dan for his taking the time to tell us more about this work and for Louise in carrying out the interview and writing up the full transcript.

The full interview will be published on our new Facebook page that showcases the Art House’s well-being work.

Q: Could you tell me Dan about the origins of the project and the title of it?

Dan: There is no title for the project. What happened is one day I saw this program on TV about people in Syria.....and what happened to the women and families, *with Isis and all this dementia that is going on in Syria*. To me it was very traumatic. At first I said I don't want to see this. It's too much. I was in the process of changing the channel when I realised I have to watch this. I cannot bear the guilt any more of escaping this thing. So I went back and I had to force myself to watch the whole program. I ended up with tears. For the next couple of days I was wandering around. I couldn't talk to people. It was like I was living on a different planet. One day I began to walk and found myself on a bridge in this area where I am working now.

Q: The River Don?

Dan: Yes. I decided to go down and put my feet in the water. I sat there and saw these stones so close to me that I decided to put one stone up onto another. And then I noticed that they had a special effect, it was like they were floating. Then I saw that it looked like a figure or a totem, something meaningful so I made another one. And it was much more interesting. Like it was pulling my attention and making me feel quiet and relaxed. So I decided I'm going to come back tomorrow and make another one. The next day I made one that looked much better. Then I planned to do something bigger but I had to go to the middle of the river. It was very embarrassing because people could see me and think who is this guy? He is an idiot.

But on the second day I realised that maybe I can use this place to do something against war. I can put some meaning here and that gave me the strength to go the next day and stand in the middle of the river and attempt to do something a bit bigger. To my amazement I looked around and found a couple of stones and it just happened. I made a sculpture and I really liked it. So I decided that I would come back another day and see what happens; whether there is a future for this. So that was how it started but the idea is to say something.

That's what I'm interested in; using the river as a metaphor for our struggle to make sense of the world because once there was nothing, just water then you look inside the water and you find objects that can be used as a resource. When you work on them you realise that you can produce something useful, of value, out of nothing. So the stones that were completely unnoticed by everybody. now you can see that there are (stone) rings there. So that's the idea, to investigate what good we can get from imagination, from creating things, from trying to say something.

Q: I noticed that you didn't include your name on any of the descriptions of the sculptures or for your exhibition at the Art House and was wondering why?

Dan: I think art has been turned into a cult of personalities..and I don't want to mess all my own chemistry, my brain, turning into (someone) that everybody knows. I need head space to work..I think art should be about the message, what you are trying to say, not the cult of personalities. Like I don't expect to make money out of this work because if you just expect to make money out of what you do, you're not able to do what (needs) to be done. I have that feeling, that I would like to be famous and to do my work and then make millions for working half an hour in a week but that's not what it's all about. It's not about getting rich and famous. It's about communicating and making sense of things.

Q: What about practical issues? For example, you said you wanted to get your message out, what if somebody wanted to get in contact with you in order to promote your message but they don't know who has done the work?

Dan: Yes that's true. At first I didn't want to put my name anywhere; just to do it and make people think about the message but yes, there are practical problems. I need help to promote the message but I'm not trying to promote myself, but yes that practical side is real.

Q: And earning a living?

Dan: Oh yes, I don't think I will ever earn a living from this. People are not going to buy things from someone who is not famous. They're not going to pay anything.

Q: They might, people might love to have a sculpture from you.

Dan: Yes, but what worries me is that now I have a certain peace of mind so I can work with the message. I can work myself. If I could get a grant or something like that so I can specifically concentrate, but that would create a little bit of tension as well because when you have a grant you have to produce (things) but I think that it would be better. Now I am trying to develop, more importantly, the concepts behind (the work), so I need space and tranquillity.

Q: Could we have a look in more detail at some specific images. Are there any that really stand out for you and why?

Dan: Some of the images I like visually but some of them are good to carry a message...This is the sculpture ('Differentiation') made of pieces of stone that stand there like people on top of ..bricks. We cannot differentiate ourselves. When we divide ourselves into classes, religions, nations, races, we open the door to competition, paranoia, hatred and the infernal dementia of war. We can be anything that we want to be but before anything else we must first be equals. Then I added this

because people told me that is never going to be possible..equality is not achievable. 'Some people think that equality is utopia but we invent the reasons that we differentiate ourselves. What is real is that as our power to destroy ourselves grows we can no longer afford war so either we make equality a reality or we destroy ourselves'.. As long as we divide ourselves there will be a reason for war. When we divide ourselves things slowly start to build up; mistrust builds up; hatred; misunderstanding. This mechanism of differentiation is a path to worsening our worst traits..so we end up magnifying our ignorance, our violence and it has to end up in war – that's the logical consequence. So that's a very important message that I wanted to put in a sculpture; dedicate some time to say something of value.

There is another sculpture here (a stone hanging from a string).

Q: This is called Reflection?

