



Sue Crellin-McCarthy and Tom McCarthy: Artist Entrepreneurs

Collaborating with artists gave us a great insight into how possible it is to pull together, collaborate and build something that is beautiful and world class, on very little budget.

Sue Crellin-McCarthy and Tom McCarthy, a creative partnership in life and art are the instigators of the Baby Forest online colony¹, a new kind of community for creative practitioners. Prior to moving to Cork in Ireland, they worked internationally in the music industry and creative media with London as their base. They live surrounded by an actual forest of twenty acres of deciduous trees where they make digital tools for developing Baby Forest and bring people together for events and art installations. Both spaces are essential for realizing Sue and Tom's vision of a new kind of space for creative exchange and production. Their collaboration is close. For Baby Forest to survive and evolve, it requires business acumen and action in parallel with the creative community building and event management. As artists, they continue to produce individual works, sometimes in ways that have been stimulated by the existence of the colony.

The initial idea came from conversations with practitioners' discontent with existing online places for creative work. Key drivers were the need for new models to promote creative work and access to collaboration with like-minded practitioners from other disciplines. Sue and Tom set out to create a solution using easy to use digital tools that facilitate the presentation and promotion of their outcomes in a structured financial and legal framework.

Sue and Tom reflect on their collective and individual experiences in the interview below which was conducted over email and is also online².

Interview

S&T: The initial spark of an idea for Baby Forest came through over 20 years ago - its genesis coming out of the desire to live a simpler more ecologically sound, creative lifestyle. We have spent the majority of our lives as creative professionals, working internationally with London as our base, me (Tom) working in the music industry as a composer & record producer, running a couple of small indie record labels, production companies and London based studio/office facilities; Sue in fashion who founded a ran creative PR/Media company. After the birth of our twin sons, London media life lost a lot of its lustre, we felt we needed to escape the city to reconnect with nature and our own creative selves somewhere new, we were both very much feeling the need for some sort of creative re-boot, someplace different to rediscover creativity. Upstate New York, Cornwall, South of France, Ibiza, Sydney, and Brazil were all on the list and we began searching, travelling - house hunting, networking our pals anywhere where we thought might be a possibility, then on a weekend break to visit some long-lost relatives in West Cork Ireland, we found it. We totally fell in love with the place, the people, the sea, countryside, its easy-going approach to life, and the possibilities.

Over the next four years we travelled to Ireland at every opportunity, sometimes every other weekend, the more we searched the harder it became. We needed a big enough living space for a family of five, (we now have three children) and creative friends to come and stay, barns

or additional building space for art studios, recording studios, workshop, with a large garden or small amount of land for growing food and fuel. With prices moving exponentially more expensive by the week, we almost gave up! The very last place we had to see was an old farm house, it had a barn, a slaughter house, a few smaller outbuildings and land - a lot more land than we had imagined - a large part of it having just been planted with over 20 acres of deciduous trees - a baby forest! It was a massive renovation project, the house was just about habitable, but all of the other buildings were wrecks.

With a huge amount of help from our creative pals and the many organic practitioners here in West Cork we learned how to manage the young forest in a completely organic way, without herbicides or pesticides, and over the first couple of years managed to rebuild and convert the barn and slaughter house into the workshop, recording studios, and art studios.

As founders of creative businesses and creators/artists ourselves, we had a wide network of creative collaborators from a wide spread of practices and ever since the studio art workshop facilities have been established there has been a constant stream of artists, composers, DJ's, filmmakers, fashion designers and writers coming over to stay, work, collaborate on various creative projects. Baby Forest developed and grew from that creative interaction, whether remotely from different sides of the world or physically here at BFHQ in Ireland.

We found ourselves having the same conversations with different individuals time and again, everyone was saying similar things about online spaces:

- Community led not corporate led
- Privacy online, shadow profiles, tracking, security of personal data, copyright
- 'I don't want advertising all over my creative work'
- 'there is nowhere online I can show my work – nowhere that has any quality control'
- 'I don't code, I don't want to use a templated website, they are too hard to use, they all look the same'
- 'I want to be able to present my work the way I want, easily change it, no adverts'
- 'creative practice is being crushed by commercial practice whichever way you look at it - we want new models through which we can promote our creative work, sell it if we want, and get paid fairly for it'
- 'work is often produced as a one-off piece of work or as a short run and by the time it hits the gallery/store, with all the mark ups, becomes an expensive item and so the artist share gets minimized - the artist themselves barely cover their costs, due to everyone else's share in the pie. It makes craftsmanship almost unsustainable'
- 'We'd like easy access to creative practitioners from other disciplines' (many wanted access to collaborators in other areas to help them achieve certain aspects of a project they were working on but didn't have the specific skills for. They find the door closed by agents or representatives before they can even start talking collaborations with the artist themselves)
- 'we want a beautiful, and curated high-quality platform that showcases our work respectfully and beautifully to reflect the quality of the creative practitioners involved'
- 'We want something we can call our own' ...
- 'we want to be part of a high quality, creative family with whom we can interact'

