

Orla Ryan

## EV+A 98

Limerick's EV+A 98, in its 22nd year, showed the work of 150 artists and as such is Ireland's largest group exhibition. Usually EV+A, in an attempt at 'objectivity' brings high profile curators, such as Jan Hoet and Guy Tortosa, to Ireland from Europe. Referring to this objectivity, the chairman, Hugh Murray writes of how "this very detachment and lack of knowledge of the Irish art scene was also a weakness". With these reasons in mind the EV+A committee decided that Paul O'Reilly, the director of Limerick City Gallery, should curate it. One gets the sense that O'Reilly on taking the position was reflexive in terms of his approach to the power involved. Worth noting was a willingness to engage with people and discuss why their work was not chosen for EV+A's Open Submission. This has to be a first. It also shows an acknowledgement by O'Reilly of the power inherent in judging people's work.

The work was dispersed over 20 different centre-city sites and because of this EV+A resembled large European shows which negotiate the discursive terrain of 'site' and location. However this trajectory was not a priority but rather was arrived at by default. In the catalogue we were told that "this is due to the unavailability of Limerick City Gallery's Carnegie Building on Pery Square". Originally the show was to be brought to Pery Square but this was not possible because of building delays. The potential of 'off site' art practice collided with conceptions of how art works function in traditional art spaces at EV+A 98, sometimes to good effect and sometimes not.

Discussing the works' pattern of dispersal around the city, Paul O'Reilly writes that it is "...a pattern that has no single dominant gallery presence". Unfortunately this was not the case; the dominant gallery presence was in evidence and located at City Hall. There are a number of reasons for this, the most obvious being that it was the location for the official opening. The main space in City Hall was used to present a large selection of 'hangable' work and followed a traditional conception and allegiance to how gallery spaces function. Perhaps it might have been more interesting to challenge viewers' expectations. This is not to ignore the pragmatic difficulties of finding space for the amount of work to be shown but rather to remark on the consequences of some of those pragmatic decisions.

On the application form of EV+A 98 there was a

very definite call for 'lens-based media' which was unusual in an Irish context and yet by the end this emphasis was disregarded by the final call of "...And everything else". It is difficult to understand the reasoning behind this besides a need to be inclusive, although arguably this desire for inclusiveness can collapse everything to a certain level, creating a compromise in which no one is satisfied. This is also worth negotiating in terms of Paul O'Reilly's catalogue notes in which he situates the dangerous implications of "...contemporary culture's visual bias". O'Reilly opens up a potentially engaging discussion on the prioritisation of the visual in consumer culture although there is a sense in which this potential remains confined within the catalogue rather than a discursive dialogue that flows through the works.

Referring back to City Hall as the 'dominant gallery space' there was a sense in which the discursive potentials available between the various art works were not explored. The inter-relationships between works suggest discussion and dialogue, but this was often so disrupted that the spatial gaps emerged as gulfs, almost as if the works were ignoring each other. This was especially obvious in work that negotiated a specifically gender based discourse. Eliz Lagerstrom's installation 'Pain is a State of Mind' which references some womens' position towards sadomasochism, employing a combination of objects, photographs and text such as "...She wears her bruises with Pride. Like trophies, like tattoos. Hidden under her clothes. Her secret. Her game". This was shown in a small annex off the main room and although employing cliched materials such as rubber, buckles, belts etc it would have been more interesting to see what sort of discussion, be it provocative or polemical, that the work would generate if shown in closer proximity to, for example Dorothy Ann Daly's crocheted wall drawing, or any of the more acceptably 'feminine' work shown in the back room at City Hall. This back room was a difficult space in terms of how the work was installed. This was unfortunate, especially in the case of Elizabeth Byrne's 'The Insistence of furniture' where the conceptual research of the installation involved confinement—the actual placing of the work.

Paddy Jolley's VHS film loop 'Late for the Train' was shown on a monitor at the end of a stairwell, a location which suited the work, a figure in the New York Subway flat out on the ground as trains on either side stopped at the station. As an installation the stairwell had the right atmosphere or 'end of the line' quality about it.

The video installation 'Untitled Unsigned Story' by Amanda Coogan in the main space was a video of a woman, mostly in close up. Through a variety of facial expressions, tapping fingers on her face, and guttural sounds, Coogan presented the frustration of failed communication and mistranslation. Coogan writes: "Irish sign language has been consistently and consciously oppressed" and in situating this Coogan opens up an intriguing view of some of the socio-political

relations of a marginalised community. This video was installed in a wooden structure, a cross between a house and furniture. It was difficult to figure the necessity for this. The conceptual terrain of the video did not need any props to support itself and the sculptural rhetoric of the wooden structure appeared jaded in terms of the complexities of language being figured in the video.

