

Creating *Echo Chamber*

Fiona Kam Meadley

"The detail of people's lived experience is always humanising."

"Our thanks to those who cleared a space in which we might all hear more clearly in a turbulent world."

"The peace we work for in our lifetimes does not end with us, but continues with the legacy of love we leave behind."

These three were amongst the comments left by visitors to the exhibition, *Echo Chamber*, held at Friends House in August. Many had been profoundly moved by what they heard and saw. Some were Quakers familiar with the history of conscientious objection, others just curious passers by surprised by what they found.

Echo Chamber had a two-year gestation, starting with a request from Britain Yearly Meeting to mark the centenary of the conscience clause, the legal recognition of the right to conscientious objection.

While the final outcome bore little resemblance to the initial design, the one constant from the start was the idea of a sound installation. I had a hunch that sound would be more fluid to work with than images, and wanted to create something that would feel fresh and resonate with younger generations.

The first idea was to erect a series of bell tents into which speakers would be



hidden, referencing the tents used in WW1, and also a metaphor for the displacement that war brings.

When this proved impractical, the next idea was a series of scaffolds, from which would be hung small speakers, playing different voices.

The Quaker Arts Network selectors urged me to come up with something more original (something similar to the scaffold having been used before by another artist).

So came the final design, going back to the idea of the bell tent,



deconstructed to an octagonal scaffold wrapped in bandages. The bandages would be a metaphor for the healing of wounds, that many of the conscientious objectors elected to do instead of engaging in fighting.

My rough mock-up in the back garden, with its sagging bandages and bulky poles, did not look promising. It took the practical magic of fellow artist Dominic Thomas to transform it into an elegant, simple structure. As for the bandages – what a fortuitous decision! When we wrapped the full-scale scaffold for the first time (a Zen-like occupation in itself), we realised its calming effect. Translucent in natural light, the bandages seemed to glow, and create a space inside that encouraged one to listen.



Whilst all this was going on, I was reading and researching all I could about the WW1 COs. My initial idea was to find and record materials written by and about COs: diaries, letters, speeches, poems, news reports, tribunal hearings. But the language of a hundred years ago made the

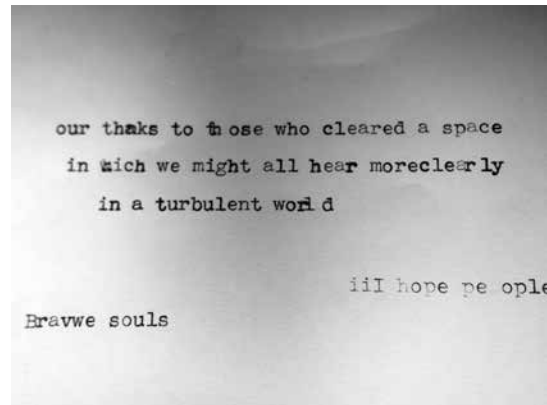
narrative feel of its time, and somewhat difficult to access. The poet Philip Gross offered to piece together a script, along the lines of *Under Milk Wood*. Exciting as this was, I worried about being able to dramatise such a piece properly, with only a modest budget available.

My hunch came good when I stumbled upon a sound archive at the Imperial War Museum's. Their oral historian in the 1970's had the foresight to record extensive interviews with a diverse range of people who had lived through WW1, before it was too late. She had included a number of CO's and CO family



Photo by Ruth Davey

members, with ten hours of recordings per person. With that wealth of material to select from, it was easy to find stories that made me tingle.



The voices of the COs could connect in a direct way to listeners across the generations. Added to this mix was a contemporary interview with an Israeli CO and a news clip – a modern touch.

We did a pop-up of the installation in our home town (Stroud)

one cold weekend in March, in a freezing goods shed by the station. Philip and some young artists had the first listen-through. The young artists latched on straight away. They understood the sense of the piece, the multiplicity of voices, the hidden shock of what they recounted. Philip encouraged use of the natural pauses, noting how we tune in the spaces when voices faded in and out. I was composing a sound piece – blending voices, programming in silences to highlight specific phrases.

Whilst all this was progressing, artist photographer Ruth Davey was contacting families of WW1 COs to take part in a photographic project. Inspired by a special ceremony at Tavistock Square in 2014, when over 60 families came to remember their relatives on International Conscientious Objector Day, we asked them to take a portrait of themselves, holding a portrait of their relative. These portraits were accompanied by text about both CO and family member – to bring the stories up to the present day, and formed part of the exhibition.

For me, the hardest part of the two-year journey was raising the funds to make it happen. It wasn't until an Arts Council England grant was secured halfway through, that we knew we could pull it off. Writing a grant application is a demanding process, with various criteria to meet. I rang for advice, concerned how to word the project when it was difficult to avoid a social and political context. "Don't worry about that, we want to see a diversity of narratives in the WW1 commemorations," an Arts Council officer told me. That encouragement, at a vulnerable stage of the project, was so important.

In the last appearance of *Echo Chamber*, back in Stroud for Remembrance Sunday, the local BBC station covered it in their early morning news bulletin. "The Queen will be laying a wreath at the Cenotaph this morning," read the newsreader, continuing, "Here in Gloucestershire the stories of the conscientious objectors who refused to fight are being told ...". I almost fell out of bed. Britain had voted for Brexit a few months earlier, and Americans had just elected Donald Trump. I was fighting a sense of paranoia, having noted that a press release on *Echo Chamber* had been left out of the local papers. The BBC coverage was welcome, not just to bring in more visitors (which it did); it also provided reassurance that there is space for this story in the public realm. At last. Still.

So many CO families came to see the exhibition, and it was clear it meant a lot to them that their relatives were being remembered publically. Their legacy of love inspired a new generation.

Fiona Kam Meadley is a member of Gloucestershire Area Meeting.

Unless noted otherwise, photos in the article were taken by Fiona Kam Meadley.