With all that in mind we looked at what the solutions to those issues might be, and after identifying a basic set of tools that would service the widest selection of creators – e.g. giving members the ability to present, promote, sell their work (and get the income from it) - no ads, privacy & data secure, highly curated, easy to use. We decided that we should try and build it. And so babyforest.co was born.

Q: What made you call it a colony?

S&T: We saw this as a creative adventure and felt that BF was about many of us coming together to explore new territory - colony seemed to say that...so creative colony it was! Traditionally, an art colony or artists' colony could be described as a place where creative practitioners live and interact with one another. It is a pure place, with no agendas, rules, or specific outcomes. It provides a facility for creators to work either individually or to interact with others and collaborate. It also allowed for members of the public to visit and engage with the work developed. We wanted to create something like that, a facility like that online/offline, something both digital and physical, and build a community who could collaborate and cross pollinate with a wide range of creators they might not otherwise meet in their daily practice. A space where they could access new tools and technology to empower themselves to present work, promote and sell what they do. The aim was to see how 'decentralised' we can make it whilst maintaining a structure for high level promotional activity that people to become involved with, driven and managed by the creator and their needs, in an environment that helps them to do that as easily as possible, with 'real life' co-ordinators to talk to and help them should they need it - so this is not a faceless, one sided platform, we really are trying to build a self-empowering community – a co-operative if you like.

Q: Would you say that the 'colony' as a whole is a form of collective?

S&T Yes and No. Yes in the sense that we are an Independent, self-curated platform where Artists, Creators, Makers, Innovators, and Creative Explorers come together to connect, collaborate, exhibit, present, promote and sell their work. As creator members of Baby Forest, artists, makers and creators are joining forces to define and build a multi-disciplinary, culturally meaningful colony identity. And No, in the sense that each creator member has an individual space on Baby Forest that they can manage independently - and can use that facility without interacting with their peers if that is what they so wish. The way they interact with the community and system is entirely up to them.

What we are building ...A place where people can discover a group of high quality creative practitioners under one roof. We are building a new kind of cultural, creative and social experience, a creative eco-system for both creator and audience, for connection and exchange both on and offline. Our aim is to become an identity that is recognised for quality, integrity and autonomy, where creators and supporters connect directly.

We are carving out a new space where audience, cultural supporters, curators, gallerists, collector/customer and creator can come together in one place. Where an audience has direct access to creators and their work. A place that fuses individual showcase/presentation spaces, with creator managed e-gallery and shops, curated exhibitions, editorial features and news with broadcasting, social sharing and curation tools.

Behind the scenes, creators collaborate, skill swap, share resources and dialogue with a network of their international peers. Front of house, we invite our audience into the colony to enjoy, experience, and buy our work. On *Baby Forest*, the creator is self-empowering, self-sufficient, and receives the 'lion's share' of the income generated from their creative output. (85% from all sales). The colony provides a meaningful identity from which the creator can manage and grow their reputation and audience, in a space allied with quality and integrity - one that respects and reflects the talent and high standards of each individual's work.

Q: How would you describe your roles (individually and collectively) in relation to the other participants?

Our roles differ to other creators because we founded the project and are responsible for driving it forward, leading the fight for its future. For *Baby Forest* to develop and grow it has to stand on its own two feet financially, it has to be a sustainable business in its own right, there is a constant need for entrepreneurial input to ensure further growth and development.

Q: Have you formed close relationships with particular people?

Creators are using the facility in whichever way works for their practice. Some speak to us regularly - others from time to time, and some do their own thing. We have found that those who have become involved in BF projects, exhibitions, or have just called for help or advice tend to form close bonds with us, and from that new ideas are formed. Other members from the USA, Japan, Germany, UK, Ireland, have contacted each other through the site and have been developing projects of their own. We as individuals, have also developed working relationships with artists we would not otherwise have met or worked with.