Dan: At first I didn't want to put a name on it; just put it there and people think about it and wonder what is going on. It would be more dramatic but somebody said if you don't put your name on it, or some name, somebody can appropriate it and they can change the whole message. My idea is to put a rock hanging from a string and find out what we can deduce from this. I put 'Common beliefs say that rocks don't float yet the atoms that form the rock float. Additionally the rock is part of that super molecule called earth which also floats in space. So evidently earth is infinitely more than a rock and a rock is much, much more than than we find in the shallow interpretations of our rhetoric. Similarly, against conventional thinking and myopic misunderstanding humans are not born bad and life is not war'. ..Everything is floating so why do we say that rocks don't float? '

If you think a bit deeper beyond common misunderstanding ..you see the wider picture. And that's wisdom when you see the wider picture. When you see the wider picture you realise that what the media says makes us human is our bad side .. we are flawed .. we are predators and evolution is self-preservation. It's completely the opposite. Even science is used to tell us that we are bad because evolution is about the superior genes killing the inferior genes.. That's the kind of logic that created the nazis. All these mechanisms that are used in our society are driving the whole society to its own destruction. We are destroying the environment, we are creating super intelligent machines and we don't even care what they are going to do. Oppenheimer wrote a poem 'I have become the destroyer of worlds'. When they (scientists) invented the atomic bomb they didn't know if it was going to destroy the whole universe. But the dementia of these people who call themselves genius scientists and reliable politicians they all decided to go ahead and blow up the bomb.

Q: So how do you see the solutions?

Dan: I think there are solutions. Many people think that the world is too complex; *we cannot do anything to stop genocides and war and being bad. I think it is totally the opposite.* The solution is not to forget what is going on..and to find answers. The authorities are not going to find answers for us. *They just keep driving us from one war to the next because they are corrupt.* ..common people like us, we have to find our own solutions out of this mess. The solution is to think and not to escape that is why I disagree with art that is just about escapism like flowers and things like that because the role of art is to communicate with people and get in touch with reality, to talk about the future and about what is going on. We need to communicate.

Q: So that's what you'd like to achieve through your project; you'd like people to discuss some of the issues you raise through your work?

Dan: Exactly. For example there's another one where I'm writing 'What is humanity?' ..today if you look on the Internet I cannot find the definition of humanity. That is crazy because it will drive all of us into an identity crisis..we think that we are born bad; that being human is destructive

Q: Do you think that's true of cultures all across the world or do you think it's predominantly a western thing?

Dan: I think there's a tendency in all cultures to become like the Romans and the Greeks; they were enlightened people, they were philosophers but also they had this destructive side to them. Because there are forces in us; there is a positive force which is humanity and there is the negative force which is inhumanity.

Everything in us that is bad is inhumanity because it drives us to our destruction. Everything that is positive in us; that is creative in us and keeps us together; solving problems and being kind and protective of each other and the environment, and is wise, is human. Everything that is ignorance and myopic and shallow is inhumanity. We have to choose, do we want to follow the path of ignorance, escapism or do we want to follow the path of looking for solutions, communicating and searching for understanding; making sense of things. That is what a human is – a being with brains and his first aim is to fight suffering and death. Yes, we have a range of feelings; we know compassion, love. All of that is fantastic. That's the human side. But we have feelings which are like an aberration from our natural mechanism, which is cruelty, war, ignorance. We have a brain..When we just stay in ignorance and misunderstanding of each other, that is not a human side ...

Q: Some people would argue that the fear aspect of our nature is built in as a part of our survival instinct.

Dan: Oh yes, but we were born with a number of behaviours. Like for example, every animal (because we are animals and part of the natural world) every animal tries to save some food for tomorrow. Like a lion for example, they don't just leave it to rot. Rather than wasting it they save it and use it fully rather than being destructive for no purpose. So we also have this instinct when we have a little bit of spare food we can save it for the winter or for tomorrow. That's a natural behaviour but through the development of culture and technology we have the capacity to save more than we need. We take other peoples resources and save it for ourselves and that has become an aberration from the natural instinct which is to save what you need for tomorrow. It's good for the environment and good for us but we turn it into greed *so now you have these multinational companies and super rich people that completely destroy the balance of nature and the balance of society by taking everything themselves and become a monstrosity, an aberration from the natural impulse. We have created a system which is based not on understanding but on ignorance because we are fed these aberrant forces. For example, we have the natural instinct to protect ourself. If someone comes to attack us, we defend ourselves. That's natural but then some people develop weapons and dream maybe I can attack these people and steal everything they've got so they become like imperialist or aggressive forces.*

I see every reason to be positive but what we need to do to be positive is ourselves, take

advantage of the resources to turn the world to something positive. Because if we just hide our head in the sand then things are going to get worse.

Q But there are people doing very positive things

Dan: That's what we all have to do. Every one of us must find solutions ourselves.