The collaboration between Amelia Stein and Barry McGovern 'Do You Love Me Cunt' employed Beckett's logic although this was more an illustrative piece. This work comprised a black and white photograph of Barry McGovern looking suitably aggressive/ angry as he recites an excerpt from Beckett's 'How It Is'. Listening to this extract as one looked at the photograph of McGovern, restricted the photograph's possible readings to one of a 'character study' of the actor performing. This made it difficult to know what this image was meant to mean. The installation was located in a small corridor beside a lift and listening to the sound piece it was hard to resist thinking how much better it would work in the actual lift.

Within City Hall, the placing of Andreas Gursky's large colour image 'Chicago Board of Trade' in the Council Meeting Room was impressive. Gursky's image, of the stock exchange taken from above, presenting the action on the floor as frantic and trivial at the same time creating a strong dynamic with the discourses of power flowing through this Council Room.

The performance of Fergus Byrne's 'Splint' took place on the Saturday in Cruises Street. Byrne with the help of two assistants and behind the cover of a makeshift 'tent' was wrapped up in roof slates, turning himself into a "vertical pillar". Byrne eventually emerges from this architectural space by using physical pressure to break the gaffer tape holding the slates in place. What made this particular performance so nerve racking was the alternative performance it gave rise to by a group of local teenagers. Besides the verbal abuse there were various moments of risk for the artist and the people standing close by. As the teenagers pushed into the tent as Byrne was being wrapped, the potential for him to fall and get cut up by the slates became a tense build up. Cruises Street on a Saturday afternoon is a great location for performance because of the volume of people passing by, although the lack of an official EV+A presence to aid Byrne was a mistake.

St Mary's Cathedral, offered a tomblike location to view Karl Grimes' 'Blood Cell Memorial': A grid of 24 colour images of blood cells together with others in alcoves or lying on pews, so that there was the potential for them to get lost amongst the memorabilia and artifacts in the Cathedral space.

The billboard of Mike FitzPatrick 'EV+A Not As Good As It Used To Be' required the collaboration of all EV+A's open submission artists. The billboard containing photographs of the artists with the above caption was, to use FitzPatrick's words "...an attempt to test the ability of an institution like EV+A to resist censorship". As an example of how effective this proposed 'institutional critique' was, the billboard occupied a prominent location just outside City Hall.

FitzPatrick's artist's statement continues "this work delivered in the format of a billboard, could act as an incentive for people in general to be more conscious of, and engaged with, an exhibition which

Brian Hand





is publicly funded and highly regarded by the participating artists". FitzPatrick aspires to a 'discursive practice' and yet the piece prioritises his intentions and perceived possibilities of how the work "...could act". It is worth noting that artists who did ask what the caption would be were not told.

There is also a problem here in the simplification of specific audiences to a more general "people in general". Who for example? EV+A as the largest art exhibition in Ireland, draws a large percentage of the 'art community' in the country. There seems to be an over simplification of 'art community' audience 'bad'; the 'people' audience 'good'. This is not to discount the validity of a practice which wishes to reach beyond a given 'art' audience. However, there is a political myopia in operation when 'artists' become some homogenous targeted group.

FitzPatrick ends his statement with: "I defend my actions on the grounds of freedom of artistic expression and the broader social intent of the work". Unfortunately this follows a certain cynical logic that falls into a heroic conception of the lone artist (male!) battling to change the world no matter the personal cost.

Located in a tax office, Susan MacWilliam's 'The Last Person' is a strange and humorous reconstruction of the paranormal events surrounding one Helen Duncan (1898-1956). The video is based on Duncan's trial. A medium from Portsmouth, she "...was the last person to be prosecuted under the British Witchcraft Act of 1735". The video uses the court reports as a narrative, recounted by a monotone male voice. The enigmatic qualities of MacWilliam's video were expanded by its setting in the bureaucratic atmosphere of this '70s style Civil Service space.

Jonathan Horowitz's 'Bach's Two Part Invention' situated in Maloney's Bookstore was an installation comprising an audio track, a framed vintage photograph and text. The photograph is of the 1974 Minnesota Music Teachers Association Piano Contest Recital in which Horowitz took part. The text presents Horowitz's memories of the contest; the fact that he forgot his piece and his subsequent disinterest in the piano lessons which he was forced to take until he left the family home. The sound accompanying this is of piano notes played randomly, resulting in, not quite dissonance but more of a depressing but humorous pointlessness which was totally in sync with Horowitz's story of suburban mores in Minnesota circa 1974.