Q: What impact has the creation of Baby Forest had on the way you think about your own creative work?

Collaboration has become a bigger part of our own personal practices as a direct result of Baby Forest.

T: For me Baby Forest is my creative practice - but in relation to my own work, and I how I think about it, baby forest has influenced it enormously, it has brought me into contact with a vastly experienced, hugely talented, open, helpful and often brutally honest (something that I think all creators need!) supportive group of creative people that I think I would never have had the chance to meet, let alone get to know, or ever had the opportunity to collaborate with - from that point of view it's been a wonderfully empowering influence.

In a practical sense Baby Forest has put severe restrictions on the availability of any creative time at all, but that in itself has stimulated how I approach my creative work, what little time there is for creative practice has become much more focused - in the sound work I'm recording more live material based around experimenting with the fixing of location and time as sound in itself, my sculptural practice has become much more meditative and in the moment, leading to simpler calmer pieces, more about ex-formation than information.

Overall Baby Forest has helped me to think about how to broaden my practice to develop and create a number of new directions in my work, I have created sound installations for exhibitions in Berlin, Hamburg, UK and here in Ireland, and its helped me work in and learn more about film, I've also created sound pieces with a number of Baby Forest film makers for collaborations within their films for presentation in various international film festivals.

S: To be honest, our work has been somewhat curtailed! The energy required to build a project of this nature is beyond demanding and my creative practice is geared mainly around the disciplines needed to run Baby Forest!

So the practice of curating exhibitions, writing artist copy, and organising residencies and physical space events, editing work, mentoring, etc. ... my artistic practice has mainly been put to work in these areas - which has been immensely useful as being an artist really means being able to visualise the 360 picture - it's not enough just to output work - an artist really needs to be able to deliver, envisage and manage the whole package. I have also managed to produce work for exhibitions here in Ireland & the UK and been involved with several group shows - one of which was organized and set up virtually (which would never have happened pre Baby Forest! - I'm so much more tech savvy!), and I have run several residencies here at Baby Forest which I have also participated in - so my work has concentrated around collaboration and community, which is a direct result of being part of Baby Forest and managing it at the same time - it would never have worked that way without it.

Last year we started to use the forest as an art space, and are opening up, shaping and forming the forest itself to create pathways and walkways through the space - a beautiful artwork in its own right. We called this eco project the 'Heart of the Forest' and Baby Forest members were invited to create artworks in the space - last year this ranged from film work shown in bell tents, sound pieces played through the trees, installations, giant photographic installation works, forest interventions, and different 'live' performances every day: plays, dance, music, spoken word, endurance drawing, bronze casting. This was opened to the public as an

immersive art experience, the audience invited to take a walk through the forest and engage with the art that surrounded them.

Collaborating with artists to put this together gave us a great insight into how possible it is to pull together, collaborate and build something that is beautiful and world class, on very little budget - just a huge sense of community a strong sense of will, like mindedness, empathy, open contribution, open mindedness, self-empowerment, creativity and the intention to make it happen. The sheer enjoyment, friendship, effort and community spirit each and every one of the participants showed was more than we could ever have expected. It was fun – it was family – it enriched everyone’s spirits. It was hard work, and everyone was working outside in conditions they weren’t used to, to produce a world class ‘art experience’ for our audience – so it wasn’t an easy ride – but the experience for everyone was truly amazing – the creators themselves proud and amazed by what was produced – and the interactive experience they put together was enjoyed by every member of the public that came to see it. Many, found engaging with the work far more enjoyable and enriching than the more formal spaces in which we are accustomed to view art.

Inspired by independent thinking, self-empowerment, and a willingness to think outside the institutional and commercial channels that creators find themselves so intrinsically caught up in – we hope we can unite as creators to inspire other creators - they do have the opportunity to take things into their own hands and produce remarkable and meaningful events, and we are now seeing some of our members doing the same within their own local networks. By looking at new ways, striving for change, and acting upon it, more self-empowering models will come to the fore and support, nourish and honour creativity in the way it needs to for our society as a whole to move forward.



Figure 1: Heart of the Forest Film Installation. (*I Am All Things*’ Collaboration between Rob Monaghan/Tom McCarthy & Phyllis Akinyi)

1 See <https://babyforest.co/hotfexhib>

2 <http://lindacandy.com/reflection/babyforest>