Q I wanted to ask you about your concerns about getting all the sculptures completed before the end of October? Also where exactly on the River Don is it if people want to come and have a look at it?

Dan: The Wicker. Near the bridge (Ladies Bridge) and Holiday Inn.

Q Is it right at the start of the Five Weirs Walk?

Dan: Yes. There is a little path beside the river and there are messages around there which are related to some of the specific sculptures. So that's what I need - to develop more and it's going to take me another year, maybe 2 years, maybe 100 years (laughs).

Q You said that you were concerned about a deadline in October?

Dan: I was approached by someone from the environmental department. He told me that the fish need to be left alone for their spawning cycle every year. So they told me that I had a limited time to work on the sculptures. They gave me 5 months in a year to work and that from October I cannot enter the river. The fish need gravel to spawn but the area specifically where I use there is no gravel. As I said I need time to develop the sculptures and 5 months is not a lot for me. It's constant work because everything is developing as I go. I will ask them for a bit more time because they have told me this is low risk work that I am doing, for the fish. If I can get a bit more time that will be fantastic. The work that I am doing is going to benefit the environment as well because the work is meant to make us think about the consequences of our technology and where we are going as a society. So also it will be positive for the environment and the river itself so I want to keep going.

Q: So, what are you making these sculptures out of?

Dan: They are made out of the stones that I find in the river itself. They are under the water. I found different shapes and then I found rings. That was the biggest discovery, like gold.

Q What are they from? Do you know?

Dan: In the industrial revolution they were used to sharpen..

Q Grinding wheels?

Dan: And there are some big ones that were used to grind wheat. So, I don't know, they could be from the middle ages, pre- industrial revolution. Some of them are very old. Everything is still there. The only thing is I'm running out of bricks because some of them are too round. I cannot make them stand (up). I go further up in the river to where the bricks are more modern. And I have

to bring them from there but they are all from the river.

Q: Examples of your work and this interview are going to be put on the Art House Wellbeing social media page and I wanted to ask if you've got any comments that you'd like to make about how you think art can help maintain wellbeing?

Dan: Yes, I think art is a very important thing. Art is a biological function in us. It helps us to communicate and to make sense of the world because when you are alone - I have experienced this myself; I spent myself a long time alone and was destroying myself because I was not communicating. At some point, when I was at my worse, I realised that my problem was that I needed to communicate with people. Our minds need to stay in touch with other people otherwise you lose complete reference with what is going on; you lose a sense of who you are yourself.

Art is a natural mechanism which helps us to communicate. When we have a society which does not use art to communicate; to talk about what is fundamental in our life, like the things that we fear, like tyranny or class differentiation, or ignorance or myths that nobody can challenge, then the whole society goes down a bad path. But art is what saves us because we can communicate and find solutions and learn, find wisdom looking at the big picture, not just ourselves. When you open up yourself and say I am not alone in the world.. there are other people that suffer, when you don't just forget suffering, you confront it, it gives you energy because you know that you can fight and go and change the world.

Now I am convinced that I can help to change the world. I don't know about physics, I don't know about mathematics, I'm not an economist but I know a bit about art. With a pencil and piece of paper, it's the cheapest thing in the world. You just go out, put a couple of stones and you make a sculpture. Then you go with a piece of paper and you write a message and you put it nearby. So it's the cheapest thing in the world but you can use art to grow as a person, make sense of the world and communicate, reach wisdom and to change the world. So art is fundamental. Art should be used for getting together and solving problems because in that process will we find hope and we feel happy because we're not trapped in ourselves. We expand our consciousness. I think that is healing. But some people have misunderstood the word healing. They say that healing is just doing art to escape all the problems of the world like some people go to meditate to escape all the problems of the world.

Q: Well maybe they go into a different place and are able to come back with a different perspective.

Dan: Yes, sometimes, use it ..to look at the world with fresh eyes. That is good because you are learning... so escapism doesn't work because eventually it will catch up with you.

Q: As a way of life, maybe, but temporarily it can help shift your perspective in a very useful way.

Dan: I don't call that escapism. It's like being reasonable because at some points things get too much and you need time to find your center yourself again and look at things with fresh eyes but from that state you need to look at your life in a broad way, to find solutions. So I think the role of meditation – yes, very good. I use meditation myself but when you are in that state then you need

to use that power..to go outside, to be in touch with reality..Humans take care of other humans – that is our humanity. Humans use their brains to protect themselves from suffering and death and to do that you have to use your brain, be alert to what is going on in the world

Q: And as you said earlier, be connected with other people?

Dan: Exactly, because when you are connected with other people you are connected with yourself because it is our nature to be part of the environment and of society..so that is why I am doing these sculptures.. to help us be in touch with each other and reality; to feel better about ourselves... People go there and tell me that the sculptures made them feel relaxed and they also made them think and find solutions. That's what we are all looking for, solutions and ideas..