Two of the largest installations in EV+A 98 were located in Glen House, Daphne Wright's 'Looking for the Home of the Sickness' and Brian Hand's 'Foam'. Wright's installation, comprises rows of plaster rhododendrons which vertically frame horizontal rows of miniature Georgian balustrades, which are torso height and again made in plaster. Just behind the balustrades are miniature park land 'dead' trees placed in a random pattern behind each one. The visual effect of this alludes to a theatrical space the effect of which is intensified by the sound element which is someone whistling a tune, which is vaguely familiar, reminiscent of British music halls. I think the tune is an Edwardian music hall song "I don't want to play in your yard". With lines such as "I won't let you pick my pansies, And you won't climb my apple tree, I don't want to play in your yard if you won't be good to me".

'Looking for the Home of the Sickness' as with Wright's other projects explores the cultural positions of Irish Southern Protestantism. In this instance the 'Big House' of the Anglo Irish Ascendancy is figured. The plaster while referencing the decorative qualities

of the interiors of these houses also creates a melancholic space, eerily nostalgic accompanied by the whistling of this tune. What makes Wright's installation so effective though, is that none of the things it alludes to, the 'Big House' or the sense of nostalgia for example, are fixed in terms of reading the work. Each element complements the others and promptly runs off with its own network of associations—creating a complex and ambiguous viewing space where all inherent 'essentialisms' are open to question.

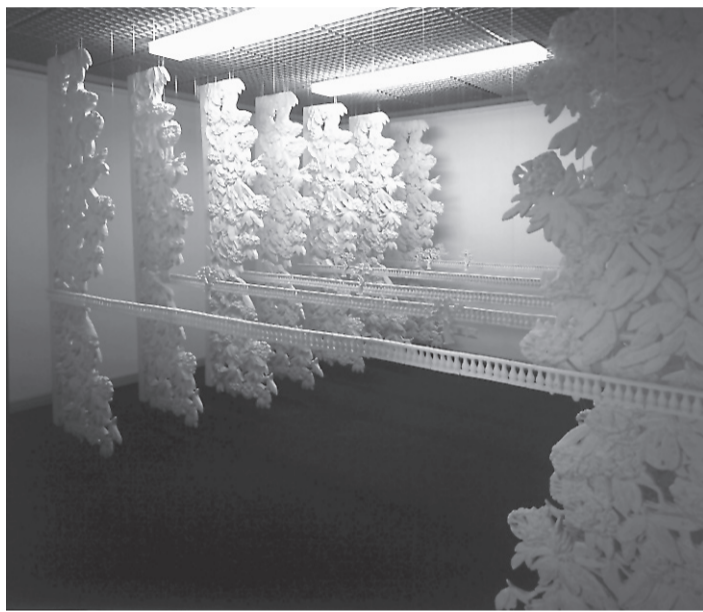
Brian Hand's 'Foam' is an installation comprising a slide dissolve of two images taken a minute apart of the Green Isle, a trawler, being salvaged from Howth harbour after an arson attack which resulted in the trawler sinking. The sound, coming from four different speakers is of the first line of *Sea Breeze*, a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé. These four lines are synced to occupy the space together just as one slide dissolves into another, creating a dissonant babble in the centre of the space. This was said in French and three translations, one in Irish and two in English. Two of the translations were by two Irish poets, Brian Coffey and Denis Devlin. Both Coffey and Devlin were signalled by Samuel Beckett as an emergent tradition more concerned with translation. In employing them in this instance Hand, is in a sense indicating a different trajectory of modernism in an Irish context, away from the 'originality' centredness of Yeats & Co.

Hand's negotiation of translation is also apparent in the use of images employed. The images show a group of men observing a trawler being brought out of the water. On first viewing it is difficult to see how the image has changed when the dissolve takes place. Slowly different aspects of the image make themselves apparent, one man disappears behind something while another emerges, a hand raised in one image goes down in the next. Pursuing this emphasis on translation, Hand misregisters the slides, so the dissolve is never smooth. Another factor situating translation was the difficulty in deciding the location of the image. As a place it has the look of some generic space in the States. 'Foam' was installed in an architects storage/archive space containing shelving units stacked with architectural plans and files which surround the installation with an abundance of texts and documents making the location well suited to the conceptual space of 'Foam'.

One of the things that is interesting about EV+A as an institution, especially in an Irish context, is the amount of work, discussion and negotiation involved to make this multi-location exhibition work. The amount of 'good will' required between different and competing art spaces singles EV+A out as an institutional practice that makes it highly specific to Limerick and to the people there who organise it. I think it is important to state that as things stand in Dublin for example, an exhibition of this size would not be contemplated, never mind get off the ground. Whatever criticisms of EV+A 98 one might wish to pursue or negotiate, its potential as a large 'event' and its potential to change each year are aspects of EV+A which need to be put to the fore.

#### Endnote

All quotes in the main text are taken from the EV+A 98 Catalogue published by EV+A, Limerick City Gallery of Art, Carnegie Building, Pery Square, Limerick, Ireland.



TOP: Paul Gray  
ABOVE: Daphne Wright